

Specters of Conspiratorial Thinking in Populist Reason

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This is mostly a theoretical paper that sets the stage for further empirical research focused on populist conspiracy theories. Its purpose is threefold. First, it tries to point out and to struggle with problems of defining populism as political phenomenon. Second, it tries to resolve these problems by putting the emphasis on the role of conspiratorial thinking in populism, conceived as a simplified political discourse that relies on ultimate phantasms of the politics of redemption. Third, it tries to show, by using ideas of social psychology, cultural sociology, Lacanian and post-Lacanian psychoanalysis, how such conspiratorial thinking emerges and expresses those phantasms in conceiving the politics as antagonistic battlefield. As an articulation of political cleavages, conspiracy theories are considered here as symptoms which mostly act-out collective traumas. What is not a part of this paper and should be done further is to establish methodological settings that will be used for discursive thick description of empirical cases that is to come about in the future.

Troubles with populism arise on the very doorstep of its definition and usage. Stijn Van Kessel clearly articulated this problem by stating that 'When the term is used, it is often not clear, or made explicit, whether a reference is made to a specific delineated subset of political parties or whether populism is seen as a certain discourse, which can essentially be voiced by any political actor.' (2014: 100). Furthermore, he raised two interrelated issues. First, when a political party can be classified as a full instance of populism? And second, by stating that populist discourse can easily be adopted and abandoned by various political actors, he implies 'that a potential universe of populist parties can become rather changeable throughout time' (101). For all these reasons, he warns, current usage of populism resembles Giovanni Sartori's concept of the cat-dog or nonexistent animal which lives only in scientific discourse.

I'm not qualified for surgery of impossible beings nor for exorcism of specters, but I will try to provide useful conceptual framework that will lean on recent discussions on populism and to explain populism by relying on conspiratorial form of thinking, usually

present in such appeals.

Defining Populism

While some authors didn't agree on concept definition and its consistent usage (Ionescu & Gellner, 1969), other theoretical attempts to define populism were criticized as comprehensive but vague and too inclusive or clear but too narrow (Canovan, 1982: 546; Youngdale, 1975: 7). Some of them also focused on populism just as a strategic communication tool for (mainstream) politicians (Weyland, 2001; Betz, 2002), as well as for interest group representatives and journalists (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007: 322). In a very slow pace further clarifications appeared about dependence of its articulations on ideological context (Hawkins, 2009; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013), political history, regional, national and continental peculiarities (Canovan, 2004; Stavrakais et al. 2014).

In spite of all these problems, several authors (Ackerman et. al 2014, Stanley, 2008; Weyland, 1996; Zaslove, 2008) tried to establish minimal definition of populism and defined it as a thin-centered ideology which rarely exists on its own, as some kind of a half-parasite which needs more usual ideological doctrines (such as nationalism, socialism, liberalism etc.) to be crafted on in order to become potent political option, able to give comprehensive program. In other words, populism is in itself never enough to fuel sustained, politically constructive mobilizations (Comaroff, 2011: 103). Furthermore, all these authors emphasize that populism imagines society as split and antagonized between 'the pure people' versus the 'corrupt elite,' and that politics should be an expression of general will of unified and unspoiled people, which are considered the soil of democracy. On the other side, corruption is immoral activity which defines evilness of elites. For the sake of our further argument it is worth to emphasize - as the corruption is nontransparent and secret activity of more than one person that includes bribery, cronyism, nepotism, patronage, influence peddling etc., and generally abuse of power for private interests - it should be considered as a form of conspiracy.

What is missing in previous minimal definition are the effects and further elements of rich populist imagery. Thus, populist ideas proclaim antagonism and define who/what political regime/establishment/regnant ideology should be considered as political enemy, unmasked, overthrown from the power, excluded from the political community or even

persecuted. Populism articulates these ideas by using simplified language and imagination. First of all, 'the people' is imagined as unified political community rooted in mythical *heimat* and/or populist 'heartland', which is the 'construction of the good life derived retrospectively from a romanticized conception of life as it has been lived' (Taggart 2000: 78). For Taggart, that is imagined 'location of the people', conceived as 'virtuous and unified'¹ (95). Maybe the most vivid metaphor of such community is performed in Russian film *Outskirts* (Okraina, 1998). In this revenge-horor-comedy-road movie a group of former collective farm peasants pursue exploiters who acquired and privatized their land after the fall of the USSR. It ends in brutal killing of main enemy, greedy oil oligarch and ritual cleansing of the corrupt country's center with fire, produced by the people from the outskirts (Mihailova, 2015). Director plays here with and allegorizes the people as mythical entity, always strong and determined, capable of bestiality, but also of reading poetry, depicting them as in between nature and culture. On their pursuit of the land stealers they pass through unfriendly wintertime landscapes. To keep warm overnight they form peculiar tent made of their animal skin coats, with rifle in the middle of construction, which is further supported only by their own bodies. Light and warmth are produced by the fire from the camping gas heater.



Picture 1. Allegory of the people in *Outskirts*.

¹ Although Stavrakakis (2014: 13) concludes that such description defines populism as a qualified nationalism which fosters the image of organic community and obsession with frontiers, it is possible to imagine cosmopolitan *heimat*/heartland, for example as a city or as the whole humanity or the planet Earth. It is empirical question if they will be conceived in organic or in some other forms, as inclusive or exclusive communities, what metaphors and themes will be used for their description, etc. Another question is whether it is possible to express populism without referring to such romanticized or phantasmatic representations. My answer would be no. But if you ask me whether is possible to do the politics without such ideational constructions my answer would be 'I beleive so'. By that I mean post-phantasmatic politics, different from present post-political pragmatic way of dealing with political problems.

