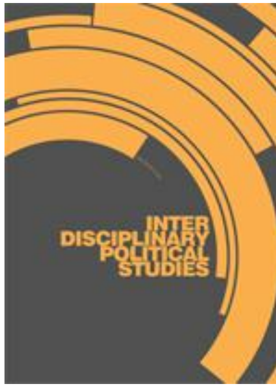

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Populism and Neoliberalism. Notes on the Morphology of a 'Perverse Alliance'

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the commonalities of contemporary right-wing populism and neoliberalism. It thereby focuses on how neoliberalism has undone the ontological basis of the modern sovereign people and how this process has generated the conditions for the possibility of neo-populism, which thus appears as the obscene reverse of neoliberalism. Populism and neoliberalism form a 'perverse alliance' that leads them to fight the same battle, albeit in different forms, against material equality. Populism fights this battle with two privileged instruments: a 'war of values' that deflects interest from the conflict against socio-economic inequality and a 'war on migrants' that amplifies xeno-populism while nevertheless sharing with neoliberalism the processes of the hierarchisation of citizenship and social order.

KEYWORDS: Populism; Neoliberalism; 'War of values'; Xeno-populism; Hierarchization of citizenship.

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1. Undoing the Demos: on the genesis of neo-populism

With the 2008 crisis, as well as the 2011 sovereign debt crisis in Europe, a post-democratic interregnum has opened which has not yet come to an end (Balibar 2016; Simoncini 2018). Since then, the neoliberal governance of the crisis has amplified the 'democratic recession' that had already been underway since the 1970s (Palano 2012; 2019). In this context, neoliberal governmentality has continued to 'undo the demos', understood as the subject of representative democracy. Revisiting and criticising Foucault's lesson, Wendy Brown has well described this process of undoing of the people and has shown how, in recent decades, neoliberal devices have acted by progressively transforming citizens into entrepreneurs of themselves, civil society into the arena of continuous inter-individual competition, and the State into a company competing with others (Foucault 2005; Brown 2015, pp. 17-45). This is how, for Brown, neoliberalism has undone the ontological basis of the modern sovereign people: the *homo politicus*, that is, the subject imagined by the modern *fabula* of the contract. The *homo politicus* is the autonomous individual capable of voluntarily subjecting himself to the sovereign power of which he is the author and to the legal norms that arise from that power. In other words, he is the subject who, in a democracy, authorises (through elections) his representatives to act politically in his name and in the name of the sovereign people – a people made up of *homines politici* who delegate the power to govern to a representative parliament. For Brown, the people under neoliberalism do not follow this logic. In fact, it is constructed as a disaggregated set of *homines oeconomici* who remove the political dimension and – as Ida Dominijanni has observed – internalise the system's imperatives by identifying 'their own life *performance* with that prescribed by capitalism' (Dominijanni 2017, p. 88). The neoliberal people thus coincide with a multitude of individuals self-subjected to the 'performance-enjoyment device' (Dardot & Laval 2009, pp. 433-437): a performative device that continuously exalts the 'freedom to invest and bet on oneself as on *futures* in the stock exchange' (Dominijanni 2017, p. 88).

However, the aim of the neoliberal programme was not in itself to undo the demos; its aim was not, in other words, to ensure that 'the world economy had

no people' or to achieve 'a world without a people' (Slobodian 2018, p. 276). Neoliberalism rather aimed at *sequestering* the people 'and leashing it, penning it into prescribed areas' (ibid.): areas in which the freedom and political mobility of its individual components would be harnessed within the mesh of the capitalist order. A multitude of de-politicised individuals competing with each other for individual affirmation, in fact, can hardly recreate 'the conditions of possibility for collective action based on the discourse of equality' (Ricciardi 2020, p. 286). The first objective of neoliberal programmatic rationality is therefore not the resetting of popular sovereignty as such, but rather the disciplining of collective action. What is most important to it is to neutralise everything that can 'modify the order of the system': its concern is to defend capitalism as 'social order and way of life' (ibid.). In order to achieve this, it is not necessary to abolish representative democracy. It is enough to preserve a weakened form of it and to superimpose itself while guaranteeing formal rights. In this way, differences and inequalities through which neoliberal capitalism enhances itself are reproduced: 'the poor and informal nature of work, classification according to skin colour, patriarchal constraints' (ibid.). Thus, social inequality is naturalised by acquiring a normative character.

However, when inequality widens too much and the middle classes together with the subaltern classes become drastically impoverished, the crisis generates the conditions for the possibility of a new age of mass resentment (Revelli 2019, pp. 5-84). Thus, from 2008 onwards, 'in the ruins of neoliberalism', sovereign populism has strongly re-emerged (Brown 2019). And 'from the neoliberal undoing of the sovereign people', from its 'defeat', the people of populism was born (Dominijanni 2020a, p. 23).[1] In different ways according to space and time, this was characterised

[1] Brown summarises it as follows in a recent interview: 'what has broken down is the post-war social contract that promised security and a degree of social mobility to the white working and middle classes'. So 'inequality has grown both in wealth and in access to what had been the commons'. In the absence of the left, 'the right has brilliantly transformed this frustration into a racist and sexist rage' (Capuccilli 2020). Throughout the text, I speak of a populism of the right, and also adopt the term 'sovereigntist populism' in order to mean (as we will see) a neo-populism that does not limit itself to evoking a sovereign people distinguished from its insidious enemies by means of a strict line of separation, but also leverages the idea of a virtuous and productive people capable of making the nation competitive within the arena of global capitalism: a people of honest workers who accept the neoliberal norm of inter-individual competition without the qualms of unions.

as a people made up of frightened, resentful and revanchist individuals demanding 'protection, borders, security, confirmation of identity, primacy of race and gender, sovereignty' (Dominijanni 2020b, p. 32). Having gone through the joyous season of triumphant neoliberalism 'armed with the self-entrepreneurial ethic and the principle of performance' – sanctified also by the left-wing parties of social-democratic and communist filiation (parties which, satisfied the rise of capitalist globalisation and the logic of the European Treaties, ending up forgetting the working classes and the importance of public services) – these individuals were overwhelmed by the crisis (ibid.). The market's promises of happiness have been reversed into austerity. The incitement to enjoy, which had become a categorical imperative along with the axiomatic of competition, left the door wide open for the 'ethics of debt and guilt, resentment and self-defence' (Dominijanni 2020a, p. 24). The crisis generated fear of falling and resentment. Neo-populism leveraged on these, finding the impoverished subjects ready 'to defend what *they had* with guns under the pillow' and what *they were* 'with walls on the borders' (ibid.). These subjects, however, remained shaped 'in their behaviour and subconscious by the subjectivation devices of neoliberal ethics»' (ibid.). The populist subject, in short, was no different from the neoliberal subject. It was the same subject that, fearing to become a 'marginal *forgotten*' of globalisation, showed its obscene face in full: the ordinarily *off-stage* face of racism, supremacism, and neo-patriarchy (Dominijanni 2020b, p. 32).

