

## Europe, Populism and the Social Question

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Last week I was teaching the last session of this semester, of my lectures on contemporary struggles for citizenship. This time, more than in the past years, I was surprised how up to date the texts I had proposed to my students were in the current reality. The whole lecture was dealing with the erosion of citizenship rights in Europe and beyond, and how this situation generates new social movements. We discussed the anti-austerity movements in Europe and in North America, such as the Indignados in Spain, Nuit Debout in France as well as Occupy Wall Street. All these spontaneous movements of students and workers emerged in the north western part of the world in the last ten years as a consequence of the economic and financial crisis of 2008-2009 in the United States and the eurozone. In particular, they were directed against the austerity measures in public spending for health, education and pension services as well as against privatisations of these same sectors and labour market reforms across eurozone member states and North America. Over the same time period, the Arab Spring originated from the gesture of protest of a street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, in Tunisia, who set himself on fire against corruption of the local police and his difficulties to earn a living. Public demonstrations against Ben Ali, the Tunisian dictator, followed all over the country and then expanded to Egypt, Libya and Syria. What is left today of these diverse but still comparable social movements? The outcome of the Arab Spring is still very debated, even though the everyday life conditions of the people did not improve, with the partial exception of Tunisia, and even became worse, especially in Libya and Syria. In Europe, anti-austerity movements also did not achieve any sustainable change in the policies proposed both at the EU and at the national level. Of course, the two cases, the struggle against authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and protests against labour reform and economic policies in Europe and North America deal with very different issues and contexts. Nevertheless, as Asef Bayat shows in his book [Revolutions without Revolutionaries](#), the Arab Spring was a movement where ordinary people took to the streets, not for ideological reasons nor through a specific party organisation, but rather to express their frustration about a system that not only did not allow them to be free in their daily life and to elect their rulers, but also had stripped them off social security. In that sense, and in due proportions, the feeling of social insecurity that citizens in Europe or North America feel when their salary does not cover their expenditures at the end of the month, when they do not know if their temporary working contract will be renewed and for how long, is not so different from the feeling of insecurity of not being able to pay for water and electricity bills or for a decent housing that, according to Bayat, was one of the reasons of the Arab Spring.

A few years after social movements brought citizens to the squares and the streets of Europe as well as other parts of the world, people feel even more disillusioned than at the start of the economic crisis. The youth of southern countries of Europe but also of its richer core, you just have to think of Brexit or the recent German election, not to mention the presidential election in the United States, don't feel they are looking forward to a future in which they will engage with a promising job market and don't feel they can trust their political elites to solve the problems generated by a precarious economic and social situation. Therefore, we should ask ourselves whether it is not precisely the missing answer to a pressing social question, for the youth but also for those left out of the job market before they can reach the age of retirement, which is fuelling populism all over Europe, including, after 24 September 2017 in Germany. In the [2013 federal election](#), the AFD (Alternative for Deutschland) scored 4.7% of the preferential votes. In 2017, this anti-European, conservative and populist right-wing party scored 12.6% of the preferential votes, thus becoming the third party in terms of vote percentage. Here, I suggest interpreting this specific result, just as the increase in right-wing populism all over Europe at the moment and in North America, in relation to the erosion of social citizenship rights and the feeling of disillusion that made room for protest movements in the aftermath of the economic crisis.

In this respect, Peter Marcuse's text on the implications of the 2008 crisis for the everyday life of the citizens is noteworthy.

In the chapter 'What Rights to What City?' Marcuse recalls Henri Lefebvre the French geographer's, definition of the right to the city as 'a cry and a demand'. The 'cry' manifests itself in reclaiming the access to the space of the city out of necessity. In this case, those protesting are the ones who are left out (of resources, jobs, housing...), those who are directly oppressed, those whose basic needs are not fulfilled by the political community. The 'demand' on the other hand is the aspiration for something more: a better job, with better working conditions and salaries, the access to a more fulfilling life. In this case, those organising demonstrations in the streets, in Europe and outside, are the students, those who have precarious or low paid jobs. Struggles for basic rights by those who are excluded from the benefits of the general economic

and social system, and demands and aspirations of those only superficially integrated in it, says Marcuse, are the underpinning reasons of all the political changes of the Twentieth century, starting with the Russian revolution, generated by the crisis of the First World War, continuing with Fascism and Nazism, outcomes of the 1929 economic crisis. But the same crisis also gave rise to the New Deal in the USA. Later on, the demands for a more fulfilling life in a situation of economic prosperity started the 1968 movements in Europe and the Civil Rights Movement in North America.

For Marcuse the difference between an economic crisis leading to progressive social change or rather to regressive social and political movements (what I called here populism) depends on the capacity of the elites, the political parties, the intellectuals, to understand both the needs and the demands, and to combine them in a reshaped social equilibrium. The task for progressive forces in Europe and in the world today is thus not to condemn those who vote for populist parties, but to understand them, understand their material conditions, and give them answers. Without that step, the needs and the demands of those left out by the current system of European integration and of globalisation will more and more be exploited by regressive populist forces. The social question needs thus to be put clearly at the top of the current political agenda and to be addressed in a progressive way.