For Mihailova, this episode is the emotional center of the film, as it illustrates the quiet, dignified camaraderie between the peasants and the type of unspoken, natural bond that facilitates the unique, near sacred unity that defines *narod*² (ibid). A sense of romanticized and direct rapport with their populist leaders is another element of populism and one of the rare unforbidden forms of love among men in Oedipal society³, as it is expressed in this movie as well. Consequently, populism adopts rhetorical position of speaking in the name of the whole as if there is one will of the collective subject that emanates from togetherness and loyalty. By means of this strategy populism performs the existence of such political subject, and tries to mobilize potential audience to attain proclaimed goals, of course, with more or less success.

Moreover, several binary oppositions between the people and corrupted elite enemies are not included in the above-mentioned minimal definition, but they are implied through the attribution of 'purity' to the people and can be deciphered from it, as well as from other usual populist articulations. Here, political community is imagined as authentic (sometimes innate and natural), originary, grassrooted, and embodied by honest, brave, astute and comprised of hard-working people versus non-authentic, alienated, arrogant, faked, knavish, deceitful and parasitic elite(s). That could be considered as an articulation of the Durkhemian opposition between sacred and profane, between pure and polluted, which seeks a form of remedy, either recall, impeachment, referendum, elections, trial, reform or even revolution. Articulation of populism also includes at least some elements of binaries of civil discourse (Alexander and Smith, 1993) related to actors, such as

2 Eng. the people.

3 "Oedipal society" is a term established by some post-freudian and post-lacanian theoreticians. By using it they negatively refer to the conception of Freud and Lacan for a society to be civilized it is necessary that its members repress to some degree and to renounce their own bodily desires. Such repression is established during the childhood through the process of Oedipal complex. Its main outcome is the so called normal (but neurotic) individual subject. In larger terms this process sets up heterosexuality as universal norm and domination of (white) men over women, as well as over other subjects, such as colonized and enslaved others through the history, as it is discussed in feminist, queer and post-colonial theories. What is at stake in these discussions is "repression hypothesis", which states that the normal subject is possible only through adoption of prohibitive forces of paternal language that inscribes subject within the culture in terms of arbitrary signifying chains (Campbell, 2000: 9). Such masculine and hegemonistic narrative, privileged by founding fathers of psychoanalysis, is for their critics theoretical support for historically contingent, sexist, homophobic, racist and ethnocentric social order, which presents itself as universal.

‘conscience and a sense of honor’ versus ‘pathological greed and self-interest’; Of relationships, such as ‘open, trusting, and straightforward’ versus ‘secretive, conspiratorial dealings in which deceit and Machiavelian calculation play a key role’; And of institutions that are antagonized on the lines of the ‘rule regulated and in favor of the whole community’ versus ‘brute and arbitrary, in favor of factional interests’. To activate such binaries a strong sense of injustice and perception of systematic and protracted neglect or exploitation of ordinary people must be expressed. Thus, populist discourse expresses and tries to mobilize the movement through ‘the love of the sacred, the fear of pollution and the need for purification’ (Alexander, 2003: 9) and salvation.

Manichean depiction of actors, problems and situations, as well as dramatic, excitable and ‘mutinous tone’ (Sitas 2010: 39) of statements and speeches are also used to identify Good with a unified will of the people and Evil with a conspiring elite (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008: 5; Hawkins, 2009: 1042). In a similar vein Jean Comaroff (2011: 105) claims that populism uses reductionist logic of us versus them, tropes of xenophobia, homophobia, antisemitism etc., and polarizing mechanisms of scapegoating, witch-finding and conspiracy theorizing. Thus, it fosters reduction of politics, bypassing of institutions and democratic procedure and often requires and/or produces leaders with charismatic and paternalistic traits⁴ (ibid.) on whom populist movements and parties depend largely and who ‘claim to say aloud what the people think, especially if it has been deemed by the elite to be unmentionable’ (Canovan, 2004: 242).

Spectrality of Populism

For all these reasons populism produces uncanny feelings and is often conceived as a threat to democracy. This stereotype is expressed even among usual populist suspects, who would never admit or be proud to be populists, at least not in public⁵. Departing from that line of thinking, Margaret Canovan (1999) considers populism in a double form: as shadow that follows democracy, as well as possibility cast by democracy itself through ambiguity and oscillation between its redemptive or enthusiastic and pragmatic or skeptical

⁴ Here we can mention only for illustration few populist leaders such as Juan Peron, Hugo Chavez, Ross Perot, Silvio Berlusconi, Pim Fortuyn, Jean Marie Le Pen, Jörg Haider, Alexis Tsipras, etc.

⁵ Their secret enjoyment is always already implied in psychoanalytic understanding.

sides. She uses two statements to explain these two sides of democracy. Pragmatic side would be best described as 'a system of processing conflicts without killing one another' while redemptive side is represented by '*vox populi vox dei*' (9-10). But, for Benjamin Arditi (2007: 50) such shadowy conceptualization is itself ambiguous because it does not state whether if populism is external to or internal possibility of democracy. Instead he uses the Derridian concept of the spectre⁶ and describes populism as a spectre of democracy or a phenomenon which oscillates between being democracy's fellow traveler or its haunting apparition. By such conceptualization he tries to enable 'one to accept the undecidability between the democratic aspect of the phenomenon and its possible ominous tones' (Arditi, 2007:7) and to consider it as internal periphery of democracy. According to him, this oscillation is articulated in the three forms of populism:

1. As *a mode of representation*, virtually indistinguishable from contemporary, media-enhanced modes of representation in democracies. This form of populism became a part of mainstream democratic politics, mostly due to changes in the function of the state. To function in a more and more complex environment, democratic state faces unforeseen developments and challenges requiring prerogative or discretionary power to elected politicians (71). Such structural condition also changes balance between branches of power in favor to executive branch, blurs the boundary between making and enforcing the law and consequently, welcomes strong and decisive leaders, who are becoming more and more similar to populist leaders. Such populists do not consider representative government as either empty formalism or a poor substitute of direct democracy and they are incorporated into liberal democratic politics. This form could be considered as 'populism in power' (Panizza, 2000: 190) which transforms conventional politics.