More generally, Slavoj Žižek has shown how neo-populisms constitute the obscene reverse of neoliberalism (Žižek 2009).[2] Indeed, they materialise the 'unspeakable invitation to enjoyment' in the identification with the leader and in the hunt for the enemy of the people, allegedly responsible for the crisis (Visentin 2014, p. 203). In this way they balance out, 'obviously only on the level of the imaginary,

[2] The present text moves in a similar theoretical direction, i.e., one that is different from hypotheses which interpret neo-populisms only as a form of opposition to neoliberalism and the technocratic drifts of liberal democracy (Mounk 2018), or as an 'illiberal democratic response to a non-democratic liberalism' (Mudde 2015). And despite considering them very useful and provocative, the perspective adopted here also considers the theoretical hypotheses which read neo-populisms as a 'senile disease of democracy' (Revelli 2009, p. 8) or as its 'permanent shadow' (Müller 2017, p. 101) to be insufficient.

the suffering and material sacrifices imposed by the end of Welfare and the social democratic compromise' (ibid.). By advancing the claim of restoring the sovereign power of the national people, populist sovereignties promised impoverished subjects that they would defend them from what threatened their 'honest' work, their property, their 'almighty freedom' (Dominijanni 2020a, p. 24). To the representation of an undone people and the people's defeat, they were able to counterpose the dream image of a people made up of sovereign and free individuals (of an unrelated, private and proprietary freedom). Thanks to the exhausting rhetorical and media repetition of an 'empty signifier' that gave contingent unity to different popular demands, individuals were stimulated to a strong identification with the leader. In this way the construction of the people took shape (Laclau 2005, pp. 122-148).

However, Laura Bazzicalupo has emphasised that the identification processes of contemporary populism are very different from those activated by the totalitarian movements of the 20th century. For these movements, in the words of Freud (1989), the strong libidinal and ideological investment in the figure of the charismatic leader triggered a mechanism of idealising sublimation that compensated for the 'impotence of fragmented and atomistic masses' (Bazzicalupo 2014, p. 28). In contemporary populism, on the other hand, multitudes composed of individuals whose form of life is shaped by the competitive-consumeristic untying of the market (understood as the now naturalised principle of social normativity) tend to aesthetically and temporarily identify with leaders who are less and less traceable to the figure of the Freudian superego and more and more similar to 'despotic fetishes' (Gatto 2021). Through continuous imitative processes, individuals who 'maintain their own narcissism, their own imaginary of self-fulfilment and self-management', aggregate into a public rather than a people unified by representative logics. They stop sublimating their libido and agglomerate, swarming around provisional leaders who seem 'available to everyone': leaders to be 'consumed' in forms of postmodern collective rituality that provisionally gives meaning to the identity of individual followers; leader-influencers who gain credibility precisely because they know how to support 'the standardised images of the public' – images that emerge

from the web, from polls, from the bubbles of social networks[3] – and for the (equally decisive) fact of knowing how to exhibit 'the desires and resentments of all in a striking way' (Bazzicalupo 2014, p. 33). In a sort of superficial mimetic game entirely within the logic of the spectacle, the multitudes imitate the leader and the leader imitates the multitudes 'as in a mirror' (ibid., p. 25). Everyone imitates everyone.

What remains central to contemporary populism – as has been said – is instead the recourse to dream images provided with a reassuring, fusional power: images able to confer a temporary mythical-imaginary unity on the people-public. This makes populism the latest scenario of the society of the spectacle. As Mario Pezzella has observed, populism is a 'newly minted spectacular representation that replaces the phantasmal dispute of the old parties'; by proposing a merely imaginary emancipation that never touches 'the real domination of capital', populism completes the transformation of 'democracy into spectacle' (Pezzella 2016, pp. 187-192).[4]

2. Neoliberalism and populism: three links in a 'perverse alliance'

Sovereigntist populisms have manifested themselves, and continue to manifest themselves, essentially as 'an attempt at the reactionary stabilisation of the crisis' which recalls the ghost of the homogeneous and sovereign people – with its recomposed hierarchies of race, gender and class – 'at the service of neoliberalism itself' (Amendola 2020, p. 257).[5] In this way they were, and are, 'global phenomena of ideological – rather than practical – neutralisation of the social distances that neoliberalism constantly reproduces' (Ricciardi 2020, p. 285). And just as they were presenting themselves almost everywhere as the main adversaries of neoliberalism,

[3] On the centrality of 'bubbles' for the metamorphosis of contemporary democracy, see Palano (2020).
[4] On the spectacular logic of Trump's 'image politics', see the interesting proposal in Bolt Rasmussen (2019, pp. 53-67).
[5] For sovereigntist populism, anyone who challenges this homogeneity and hierarchy is an enemy. These include, for example, social movements that politically subjectivate popular differences along the lines of colour, gender and class. Neo-populism opposes movements such as *Black Lives Matter*, *Ni Una Menos* and the *Gillet Jaunes* with its 'at once supremacist, securitarian, heteropatriarchal and *libertarian frames*', behind which stands the image of a people recomposed around the hegemony of the white, Western, property-owning male subject (Dominijanni 2020a, p. 25).

neo-populisms were forging a 'paradoxical and perverse alliance': perverse because it was founded on the 'omnipotence of politics in relation to society and its substantial impotence in relation to the market'; paradoxical because it contradicted the wordy criticism directed at the only really existing cosmopolitanism, namely the 'halved cosmopolitanism' of capitalist globalisation (Ferrajoli 2019).

Luigi Ferrajoli has recently underlined three fundamental links of this peculiar alliance. The first is the functionality of neoliberalism to sovereigntist populism. By demolishing labour law and guarantees, multiplying, fragmenting, and making its forms more precarious – putting workers in constant competition with each other and, at the same time, breaking up 'forms of collective subjectivity based on equality, solidarity and common struggles for common rights' – neoliberal policies have created the social basis for populism. Social insecurity has in fact created the fertile ground on which xenophobic and racist security campaigns have been grafted, re-founding 'collective subjectivities on a common hostility to those who are different – migrants – identified as aliens, enemies, dangerous and potentially criminals' (ibid.).