2. As *a symptom of democratic politics*, or politics at the edge of democracy, expressed in radical democratic movements. It is a sort of 'return of the repressed' of mainstream institutional politics. It reveals the limits of the system and prevents its closure in the

⁶ Philosopher Jacques Derrida defines spectre as "a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some 'thing' that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other....It is something that one does not know, precisely, and one does not know if precisely it is, if it exists, if it responds to a name and corresponds to an essence. One does not know: not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge. At least no longer to that which one thinks one knows by the name of knowledge...[that] comes to defy semantics as much as ontology, psychoanalysis as much as philosophy" (1994/2006: 5).

presumed normality of institutional procedures (74). It is an 'internal foreign territory' of democracy and considered as improper behavior for good procedural democrats (75) and their soothing images of equilibristic functioning of the system. The symptom is conceived here as a substitutive-formation that stands in for a frustrated satisfaction or something amiss in democratic life. Such behavior masks a traumatic experience, and its form is a compromise between repressed representations and repressing representations (86). Here, the populism postulates 'radical alternative within the communitarian space' (Laclau, 2005) that grants visibility to the founding negativity of the political by summoning the disruptive 'noise' of the people. Populism is here like an awkward guest who disrupt table manners and rules of sociability (78). For Arditì populism functions as a symptom of democratic politics in two senses: (1) as a promise of redemption and (2) as a reaction against politics as usual, which disrupts the gentrified democratic order and claims to expand the scope of citizen involvement in public affairs (81). It recuperates romantic idea of mass democracy and it should be differentiated from the mob rule, although it could turn itself into such non-democratic phenomenon.

3. *As a possible underside or nemesis of democracy.* In this form populism is a 'misfire' that mutates too easily into authoritarianism (60) or even totalitarianism. In such situation the leader abandons the role of representative and adopts a cesaristic position of 'the people's will' incarnation and acts as messiah. The gap, usual for democratic order, between representatives and represented is dissolved in favor of the representative (83). In the situation of crisis and threatening fragmentation of society inclination for strong president among citizens could lead to this form of populism, if a leader adopts undemocratic behavior, justifying it by the strong popular support. Gradually, such leadership disempowers citizens, manipulates their participatory potentials, develops the cult of the leader and institutionalizes fear, by actual, as well as by threat of potential use of repressive state apparatus. Consequently, such regime demands submission and produces wide conformism. It tries to convert citizens into (un)grateful but always immature children of a strong father. Although such temptation is not unfamiliar for leaders in the previous forms of populism.

Although Arditì treats populism as an 'anexact' object (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 367), outside of binary opposition between exact and inexact, his thorough discussion of

its appearances and political potentials opens up the space for further conceptual crystallization that I shall address later in the text.

Further hauntings

But there is another spectre inside populism. That is the specific way of articulating political relationship between friends and foes – as socially embedded binary between good and evil – expressed through conspiratorial thinking. One reason for negative perception of populism stems exactly from its use of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories (hereafter CTs) are usually considered as being inappropriate for public reason and 'common wisdom' treats them as a bizarre way of thinking, epistemologically flawed and wrong, as well as inappropriate for decent and serious people. However, some of them are very popular⁷.

Convergence of negative attitudes toward CTs and populism was expressed in Richard Hofstadter's (1965) work on paranoid style in American politics. He even 'implies a proto-fascist tendency in populism stemming from the endemic discontents in American culture when he talks about nativism, a conspiracy theory of history, and provincial suspiciousness as earmarks of populism' (Youngdale, 1975: 10). Considering both phenomena as 'pathological symptoms of some social disease' (Canovan, 2004) is a popular attitude, with all its consequences of disqualification, demonization and stigmatization of those who stick to such 'illegitimate' knowledge. For example, Karl Popper considered CTs

⁷ For example, Gallup surveys from 1963 to 2013 show that clear majority (60 – 81 %) of Americans believe that JFK was killed in a conspiracy. Although half of them could not offer the name of another person or group involved in a conspiracy. Available at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/165893/majority-believe-jfk-killed-conspiracy.aspx> [accessed on 1 November 2015]. Other researches, e.g. Abalakina-Pap et al (1999) confirm those results. Also, according to American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy (2013) 31% Americans still believed in 1991 that president Roosevelt knew about Japanese plans to bomb Pearl Harbor but did nothing about it because he wanted an excuse to involve the U.S. on the side of the allies in the war; 55 % believed in 2008 that the assassination of Martin Luther King was the part of a larger conspiracy; 54 % in 2013 thought the Bush administration deliberately misled the American public about whether Iraq has weapons of mass destruction; comparing to only 11 % in 2013 who believed the United States government knowingly allowed the attacks on September 11th, 2001, to happen; while 28 % in the same year believe that a secretive power elite with a globalist agenda is conspiring to eventually rule the world through an authoritarian world government, or New World Order; 19 % believed that there is a secret society such as Skull and Bones that produces most of America's political and financial leaders to serve the interests of the wealthy elite. Available at: http://www.aei.org/files/2013/11/06/-public-opinion-on-conspiracy-theories_181649218739.pdf. [accessed on 1 November 2015]. Croatian surveys show that 93 % in 2007 and 85% in 2012 citizens believed in at least one political conspiracy theory from national context. For exact data on the level of single CTs see Blanuša (2013: 19).

as secularized religious superstitions, akin to Homer's theory of society, where 'whatever happened on the plain before Troy was only a reflection of the various conspiracies on Olympus.' (1972/2002: 123). According to that, CTs only replace Gods by powerful and malicious groups responsible for broad social events such as wars, famine, unemployment, political crisis etc. For him, there is not much truth in them because only few, if any, are fully consumed and accomplished as they were planned. Hence, unintended social consequences and anonymous processes in human affairs always falsify them.