The second link in this perverse alliance is of an inverse nature. It consists in the functionality of sovereigntist populism with neoliberalism, i.e., in the fact that the former is objectively sympathetic to the interests of the great economic and financial powers. The anti-globalism and anti-Europeanism of sovereigntist populism is in fact opposed to the construction of a transnational public sphere. And only on this scale could the mechanisms of collective subjectivation take shape which are able to operate at the level of the 'new absolute, invisible and irresponsible sovereigns into which the markets have transformed themselves', true 'savage powers' (ibid.; Ferrajoli 2011). The growing sovereignty of economic and financial powers, which is in fact exercised on a global scale, thus ends up being facilitated precisely by neo-populisms that claim an 'illusory sovereignty' for nation states (Ferrajoli 2019).

The third link between neoliberalism and sovereigntist populism consists in the fact that neither tolerate constitutional constraints, undermining them at their

roots. In fact, neoliberals see the market as a sovereign space whose freedom cannot be controlled and corrected by public authorities; the latter must rather support the market and set up an efficient legal-institutional device capable of guaranteeing that everyone adapt to the logic of competition. On the other hand, sovereigntists conceive 'the popular will embodied by the majority as the only source of political legitimacy' (ibid.). But since in practice the sovereignty of the markets prevails over popular sovereignty, the combined action of these two logics produces, on the one hand, the 'disempowerment of politics towards the markets» and, on the other hand, its 'renewed omnipotence towards individuals and their rights' (ibid.). All of this leads to the 'de-constitutionalising of our political systems' and generates a situation in which 'the political and democratic governance of the economy' leaves more and more room for the economic and 'non-democratic governance of politics' (ibid.).

For Ferrajoli, the cases of Trump, Bolsonaro, Erdogan, Salvini and Orban show 'the populist deceit' which consists in the fact that sovereigntism validates itself as an anti-system force precisely when its culture and policies prove to be maximally 'functional to the strengthening of the existing system, its inequalities and discriminations' (ibid.). Just as neo-populism denies the sovereignty of fundamental rights over state sovereignty, neoliberalism subordinates it to the sovereignty of the markets. In doing so, both make instrumental use of the concept of popular sovereignty: sovereign populism identifies it with the omnipotence of electoral majorities and neoliberalism uses it as a source of legitimisation for a capitalism that now tends to become 'absolute' (ibid.; Balibar 2020, pp. 272-278). Both political families thus attest to their equal anti-constitutional valence, since for post-war European constitutions – starting with the Italian one – 'sovereignty belongs to the people, who exercise it in the forms and within the limits of the Constitution'.

For the constitutional dictate, however, 'people' should not be understood in the neoliberal sense, as a multitude of self-entrepreneurs dedicated to enhancing their human capital in order to prevail in market competition. Nor should it be understood in a populist sense, 'as a homogeneous and undifferentiated whole' (Ferra-

joli 2019). For the Constitution – Ferrajoli continues – the 'people' is by no means an abstract 'macro-subject', but 'the totality of citizens in flesh and blood' (ibid.). The fact that the people is the constitutional holder of sovereignty means two things: first, sovereignty can *only* belong to the citizens that make up the people and no one else (no constituted power can usurp it); second, sovereignty is equivalent to 'the sum of everyone's powers and counter-powers, which are constitutionally established rights' (ibid.). Contrary to the neoliberal and populist people, then, the democratic people coincide with the set of citizens who concretely enjoy fundamental rights, i.e., those civil, political and social rights which are constitutionally superior to any constituted power and must be institutionally guaranteed in the framework of a social democracy that Ferrajoli hopes is 'cosmopolitan' (Ferrajoli 2015, pp. 95-122; Ferrajoli 2021, pp. 369-450).

If they were conceived in their abstract legal determination, however, these rights would remain only the formal mirror of the existing relations of force. They must therefore be understood as the instruments that materially contest those very relations of force (Ferrajoli 2019). For this reason, Ferrajoli equates popular sovereignty with 'the sum of those fragments of sovereignty that are the powers and counter-powers in which consist the fundamental rights held by each and all' (ibid.). In other words, it is these rights that give 'form and content to the *will of the people*'. (ibid.). To trample on them, as neoliberalism and populism do, is to violate the people who hold them and, simultaneously, popular sovereignty itself. The 'sovereignty of fundamental rights' of which Ferrajoli speaks thus seems to maintain a continuous relationship with the social conflict from which it in fact moves (ibid.). In other words, rights are not a rosary of guarantees, but rather the instruments of a social critique that rises from the participation of the governed and challenges the presumed naturalness of law, which is instead a political stake. In this sense, rights are the 'counter-powers' that defend subjects from the savage powers of the state and the market, reaffirming the *kratos* constitutionally held by the *demos*.[6] This is the true

[6] Beyond the important theoretical differences, it may be useful to compare Ferrajoli's 'counter-powers' to the 'counter-rights' (*Gegenrechte*) of which the Frankfurt philosopher Christoph Menke spoke. If the 'counter-powers' of the former call to mind the conflicting subjectivation from which

'democratic substance' of popular sovereignty, which neoliberalism and populism constitutively oppose because – albeit in different ways – both violate the principle of equality (ibid.).[7]

3. Populism as 'new neoliberalism'

The elective affinities between sovereigntist populism and neoliberalism do not end there. Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval have recently argued that their perverse alliance is structural in nature. For them, neo-populism cannot be interpreted simply as an authoritarian reaction to neoliberalism. It is not a revolt against liberal democracy, nor is it the result of a 'Polanyi moment' in which the demand for the protection of populations would find an answer in a state that opposes neoliberal globalisation. Much less it is a 'fascist moment' of neoliberalism that would give rise to a 'neoliberal fascism' (Fassin 2018). Dardot and Laval observe how between neo-populisms and neoliberalism there is no antithesis at all. For them, the former represents a specific articulation of neoliberal governmentality, i.e., a 'new neoliberalism' (Dardot & Laval 2019). Indeed, while adopting different styles and rhetoric, none of the populist forces that emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis has really opposed the axioms of neoliberalism understood as a global political rationality 'which consists for governments in imposing the logic of capital within the economy, as well as within society and the State itself, to the point of making it the form of subjectivities and the norm of existence' (ibid., p. 5). Dardot and Laval's hypothesis is that neoliberalism is multiple in itself and that its plasticity has allowed it to survive crises, or rather to define itself as a system that 'governs through crisis' (ibid., p. 6). Since the 1970s – they argue – neoliberalism has 'fed and radicalised itself through its own crises', perpetuating the logic that produced them (ibid.). Neo-populism is only the latest metamorphosis of this way of governing, one in which

they arise and constitutively oppose the new forms of domination, the 'counter-rights' of the latter contrast the depoliticisation produced by the absolutisation of subjective rights. In fact, they arise from the realisation of the impotence of the subalterns and are defined by enhancing the praxis that combats it. Like Ferrajoli's 'counter-powers', Menke's 'counter-rights' aim to re-politicise the juridical. At the same time, they propose to modify the arrangements of the social order, marking the very 'political process they make possible' (Menke 2015, p. 388).