Reduction and simplification of politics is maybe nowhere better expressed than in images, preferred actions and Manichean moral interpretations of populist CTs. But are they just junk food for thought? We can observe that in times of crisis CTs are often enunciated from the center of power as legitimate knowledge in the name of national security, and protection of political order or simply 'our way of life'. Also, if we apply formal definition⁸ that CTs are those interpretations that posit conspiracy (Pidgen, 2007: 226), then we are opening a much wider space of interpretations that could be regarded as CTs, where so many such interpretations are considered as valid, warranted, logical and rational, as well as based on various sources and facts⁹. But factual statements and fictional narratives are densely interwoven and fantasy and reality are hopelessly intertwined (Alexander, 2003: 5). They function together in the process of persuasion and CTs gain their credibility through the weaving of facts with fantasies while explaining some hidden and secret agency. Great deal of persuasive power of CTs lies in presenting themselves as narratives that reveal some important truth. They are a sort of symptomal reading of reality wherein it is assumed that, under the influence of the undeclared (hidden) interest (in domination, exploitation, etc.), there is a gap between the "official", public meaning of some interpretation and its "actual" intention (Žižek, 1994: 10), the gap between surface

⁸ In one of my papers I define CT as 'an interpretative framework which defines political events and wider political processes as a consequence of premeditated and deceptively random activities, i.e. secret agreements regarding the performance of illegal and immoral activities (and objectives), or their application in accomplishing illegal objectives' (Blanuša 2011: 101).

⁹ As Charles Pidgen (2007) said, history is full of actions and processes such as *coups de etat*, assassinations, mass murders, etc. that are inconceivable outside of the conspiratorial framework. Holocaust and Stalin purges are the most pronounced examples of mass killings planned and partly executed in secret. What we usually don't do is to consider such knowledge as conspiracy theories. This is the consequence of normative popular understanding of conspiracy theories as *a priori* incorrect. What is also curious here is implicit usage of the term 'theory' as unproven entity unrelated or foreign to the 'world of life' (germ. *lebenswelt*).

and depth, between appearances and 'true reality'. This kind of storytelling which exploits human curiosity and need for mystery in our disenchanted (post)modern lives¹⁰ is well applied in detective and horror novels and TV series. But, no matter if people believe or not in CTs, almost all believe that conspiracies are possible. The consequence of such believing is that every conspiracy theory exerts some influence, not only on those who accept them, but also on those who reject them. While the first ones are possessed by "real truth", the second ones are, at least a little bit beset by "possible threat" before they decide to dismiss them, or better to say, exorcise them. Such threat is experienced as transgression of civility, decency, or as politically dangerous way of thinking.

But there are other common features of CTs that also contribute to their spectrality. One of them is vagueness of interpretation, whether by using fuzzy signifiers, such as 'dark forces', shadow, secret or invisible government, by defining enemies in negative form, such as antidemocratic, unpatriotic, counterrevolutionary, imperialistic forces, criminals, clans, or by simplifying relations and mechanisms of conduct of conspirators. The big question is also on what basis do people decide to believe or not in particular CTs. For those publicly known CTs, most of citizens do not have neither opportunities nor time to verify evidences. Most of us are only informed about or experience only consequences of assumed conspiracy, and we are left in a position to believe or disbelieve to various sources to whom we attribute more or less credibility, as well as to media. Accordingly, we can only suppose in most of the cases that some conspiracy theory is correct, i.e. that some conspiracy is real. Even if it exists, we can have it only in the virtual form, as 'a presence of the unpresent'. We decide to believe on the basis of assumed reliability of information sources, perceived coherence of the story, strength of argument and supposition about the level of 'conspirativity' in society. And even if we would had satisfactory mechanisms of control and information on credibility of public institutions (which we usually don't have), we will never be able to know the real level of social conspirativity because we will never be aware of those conspiracies that pass by unnoticed. They will always remain as the unknown unknowns or in the domain of Descartes' demon.

But this virtuality has real effects, or as Thomas theorem says: if someone defines

¹⁰ See about that more in Kurakin (2015).

situations as real, they are real in their consequences. By assuming such position it is possible to study CTs beyond the opposition between delusion and secret truth, beyond modernist binary of facts and fictions. As such, they are more or less popular narratives, interpretations of politics, and expression of opinions. Whether people believe or not in those interpretations significantly influence their political behavior. CTs have specific internal structure which in compact manner differentiate friends from enemies, establishing by that horizon of fundamental political relationship and constitutive principle of community, differentiation between 'us' and 'them' (Schmitt, 1976 in Mouffe, 2005: 11). By emphasizing agency of political actors assumed to be involved in conspiracy (in form of their personal power and/or by personifying collective actors) they significantly reduce explanation of politics and disregard anonymous processes and structures.

Conspiracy theories and populism

But, what is their role in populist reason? If we take seriously Ernesto Laclau's Freudian statement that 'populism is the royal road to understanding...the ontological constitution of the political as such' (2005a: 67) then all forms of populism have something to do with dreaming. I would like to push the argument further: the core dream of populist reason is in the form of conspiracy theory. If populism is 'a particular logic of articulation' (Laclau, 2005b: 33) then conspiratorial thinking is a form of expression of that logic.

Furthermore, in postfoundational thought 'the political' is the moment of antagonism that interrupts and remodels the sedimented forms of 'objectivities' in particular society (cf. Laclau 1990: 34–5) and symbolically (re)orders social relations, or 'mise en scene' and 'mise en forme' of human coexistence (Lefort in Mouffe, 2007: 3). In politics it interrupts natural[ized] order of domination by institution of a part of those who have no part (Ranciere, 1999: 11). In other words the political reveals and includes what was excluded, invisible and without voice before, or previously unarticulated perspectives, horizons and views. And isn't that one of the basic redemptive demands of populism? From the point of view of discourse theory, the emergence of new discourses and new identities is always related to the dislocation or crisis of previously hegemonic discursive orders (Stavrakakis, 2014: 21). In my view, populist CTs are expressions of such dislocations and interruptions, or symptoms of the political, engaged with the idea of the political potential of the people.