[7] On the principle of equality see Ferrajoli (2018, pp. IX-XIII, 3-35, 113-137, 196-220).

neoliberalism – earlier associated with progress and individual freedoms – 'takes the form of the closure of borders, the erection of new «walls», the cult of nationhood and sovereignty, and the explicit offensive against human rights, seen as a danger to security' (ibid.).

In this sense, Trump's election 'unquestionably marks a date in the history of global neoliberalism: Trump is the name of a mutation that goes well beyond the United States and involves 'all governments that express nationalist, authoritarian, xenophobic tendencies' (ibid. p. 7). Similarly, we can observe the government that was in power in Italy from 2018 to 2019, considered one of the most interesting laboratories of the 'new neoliberalism' because it is characterised by a mixture of nationalism and neoliberalism perfectly embodied by Matteo Salvini's Lega. While verbally lashing out against the European Union and the Euro, the governing League has in fact remained firmly within the limits of the neoliberal programme. It has opposed 'any logic of redistribution through taxation and public spending', in particular by raising the flag of the *flat tax;* it has supported small and medium-sized enterprises by elevating them to the rank of champions of productivity and 'national heroes'; it has tried to promote the so-called 'differentiated autonomy', that is, that real 'secession of the rich' which – in the name of free competition between regions of the same country – undermines the equality of citizens 'with respect to fundamental public services' (ibid.; Viesti 2019).

The 5-Star Movement has also mixed nationalism with neoliberalism – as evidenced by its full support for the immigration policies of the Ministry of the Interior – which also includes the so-called 'citizenship income'. This social measure, flaunted from the balcony of Palazzo Chigi as the abolition of poverty, is a good example of paternalistic neoliberalism and is in fact a 'dangerous workfare system' (Ciccarelli & Nicoli 2019; Ciccarelli 2020);[8] in fact, it is a subsidy strongly condi-

[8] Ciccarelli recalls that the 'citizenship income' envisages on paper 'up to 16 hours of free work per week provided to local authorities, compulsory mobility throughout the country in search of a job, funds to companies that hire. Those who do not respect these rules are penalised and punished up to the loss of the subsidy'. This neoliberal workfare logic has, moreover, run aground on the rocks of the failure of the 'digital platform that was supposed to bring supply and demand together' and that

tioned and marked by the colour line – all non-EU citizens who have resided in Italy for less than 10 years are excluded. It was not conceived as a measure capable of freeing up time to dedicate to 'active participation in citizenship' but as a 'tool for moralising the poor and disciplining the workforce to the benefit of businesses' (Dardot & Laval 2019, p. 7).

For Dardot and Laval, the Italian example shows that the governments of the new neoliberalism do not in any way represent 'a questioning of neoliberalism as a form of power' (ibid., p. 8). Rather, despite their great difference, governments such as those of Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi, Johnson, and Orban innovate the forms of neoliberal power by experimenting with an authoritarianism that reinforces its governmental grip on society and transforms it into 'national-neoliberalism'. As Pierre Sauvêtre has argued, this national-neoliberalism proclaims the recovery of national sovereignty against 'globalism' but does not oppose capitalist globalisation (Sauvêtre 2020). On the contrary, Trump, Johnson, Bolsonaro and Salvini present themselves as champions of entrepreneurial *ratio* and do not question generalised competition as the new reason of the world. On the contrary, they redefine the nation as an entrepreneurial community engaged in international economic warfare. A war whose logic their economic nationalism fully accepts, further pursuing 'the neoliberal work of the general dismantling of society' in the name of affirming the nation-state and national capital (ibid). Hence the support for lower taxes for the rich, the reduction of subsidies (which are only conceivable if they are strongly conditional on work) and the simplification of the various forms of market deregulation,

For Dardot and Laval, neo-populisms are thus produced within neoliberal governmentality as 'an original political form that mixes anti-democratic authoritarianism, economic nationalism and extended capitalist rationality' (Dardot & Laval 2019, p. 9). Arising out of the crisis of neoliberalism that, with its programme of transforming society into an order of competition, blew up the foundations of social and political life by generating anger, neo-populisms channel and exploit popu-

'has never come into operation'. Thus 'in fact, today, the 'citizenship income' is a basic income of 500 euros on average' (Ciccarelli 2020).

lar anger. Legitimising their actions with that same anger, they adopt a policy that overwhelmingly favours the market (ibid., p. 10). They use 'the crisis of liberal-social democracy', without ceasing to aggravate it, in order to better impose the 'logic of capital on society' (ibid.). Neo-populism is thus an integral part of neoliberalism. It is the form that politics takes in the crisis of neoliberalism and representative democracy. It is a tactical articulation with which neoliberalism addresses these crises by deploying more radical and explicit forms of its basic choice: the 'choice of civil war' (Dardot et al. 2021). In a recent book, written together with other members of the *Groupe d'études sur le néolibéralisme et les alternatives*, Dardot and Laval argued that the unifying feature of neoliberalism is that it wants to impose the market order through a policy of civil war. In all its forms, whether progressive, conservative, or populist, the strong State of neoliberalism fights a no-holds-barred battle for the constitutionalising of capitalist axioms: for a 'market constitutionalism', that is – as the governmental architecture of the European Union shows – the one able to shield the levers of political decision-making from democratic processes (ibid., pp. 97-118; Dardot & Laval 2009, pp. 196-199; Malatesta 2020). The political is thus reconfigured 'as a fundamental decision in favour of the economic' (Ricciardi 2016; 2017, pp. 11 ff; Zanini 2019).

4. Populism in the neoliberal 'civil war'

For Dardot and Laval, neoliberal civil war is not the *stasis* of the Greeks, the permanent threat of the dissolution of the social body. Nor is it the Hobbesian war of all against all: a figure of disorder radically opposed to politics as a praxis capable of radically suspending violence. Neoliberal civil war is a peculiar form of politics itself: it is politics understood as a 'continuation of war' (Foucault 2013, p. 45). Put another way, it is 'the product of power relations and the exercise of government' (Pelletier 2021). Exercising power, in fact, 'is in a certain way to practice civil war' and – turning Clausewitz's famous dictum on its head with Foucault – for Dardot and Laval, politics is also 'the continuation of war by other means' (ibid.; Foucault 1998, p. 22). As mentioned above, the '*heart* of the authoritarian dimension

of neoliberal politics' – the one running through both globalist and progressive neoliberalism as well as sovereign and reactionary neoliberalism – is the 'founding decision that restricts *a priori* the field of deliberation' and excludes 'economic policy from collective deliberation' (Dardot 2021).[9] This is what the two authors call 'constitutional decisionism' (Dardot et al. 2021, p. 296[10]). If this is the unifying feature of neoliberal civil war, the many differences of real neoliberalism are due to the changing strategies with which – in different contexts and against changing enemies – it is fought in order to establish the market order.

In order to achieve this goal, Austrian and German theorists of the 1930s immediately thought of neoliberalism as a 'political project to neutralise socialism' (ibid., p. 23). Socialist governments and parties, social movements and trade unions must not be allowed to undermine the market order. The first objective of the neoliberal civil war is therefore to avoid 'that the masses, forming a coalition, can – even within the legal framework of representative democracy – call into question the self-balancing functioning of the market' (ibid., p. 20). That is why a strong State is needed in order to protect the market from the threat of State regulation and the Freedom-killing collectivism of the welfare State. The State – as the champions of doctrinaire neoliberalism (Hayek, Mises, Rüstow and Röpke) agree – must index economic justice to the market order, protecting the population from class struggle understood as 'civil war in society' and effectively neutralising 'the socialist that can be born in every proletarian' (ibid., p. 302). The neoliberal State is always on the

[9] In this sense, Dardot and Laval's theoretical proposal differs from others – such as the very stimulating idea of Thomas Briebricher (Briebricher 2020) – who, assimilating authoritarianism and the authoritarian regime, tend to consider as the harbinger of 'authoritarian neoliberalism' only the political options which lead to authoritarianism understood as a political regime and not also those options (such as the experience of the 'Third Way' of Clinton, Blair, Schroeder, etc.) which create, in their own way, an 'irreducible authoritarian dimension of neoliberalism'. This is a dimension that, for Dardot and Laval, consists precisely in removing the decision over market order from common deliberation (Dardot & Laval 2021, p. 297).

[10] For Dardot, the ordoliberal pioneers who paved the way for 'constitutional decisionism' in the 1930s were inspired by Carl Schmitt's concept of 'fundamental decision' (Schmitt 1984, pp. 48 ff.). Dardot recalls the example of Franz Böhm, who described the economic constitution as a 'normative order of the national economy' that could only exist 'through the exercise of a conscious and felt political will, an authoritarian decision of *leadership*' (Dardot 2021). Laval pointed out that, although they dislike the concept of sovereignty, neoliberals 'are hyper-sovereigntists since they make the State the supreme guarantor of the market order' (Laval 2021, p. 189). On the Schmittian inspiration of the ordoliberals, with different positions, see also Malatesta (2019) and Mesini (2019).

warpath, but its goal can be achieved with different strategies. The neoliberal civil war is not thought of simply as a violent armed clash between two fractions of the population, even if – as has happened in practice – it can certainly resort to physical violence modulated in different degrees and forms: the coup and the physical elimination of the enemy in Pinochet's Chile, class warfare from above in Thatcher's England and Reagan's USA, the repression of the Gillet Jaunes in Macron's France, of the No Tav militants in the Italy of so many governments, the suppression of the great self-organised popular movement in Piñera's Chile.

Different from fascist violence, this violence is essentially characterised by being a 'conservative violence of the market order' (ibid., p. 21). Its 'categorical imperative' is the market and it is identified with a 'whole civilisation': the civilisation of the freedom and the individual responsibility of the 'citizen-consumer' (ibid., pp. 21-22). The neoliberal State, whether right-wing or left-wing, progressive or neo-populist, will have to defend this civilisation with all necessary means, and violence is only one of them. What is central, however, are the political, legal, social, moral, cultural and media weapons needed to construct an enemy (external and internal) that will allow popular emotions to be mobilised in order to aggregate a stable social coalition and establish a deep and lasting internal frontier between previously opposing sections of the population. Dardot and Laval give the example of the recent US elections. Although he lost them, Trump obtained the consent of 73 million voters (compared to 63 million in 2016), who – as has been observed - represent 'a rather articulated set of authoritarian impulses, supremacist behaviour, conspiracy delusions but also varied social conditions, political convictions, economic projects' – with which the United States will have to deal for a long time to come (Mometti 2021).[11] Trump has managed to 'reinvest very old racial, social and cultural divisions

[11] Franco Berardi Bifo has argued that, plagued by economic, social and anthropological crisis – and 'worried about their demographic dominance slipping away' – white Americans voting for Trump perceive that 'the privilege they enjoy is about to run out'. So for now they are desperately clinging to 'what they have left – an SUV, firearms and the right to eat a lot of meat' – but are ready to follow 'a Führer who promises to restore America's greatness'. This is why the creeping 'American civil war opposing white nationalism and liberal-democratic globalism, both expressions of American capitalist supremacism', is likely to continue for a long time 'with destructive force'. Trumpism embodies,

in order to exploit them to his own advantage', while also refreshing the sexist, racist and slave imaginary of the south (Dardot et al. 2021, p. 12; Salmon 2021). In this way he was able to make sense of popular hatred and resentment, staging a veritable war of values between freedom and equality. While equality was superimposed on the enemy – especially the 'socialist' enemy – the former president identified with a neoliberal and populist version of freedom: the 'freedom to resist anti-Covid protocols, to cut taxes for the rich, to try to destroy what remains of state regulation and the welfare state' (Brown 2020):[12] a freedom to undertake and consume what hinges on the supremacy of Western cultural values and spreads the 'passion for inequality' on a mass scale (Rancière 2021).[13]

This is a recurring strategy in sovereigntist populisms. All of these, on a global scale, today seem to want to fight a 'civil war against equality in the name of *freedom*' (Dardot et al. 2021, p. 13; Löwy 2019). A central feature of this reactionary declination of neoliberal civil war is that, while denouncing globalised *élites*, it is always driven by oligarchies: 'oligarchies coalesced to certain sectors of the population, through the active support of other sectors of the latter', especially the middle and popular classes (ibid., p. 16). This active support, however, is not already given. On the contrary, it must be built up through the instrumentalisation of the divisions already existing in the population itself. In particular, they are the more archaic divi-

and risks continuing to embody for a long time, 'the deep soul of America' (Berardi Bifo 2020; 2021a).