But let's leave aside for now how *the people* is defined in particular cases.

In populist reason CTs have multiple functions. They function in populist claims as *an exclusion device*, a tool for defining a threat to collective values and interests that should be dismissed. Threat to the people are embodied in certain elites and their doings. Conspiratorial explanations also offer *evaluative mapping* of political space, depending on what level they try to explain, from local to global, although cross-level relations are not unfamiliar to them. The next function is *identificational*: defining the enemy in order to define oneself as its 'photographic' opposite and, as such, to fixate identity signifiers of one's own group or society. This dimension carries in itself a bundle of moral distinctions or asymmetrical binaries. Finally, they have *symptomal* function. Here, as emotionally charged explanations they reveal or articulate deeper political cleavages, cracks in the field of politics, produced by afterword (fr. *après coup*) interpretations of previous traumatic encounters with defined enemies, events or processes. But, as I already said, they are itself a symptomal reading of political reality or a sort of behindology (ital. *dietrologia*) (Spark, 1998 in Bratich, 2008: 15) that reveals the stereotypical and petrified images of the criticized agents and beloved objects of their endangerments¹¹.

Conditions of emergence of (populist) CTs

Conspiratorial thinking is old at least as civilization, maybe even older, with huge span of themes, from the religious-metaphysical world-views with vivid depictions of the Devil as main conspirator against the world of God's children and their salvation, up to the nowadays ideas of the New World Order and other evil doings of elites. Medieval pogroms of Jews and heretics, as well as witch hauntings as a reaction to plague and other maladies were justified by religious CTs, which were describing them as accomplices of the Satan. Such pogroms are mass behavior instigated and explained conspiratively by their leaders, and it is possible to find several common features of those and populist CTs, but that violence is different from modern social movements and populist discourse and does not

¹¹ Journalist Tobias Jones in his book *The Dark Hearth of Italy* (2003) also refers to the Italian popular term *dietrologia* which is described in *La Stampa* as 'the science of imagination, the culture of suspicion, the philosophy of mistrust, the technique of the double, triple, quadruple hypothesis.' He adds 'it as an indispensable sport for a society in which appearance very rarely begets reality'.

comprise appeal to the people in a modern sense of the word.

Several authors (Groh, 1987; Pipes, 1997; Wood, 1982) actually relate current forms of CTs to the great historical caesura of the 18th century, when theological elements disappeared and when *the people* entered in the history and politics. That would be a necessary condition of possibility of populism and corresponding CTs. Such conspiratorial discourse culminates in interpretations of causes and reasons for American and French revolution¹² and there was nothing strange to use CTs as explanatory device up until the end of World War II. From the mid-19th century main fears about secret society subversives will be replaced by the new form of antisemitism and anti-imperialism, as two main lines of conspiratorial thinking, used in populist or other discourses (Pipes, 1997). With anti-imperialism conspirators will start to 'inhabit' the center of powerful capitalist states, while antisemitism was increasingly feeding itself by notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, especially after the World War I and the success of Russian Revolution. Actually, these two lines of thought will be crystallized in the phrase 'Imperial Judaism' and very soon be adopted by Hitler and so many other fascist and extreme right-wing movements in Europe and abroad. Stalin will also embody both lines of conspiratorial thinking, especially during his purges and campaign against unpatriotic "rootless cosmopolitans"¹³. After the World War II and growing knowledge about the real scale of atrocities of Nazi regime, Stalinist mass murders, as well as of delusions of McCarthyism, tradition of conspiratorial thinking will be considered almost exclusively dangerous and pathological¹⁴.

12 Bailyn (1967/1992: 155 – 157) claims that the dominant content of *Declaration of Independence* is enumeration of British conspiratorial designs. Other popular wordly conspirators were becoming secret societies, like Free Masons, Illuminati, Philosophers etc., accused by supporters of *Ancien Regime* as the main subversives in the conspiracy against throne and altar, expressed in the French Revolution. Here they are not a part of populist discourse, but through that period they will soon become, especially among right-wingers. Left-wing revolutionaries from that period will identify itself with secret societies and conspiratorial workings, especially François Babeuf, Louis Blanqui, Pierre Briot, Giuseppe Mazzini, Filippo Buonarroti etc.

13 As an example of populist discourse here we can use Benjamin Pinkus (1984: 183 - 184) citing the newspapers *Pravda* from that period: 'An anti-patriotic group has developed in theatrical criticism. It consists of followers of bourgeois aestheticism. They penetrate our press and operate most freely in the pages of the magazine, *Teatr*, and the newspaper, *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*. These critics have lost their sense of responsibility to the people. They represent a rootless cosmopolitanism which is deeply repulsive and inimical to Soviet man. They obstruct the development of Soviet literature; the feeling of national Soviet pride is alien to them.'

14 Prominent scholars who played significant role in their initial pathologization were the first generation of critical theorists, especially group around the study on authoritarian personality, Franz Neumann, as well as Richard Hofstadter, Harold Lasswell, Hannah Arendt etc.

But what particular socio-historical processes would be important for the content and the form of modern CTs that were found its expression in populist discourse? One of the most important is the Enlightenment itself. Gordon Wood (1982: 413–19) contends that Enlightenment thought, focused on establishing mechanistic causal relationships produced a “man-centered causal history” by stressing motives, intentions, and individual moral responsibility. Because of that in 18th century conspiratorial interpretations were considered as plausible and rational. Through these lenses history was not any more in hands of God's will, but in hands of politically powerful persons and groups. Besides, like other Enlightenment theories with claims to truth and reason, CT links facticity, causality, coherence, and rationality and it is marked by a drive to know and uncover the truth (Dean, 2002: 100), though significant numbers of them apply these standards very poorly.

Considering the last words, why are they still popular? According to Byford (2006), there are two lines of explanations. One is related to those scholars (such as Davis, 1960, Hoefstadter, 1966, Lipset i Raab, 1970, Billig, 1978, Pipes, 1997, etc.) who consider conspiratorial discourse as a part of radical ideological tradition, such as fascism, nazism, aggressive nationalism, populist movements and extremist political parties. Another group of scholars (Knight, 2000, Melley, 2000, Fenster, 1999, Dean, 1998, Jameson, 1992, etc.) analyze them in a wider perspective, as a counter-reaction to fragmentational and alienating effects of postmodern culture. According to these authors CTs of globalized late capitalism are attempts to personify faceless forms of rules and control. They are expressions of ideological drive for cognitive mapping of totality of the global system, instigated by the growing sense of exclusion and "sense of diminished human agency" (Melley, 2000: 11). That is reaction of decentered subject who mourns for ideal, consistent and integral picture of itself. Moreover, fertile ground for development of CTs is whenever the world is 'growing' in a sense that things in one its part are influenced by the activities far away from the other part, which are invisible to most of the people. According to Fenster (1999), alienation of the human subject is further aggravated by the whole array of contemporary factors. One of them is neoliberal state, which destroys civil society and turns citizens into consumers and clients by using the language of private consumption. Another one is destruction of social space through building the quasi-urban spaces, designed in such a way to keep certain classes inside and to leave others outside. Another culprit are quasi-public

media, controlled by few magnates. Their manipulative communication of various CTs significantly contributed to the reduction of political discourse. Consequence of such processes is 'the politics of mood' (Grossberg, 1992), where the scandal replaces discussion and becomes the strategy of depoliticized politics. Scandal has a function of discursive intoxication which brings to the surface questions of morality, but only to produce outrage and indignation and nothing more. For example Watergate, as a symbolic source for naming and framing further scandals, such as Irangate, Whitewatergate, Monicagate etc. sets the scene for automatic attribution of corruptive image of politicians in every similarly conceived situation. All this diminishes the trust in politics and political elites. Such general discontent is easily to be maintained by posing the conspiracy theory that we can be sure only that politics is corrupted (cf. Fenster 1999: 71). Such conditions are fertile ground for populist claims and promises that is possible to attain full and happy life only if we get rid of nasty elites, whoever they are.

Beside these historical and political forces it is possible to give a more general explanation on socio-genesis of CTs. Some of their features could be considered as common to most of them, not to say universal. As we saw, their content and form varied according to dominant cultural systems and their imagery. As a pattern of collective reaction to perceived threat they could be explained by the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1987; Groh, 1987; Wagner, 1999), combined with elements of cultural trauma theory (Alexander et al, 2004). Briefly, for CT to be articulated, a certain *trigger* has to appear, such as political or economic crisis, scandals, epidemic, conflicts, assassinations etc. But such triggers will be more effective for development of skeptical thinking, suspiciousness and CTs if there are some cumulative frustrating conditions, such as perceived life difficulties and latent antagonisms, e.g. increasing social gap between rich and poor, increasing cultural differences because of migrations etc. that could lead to certain radical politics. Also, those (perceived) frustrating conditions must be shared by critical mass of people to be possible for carrier groups to succeed in persuading them (and media) that reality is as it is explained in certain CT. Furthermore, it would be easier to do that if there were already developed stereotypes and prejudices and legitimizing ideologies at the stock of the lay knowledge, based on some violent history and victimization of some concrete group. To sum up by paraphrasing Alexander and Smith (1993: 166), for

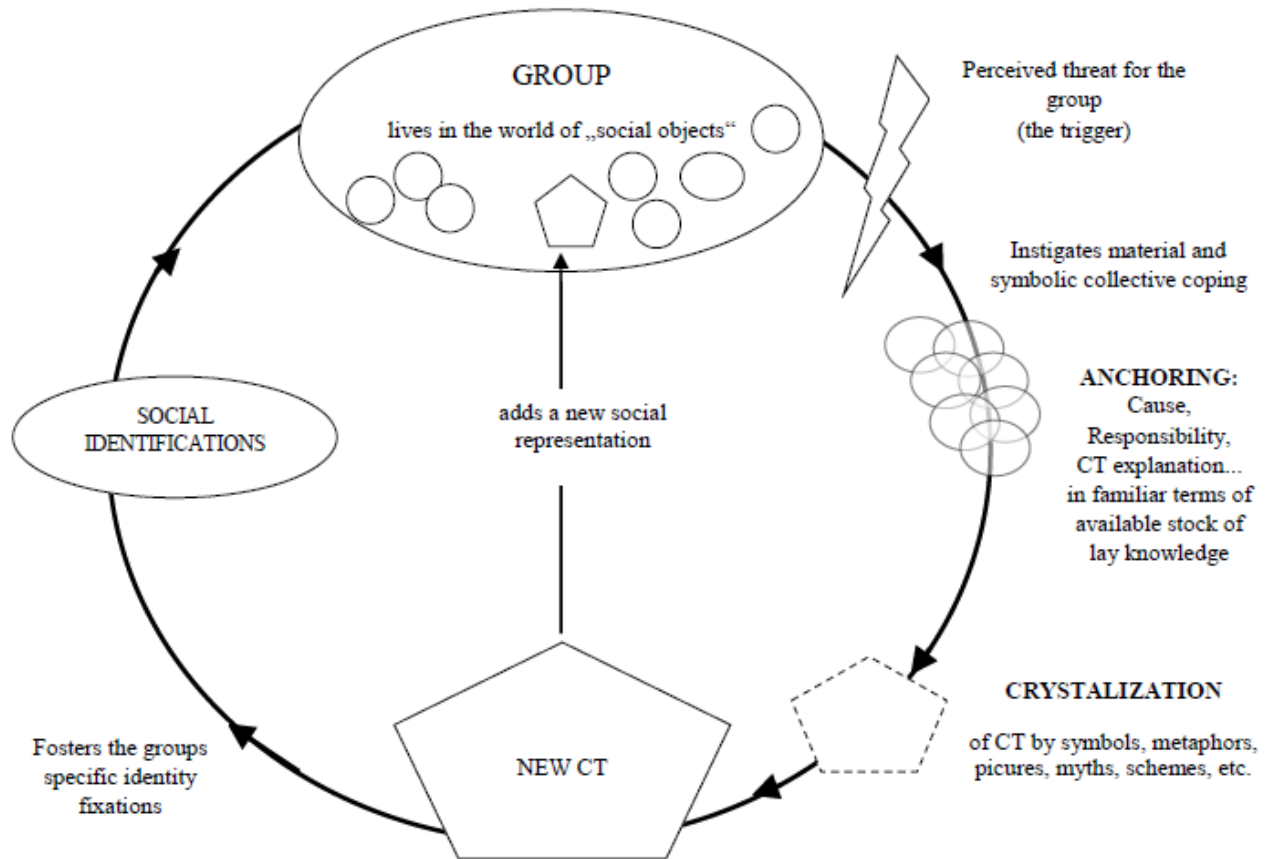
development of populist CTs necessary are periods of uneasiness and tension in which fundamental political meanings are at stake. And exactly populism is a mobilizing discourse which leans on unresolved and disquieting problems of significant proportion of the people, expressed through shared anxieties, distress and some form of disillusionment ruminations of unsatisfied needs or desires.