[12] *The land of free'* read a banner of the US supremacist squads who, harangued by Trump, marched on Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021. For Bifo, the slogan reveals a conception of freedom as the one that the legislators of the United States of America 'wrote in their founding documents, deciding to forget millions of slaves from the very first minute'. It is a freedom that can go as far as 'legitimising and guaranteeing slavery' and which – in the universe of inequality – 'means supremacy, privilege, violence' (Berardi Bifo 2021b).

[13] The passion for inequality – Jacques Rancière points out – allows both rich and poor to 'find themselves a multitude of inferiors over whom they can maintain their superiority at all costs': superiority 'of men over women, of white women over black women, of workers over the unemployed, of those who work in the trades of the future over others, of those who have good insurance over those who depend on public solidarity, of natives over migrants, of nationals over foreigners, and of citizens of the mother-nation of democracy over the rest of humanity'. The passion of inequality is a sad passion based on the 'affection of hatred and exclusion'. For Jacques Rancière, however, it is not only found in the Trumpian people or the populist right-wingers, but also in the people of all those 'forms of community that we call democracies' (Rancière 2021).

sions along the lines of colour, nation, morality, tradition, and religion: all 'instruments of hierarchical discipline and normalisation of the population' (ibid., p. 191).

5. Dividing the people: 'war of values' and 'war on migrants'

Exploiting the great phantasmagorical narrative of the dissolution of the people and their cultural identity, in its populist and conservative version neoliberalism engages in a war of values that allows it to 'divide the people' not only by playing one side against the other, but also by effectively setting them 'against themselves' (ibid., p. 210). This 'war of values' is not a novelty coming from Trump, Bolsonaro, Orban, Kaczyński, Salvini. The 'neoliberalism/new social conservatism alliance' mentioned by Melinda Cooper was already alive when Pinochet, Thatcher and Reagan were fighting the legacy of '68 with an effective cultural counter-revolution (Cooper 2017, pp. 22 ff.). The neoliberal war of values is not just a 'superstructure', nor a mere supplement to the class struggle from above (Gallino 2012). Rather, it is a very important part of this struggle because, while it mobilises a section of the population to support *elite-friendly* policies, it deflects interest from the conflict against socio-economic inequality and provides a channel for 'venting the anger of the victims of the neoliberal system' (Dardot et al. 2021, p. 193). Victims who are invited to fight the crusade for the restoration of a traditional order in which the values of authority, 'honest' work, merit and the 'natural' family find their place but are reconfigured according to the updates proposed by neoliberal Nobel Prize winner Gary Becker (Becker 1981).

In neoliberal populism, the family is in fact conceived as a small business in which rational parents pay constant attention to accumulating 'human capital with a very high return' (Dardot et al. 2021, p. 199). This family then aims to harness women again in the gratuitousness of reproductive labour to better accommodate the neoliberal dismantling of welfare and consolidate new and more insidious forms of 'patriarchal capitalism' (Federici 2019; Chicchi et al. 2020). In sovereigntist populism, God, nation and family coexist with freedom, which remains the first source of legitimation of the neoliberal programme. But in its war of values, popu-

list neoliberalism sets up a 'new spirit of freedom', in which 'emancipation-freedom' – the set of guarantees against oppression typical of the Enlightenment and liberal tradition – gives way to 'tradition-freedom', i.e., the 'right to assert a set of self-proclaimed traditional values as equivalent to civilisation': obviously an idealised Western civilisation whose material and immaterial borders must be defended against a long list of enemies who would like to break them (technocrats, financiers, globalists, oligarchies, political castes, migrants, Muslims, terrorists, communists, feminists, LGTBQ+ activists, etc.), thus destroying the identity and freedom of the 'true people' (Dardot et al. 2021, p. 200).

It is to this right-wing variant of the neoliberal civil war that, after the 2008 crisis, a massive component of the working and popular classes ended up surrendering, after the governmental left had abandoned them in the previous decades along with the fight against inequality. Recovering the libertarian and emancipatory thrusts of the 1960s and 1970s movements to the mythologies of enterprise, technology and consumption, the governing left in the 1990s had in fact helped to forge the 'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski & Chiapello 1999). By embracing the deregulation of financial markets, privatisation, liberalisation, job insecurity, the dismantling of public services and the logic of *New Public Management*, the so-called Left of the Third Way had created 'progressive neoliberalism'.[14] Trying to grab the vote of large fractions of the young, educated and urbanised middle class, it ended up passively accepting the battleground of values imposed on it by the right, thus permanently closing the road to any proposal for an alternative to neoliberal society. However, if it is true that – as Žižek has argued – the explosion of sovereigntism is 'a symptom of the failure of today's liberal left', its abandonment of the working classes is not enough to explain the success of the reactionary and populist version of neoliberalism (Žižek 2016).

This, Dardot and Laval argue, is mainly due to the fact that they have been able to counteract the social damage produced by neoliberal policies with an 'imagi-

[14] On the brief hegemony of progressive neoliberalism in the US, see Nancy Fraser (2017, pp. 46-64).

nary antidote': a true 're-enchantment of us' (Dardot et al., 2021, p. 210). Sovereigntist populism has evoked a virtuous people, without class divisions, composed of free men who respect state authority and traditional values. It invoked the idea of an indivisible nation capable of becoming competitive again in the arena of global capitalism thanks to ordinary people and honest workers, also capable of 'going for it' by accepting the norm of inter-individual competition without union complaints. Sovereigntist populism was (and is) a 'xeno-populism' that lashed out at the alleged privileges of *others*, accusing them of not taking their rightful place within the national community and of usurping what was rightfully due to 'honest working national citizens' (Alietti & Padovan 2020, p. 12). Against the backdrop of an accentuated 'productivist populism', sovereigntism forcefully remarked on the division between the virtuous national producers and the 'enemies of the people', 'immoral parasites' (Abromeit 2016, p. 236). With a threefold operation of 'imaginary re-communitisation of society', 're-idealisation of the sovereign State' and 'radicalisation of individual freedom', sovereigntist neo-populism has thus managed to divide the people and overthrow a section of the popular classes against the achievements of the labour movement, the welfare State, labour law and trade unions. The imaginary re-communitisation of society has unscrupulously mobilised xenophobia, racism and securitarianism, engaging an 'illiberal and proto-fascist drift' in style (Dardot et al. 2021, p. 211). This allowed neoliberal populism to break down any remaining unity of popular circles, undermining their 'eventual resistance to the ruling classes' (ibid.). Dardot and Laval point to the decisive role of racism in the strategy with which sovereigntist populisms fight the neoliberal civil war. They argue that this is also 'ethnic' warfare because it seeks to 'exclude foreigners from any form of citizenship, especially by increasingly restricting the right to asylum' (ibid, p. 16).