All this can lead to the public *crisis of consciousness*, when the world is perceived as 'out of joint', reversed upside-down, when evil, bad and unjust things are happening to the good people. The next step is *the search for explanation* of who and/or what is responsible for such bad condition. Who threw the world (state, community etc.) off the balance, or off previously accepted and better conditions? Who conspired against the people? Such search is a part of wider symbolic and material collective coping with disjointed world and the 'first step toward collective "salvation attempt"' (Groh, 1987: 7). Here populist discourse declares that the people is the subject of a wrong and puts into question the existing field of experience (Arditi, 2007: 94). Such emancipatory politics is also traumatic because it is a practice of disturbing the given and of redefining the possible (100).

This process will result first in the symbolic *anchoring* through discursive struggles in terms of familiar, already available and sedimented terms, codes, narratives and representations from the stock of lay knowledge, forged through the history of the group. This process can be depict as 'boiling' of signs, signifiers and signifieds, and relations between them. Further discursive activities lead to the *crystallization*¹⁵ of the social representation by inventing or attaching signs to already available symbols, metaphors, pictures or tropes that will solidify and represent the elements of conspiracy theory in the more condensed form of narrative, and relating it to previously developed conspiratorial interpretations, myths about 'the people' and 'historical enemies', politics from the past, similar patterns of events, historical persons, leaders etc. By that process certain CT will become embedded in a wider context and ideological continuity, more emotionally imbued, crystallized, and resilient to counter-arguments. As a fully developed social representation

¹⁵ Originally, theory of social representations uses the term objectification. Crystallization looks to me more appropriate because it emphasizes layers and specific structure of created socio-cultural entities and the process of their creation, while the concept of objectification and objects is more static, implying a sort of immutability.

it will be added to the group world as a new element of lay knowledge that further influences social identification processes in the group and specific identity fixations (see Picture 2 for graphic explanation).



Picture 2. Socio-genesis of CTs as social representations (adapted from Wagner et al. 1999: 98)

However, what this theory lacks is an explanation how different forms of populism emerge in political context, what are their common and differential qualities, why they use different signs, what kind of concepts they use for political mobilization and by using them what kind of identities, politics and horizons of expectations they offer. Moreover, what kind of more-less unconscious fantasies and myths these different populist discourses play

with to attract and interpellate their followers? Briefly, what is the internal logic of articulation of different types of populisms? I will try to give provisional answers to these questions by applying certain general concepts of Lacanian and post-Lacanian psychoanalysis on populist discourse.

Psychoanalytic explanations

However, we should be careful. "Whenever a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon, we may be sure that the explanation is false" (Durkheim, 1901: 128). Accordingly, what could such individualistic and even more pathologizing discourse of psychoanalysis add to our discussion? It could offer so much, if we understand it out of that stereotypical framework. As Fredric Jameson (1977: 338) claims, social phenomenon of psychoanalytical concern is the language, 'the very medium of universality and of intersubjectivity [which] constitutes that primary social instance into which the pre-verbal, pre-social facts of archaic or unconscious experience find themselves somehow inserted'. With focus on language and 'translation' of Freudian conceptions by using structural linguistics Lacan saves them from their medical and personifying content. Instead, Lacan offers theoretical 'model which is not locked into the classical opposition between the individual and the collective, but is rather able to think these discontinuities in a radically different way' (349).

Such is especially Lacan's theory of three orders: the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real. According to this theory every human experience can be described by referring to these three registers of experience that work inseparably and are structurally coordinated. Basically, this model is based on de Saussure's conception of language as composed of signs. By that logic the Symbolic would be 'the order of the signifier' (Lacan, 1993: 167), similar to Lévi-Strauss's order of culture (Macey, 1994: XXII, XXV). The Imaginary is the order of the signified. But the Real for Lacan is not what is usually called reality. The Real is outside of language and resists absolute symbolization. We could say the Real is that barrier which language in use cannot pass to get to the core of imagined referent. It is beyond the words and it is experienced in the most vivid way in some traumatic events which leave human subjects speechless. That is the moment of experiencing uncanniness,

when something familiar turns into unfamiliar and unknown, creepy moment that strikes us, something that leaves our individually or collectively developed system of meaning inoperable, with tremendous feeling of void, something that such system cannot (yet) neither symbolically assimilate, nor imagine in other way than as horrifying thing¹⁶. The Imaginary is domain of images, pictures and phantasms, and for Lacan also of deception and seductive lure.