However, Dardot and Laval do not delve into the deep elective affinities that link populism and neoliberalism in the practice of the 'war on migrants', understood as a shared tactic in the common neoliberal civil war (Mellino 2016; Mezzadra 2020, pp. 101 ff). Miguel Mellino, on the other hand, does so scrupulously, arguing that the analysis of EU migration policies shows that populist sovereignty and ne-

oliberalism are 'one hydra with two heads' (Mellino 2019, p. 15). Stepping back from the different rhetoric used, in fact, both share the basic features of a mobility governance device that associates the exclusion of migrants – with the blocking and externalisation of borders, racism, the global proliferation of camps, the 'system crimes' in the Mediterranean (Ferrajoli 2021, pp. 433-438) – to their differential inclusion in the order of production and social reproduction, according to a logistical rationality pursuing the utopia of *just-in-time* and *to-the-point* migration (Mezzadra 2020, pp. 120 ff.).

When the powerful migrant and refugee movements in the summer of 2015 materially undermined European border *management*, individual states and the European Union responded in continuity with what Mellino calls the 'racist material constitution' of Maastricht and Schengen Europe (Mellino 2019, p. 10). That is, they have set up the 'hotspot approach', further tightening and externalising borders, thus decreeing 'the end of the traditional human rights regime concerning refugees and asylum seekers and its replacement by legislation geared towards their production as a differential and racialised labour force for local labour markets' (ibid., p. 38). Exploiting this context, against the backdrop of a severe economic crisis, populist sovereignties have managed to accredit themselves as the bastion erected in defence of national sovereignty and borders by proposing themselves as the actors of the 'restoration of a lost economic, patriarchal and racial order' (ibid., p. 13). In the order of the dominant discourse, then, a binary logic has been established that has insistently described neoliberalism and sovereigntism as two opposing political projects. The good conscience of European democrats has fetishised the former, seeing it as the only barrier to the spread of the latter. But, while embodying two different projects for governing the crisis, neoliberalism and sovereigntism have been (and are) an integral' part of the same 'capitalist realism» that – according to Mark Fisher's lesson – proves capable of 'dominating the political-economic unconscious' by imposing itself as the only reason able to guide our social existences (Fisher 2018, p. 148). In fact, with different modulations – as we have said – neoliberalism and sovereigntism share the intention of relaunching the 'ne-

oliberal, competitive, proprietary and securitarian way of accumulation', while also further tightening the 'racist and coercive devices, both on migrants and on the 'post-colonial' populations of the continent' (Mellino 2019, p. 10).

6. Defending the people: structural racism and the 'racial contract of citizenship'

For Mellino, the deepest link between neoliberalism and sovereigntism lies in the fact that both propose a 'new «racial contract» of citizenship', offering nationals greater control over migrants and their labour (ibid., p. 11).[15] Their 'political interpellation', however, is not only based on the socio-economic question. Neoliberalism and sovereigntism are in fact 'structures of feeling' that mobilise passions and solicit emotional involvement.[16] In different ways, they equally appeal to what Jacques-Alain Miller has called the 'hatred of the enjoyment of the other' (ibid.): the hatred against the alleged well-being of the other; against 'the way the *other* lives, dresses, eats, works, rejoices, desires'; that is, hatred against the fact 'that he can enjoy more than I do' (ibid.). What is problematic, then, is not simply the racist virulence of sovereignty, with its project of tightening up the mechanisms of hierarchisation of citizenship. Sovereigntist racism, in fact, is 'a sort of radicalisation of some tendencies already inscribed in the institutional and structural racism promoted by the European migratory regime' (ibid., p. 14). The real problem is the fact that sovereigntism and neoliberalism intimately share precisely that institutional and structural racism, even if the latter often presents itself with the face of an ethical anti-racism.

We mean by 'European institutional racism' here, following Etienne Balibar, a system of power that, by political decision, combines the political and social exclusion of migrant populations with their 'inferior inclusion in the economy and welfare networks', with the ultimate aim of 'exploiting the differential in living

[15] Mellino takes up the concept of the 'racial contract' from Charles Mills (1986). In open polemic with John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, Mills understands the contractualist narrative as an ideological tool based on an 'epistemology of ignorance' that erases racial subordination and refuses to face reality, viewing Western society as 'a cooperative enterprise for mutual benefit' (Lim 2020).
[16] For the concept of 'structure of feeling' see Williams (1961, pp. 64 ff.).

standards and wages that is thus produced' (Balibar 2001, p. 309). 'Structural racism', on the other hand, is a concept that Mellino carves out of the Bourdieusian concept of *habitus*, in order to define a form of racism 'that crosses all the spaces we inhabit and pass through every day', material and immaterial (Mellino 2019, p. 26). Like Bourdieu's *habitus* – and like Abdemalek Sayad's 'State thought' – structural racism is 'structured structure predisposed to function as a structuring structure' (Bourdieu 2001, p. 257; Sayad 2002, pp. 367-384). As a structuring structure, it is a 'principle of division into logical classes' and 'the product of the incorporation of the division into social classes' and races (Bourdieu 2001, p. 175). As a structuring structure, it 'organises practices and their perception': that is, it shapes both the necropolitics that excludes, interns and expels migrants (to the point of causing their death), and the biopolitics that – through concrete processes of racialisation – harnesses them as concrete beings within the mesh of societal order.[17] And finally, through 'symbolic violence', it drives them to internalise domination and accept subordinate roles.[18] 'Structural racism' is the fact that society is structured on the basis of racism, which in turn reproduces and institutionalises the hierarchies of the social order. Structural racism is the obscene side of capitalist modernity which, while proclaiming equality between men in words, daily tramples on it by naturalising the material and symbolic inferiority of populations which are pushed to inter-

[17] For the concept of 'necropolitics' the reference is of course to Mbembe (2011; 2016). That of biopolitics is clearly Foucauldian. For a concept of racialisation similar to the one used here, cfr. Omi & Winant (2015). Focusing on the centrality of the process of 'racial formation' in the United States, in this volume these authors argue that the logic of capitalism and the logic of racialisation – understood as a 'complex process of selection' and the 'fabrication of race' by way of which 'human physical characteristics («real» or imagined) become the basis for justifying or reinforcing social hierarchisation' (p. 111) – are strictly connected on the historical, material, and symbolic level. Mutatis mutandis, this is what has happened and also is happening in Europe where the recent political success is very much due to the explicit proposal to revive the weave between the hierarchies of capitalist order and processes of racialisation: this weave, however, is not disputed, except rhetorically, even by the most markedly neoliberal political forces.

[18] For Bourdieu, symbolic violence is notoriously, 'gentle, insensitive violence, invisible to the victims themselves, exercised essentially through the purely symbolic avenues of communication and knowledge or, more precisely, mis-knowledge' (Bourdieu 1998, pp. 7-8). This violence leads to the incorporation of dominant classifications by subalterns. It ensures, for example, that in Italy, despite living in a condition of intensive exploitation, Romanian construction workers can 'accept to represent themselves as «great workers» and Burkinabé labourers do not question the need to receive low wages and live in dramatic conditions during the harvesting seasons' (Perrotta 2014, p. 174).

nalise the legitimacy of the market order in which they live as excluded or included in subordination.

In different ways, neoliberalism and sovereigntism share the material substance of structural racism. Indeed, there is operative in both 'the externalisation of a racial drive rooted in Europe's historical relationship with its «colonial» others' (Mellino 2019, p. 15). What they have in common is precisely coloniality which, although removed along with its traumatic violence – after the end of the anti-colonial struggles – remains in the social unconscious as 'the Mr. Hyde who haunts Dr. Jekyll from the beginning' (Pezzella 2017, p. 113). Coloniality thus overbearingly resurfaces not only in the 'white, exclusionary and racialised conception of *people*' that operates in the sovereign promise of an 'increasingly exclusionary, selective and police-like administration of the status of modern citizenship', but also in the neoliberal programme of the EU (Mellino 2019, pp. 52 and 15). This is also why neoliberalism and populism are so similar. Their common roots lie in the colonial and imperial history of European capitalism and its States, as well as in the 'constitutive coloniality of the (political-cultural) notion of the people' that descends from that history (ibid., p. 52).[19]

Sovereigntist populism is certainly a reactionary variant of neoliberalism. But it only proposes a few more clampdowns on the 'processes of hierarchization of citizenship' that have always been 'constitutive of neoliberalism' (ibid., p. 86). With Stuart Hall, Mellino recalls that the first European neoliberalism – Thatcherism – was after all an 'authoritarian populism' (Hall 2015a). It succeeded in mobilising the masses by reinforcing the class order through the hegemonic diffusion of a new common sense that combined the values of the market – competition, personal responsibility, proprietary individualism – with the more traditional values of family, nation, duty and authority (Hall 1978; 1979, p. 17; Moini 2020, pp. 145-151). Thatcherism governed the crisis of hegemony in post-war capitalism with a 'postcolonial rearrangement of society's racial hierarchies' (Hall 1979; Mellino 2019, p. 19). 'Europe's first neoliberal *law-and-order-society*' promised the English people and

[19] On the coloniality of modern capitalist power see at least Quijano (2000) and Grosfoguel (2017).

white proletarians – in order to divide and better discipline them[20] – a tightening of command over black populations to be understood as a kind of compensatory 'psychological wage' in the crisis: a 'wage of whiteness' which is able to defend the national people from the fear of falling (Mellino 2019, p. 21).[21] In continuity with the British imperialist and colonialist tradition, racism was thus used – for the first time after the defeat of Nazi-fascism – as a 'vehicle for political suturing' and as a 'material device for the hierarchization of citizenship' (ibid., p. 24).

After the 2008 crisis, while neoliberal governmentality was hitting large portions of the European population hard, the racist device – understood as the 'institutional technology of production of territories and populations' – again became central (Mellino 2020, p. 32). Migration governance policies and structural racism have continued to support the 'racial contract of citizenship' deputised to defend the European people from the fear of slipping into the lower rungs of the social ladder, where there are now the *others*: those migrants and refugees whose lives are reproduced as an 'increasingly precarious labour force' and tendentially 'servile' (Mellino 2019, p. 164). European capitalism and its governmental *ratio* confirm their need for '*racial* subsidies' (Mbembe 2013, p. 257). These feed on a colonial subconscious that resurfaces and, when necessary, is put to political use by neoliberals and sovereigntists alike. 'Race and racism', Achille Mbembe argues, 'are part of the fundamental processes of the unconscious' and 'refer to the blind alleys of human desire: appetites, feelings, passions, fears' (ibid., p. 57).

In the post-democratic interregnum, structural racism and the political interpellation of the new authoritarian populisms have operated as a 'driving force' able to provide 'desperate support for the structure of a failing self' (ibid.). Through the promise of defending the people from the 'ghost of the foreign body', a 'fascist mood' has thus spread: 'a subtle mood that inadvertently infects [...] the gestures and words of everyday life' of those who end up accepting and practising words and

[20] For Hall, it is through racism that capital defeats the attempts to build 'those alternatives that could represent class as a whole, against capitalism and against racism' (Hall 2015b, p. 122).
[21] For the concepts of 'whiteness wage' and 'psychological wage' see Roediger (1991) and Du Bois (1979, pp. 700 ff.), on which Mezzadra (2013). On the 'fear of falling' during crises see Gambino (2003, p. 121).

actions that they would have 'found unthinkable and unacceptable until a short time before' (Balibar 2019; Pezzella 2019). This state of mind smoulders under the ashes of the pandemic. In order to face its re-emergence, Mellino argues, it will not be enough to throw arrows against the 'new fascism'. Instead, it will be necessary to 'decolonise anti-racism' by bringing back to the centre a political action which, even when it wants to be emancipatory and progressive, today fails to propose a different vision of society and an alternative narrative to the hegemonic neo-populist narrative. What would be needed is a political action capable of rejecting both the 'racist and «progressive neoliberalism» of the EU and the 'openly xenophobic and «regressive neoliberalism» of sovereigntist populism (Mellino 2019, p. 50; Palmi 2020).

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