The principal illusions of the imaginary are those of wholeness, synthesis, autonomy, duality and, above all, similarity. The Imaginary is thus the order of surface appearances which are deceptive, observable phenomena which hide underlying structure; the affects are such phenomena. (Evans, 1997: 82)

According to Stavrakakis (1999) Lacanian psychoanalysis is a peculiar form of social constructionism. In a nutshell, both approaches share the view that humans are trapped within the universe of discourse and that 'objective reality' is accessible through the magma of socially instituted meaning, a meaning which transforms it ontologically (Castoriadis 1978 in Stavrakakis 1999: 154). As a social constructionism, Lacanian psychoanalysis contends that social reality is not a stable entity. But, this conception also adds that reality is created by the interaction of symbolizations and imaginations in their encounters with the Real. In their mutual functioning the Symbolic and the Imaginary are always attempting to completely assimilate the Real, to demystify it, but that is impossible task. Always something remains outside of discursive constructions, present but indescribable, felt as resistant barrier to the meaning making activities, and unbearable enigma that instigates further meaning-making activities. We could say that every discursive formation has its own Real, which is the ultimate boundary of its functioning, that interrupts its consistency and idealizations, something that awaits it 'around the corner' and puts it out of the balance. In other words, the Real is a wound on the body of culture that makes it 'precarious' (Lacan, 1993: 30). So, there is something outside the discourse, but 'this exteriority, however, cannot be transparent exteriority, a new essence which is

¹⁶ Ground Zero memorial waterfalls in New York City are maybe the nearest metaphor of such feeling.

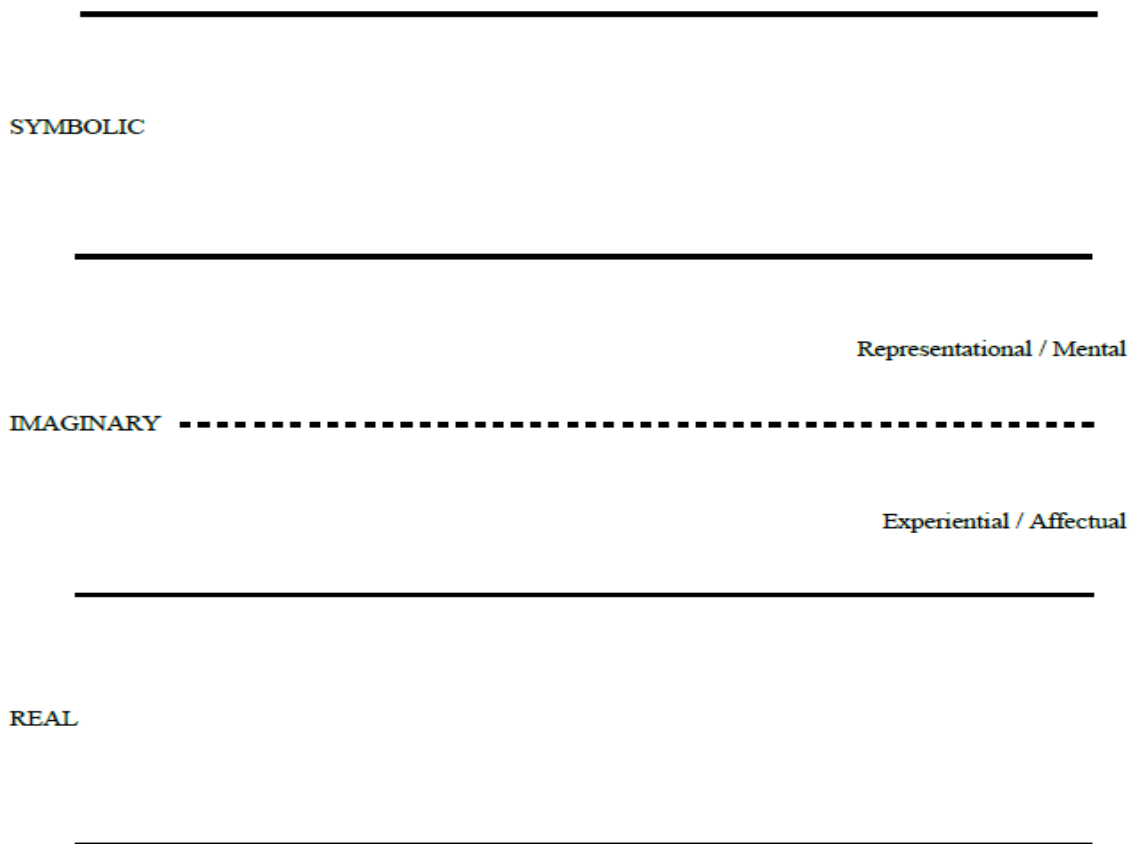
objectively accessible' (Stavrakakis, 1999: 66). Moreover, exactly the encounter with the Real, reveals the lack in socio-symbolic formations and stimulates further discursive activities and socially shared desire to produce them, to overcome the lack by explaining 'what is really going on', as we also saw in the theory of social representations. But such 'overcoming' is only possible in the form of fiction.

According to this theory the core of CT is the image of a group of enemies or some collective enemy entity. What is the function of such image? By means of this construction, people try to avoid and reshape in an imaginary and symbolical manner the trauma caused by the experience of the elusive, terrifying, and traumatic properties of 'the other'. For our case 'the other' are those powerful elites who, alienated from, or directly oriented against the people, conspired to achieve some immoral and/or unlawful and harmful goal. Here CTs receive the impulse for its formation from the Real. They derive from the experience of the Real in the other, or unfathomable gap of radical otherness. Facing this alien traumatic core as an inert, inaccessible, and enigmatic property of 'the other' raises the question: What does the other really want? As an answer to this question expressing the 'unbearable enigma of the other's desire', we get phantasm, an imaginary scenario, i.e. an unsettling explanation as to why things went wrong (cf. Žižek, 2009). In populist discourse these could be the questions like: 'Why is our society not functioning?', 'why is our people suffering?', 'who is to be blamed for that?'. This theory considers that the ultimate question we unconsciously pose in that situation is 'who is stealing our enjoyment?'.

In order to further develop a conception that would be applicable to populist CTs we should expand the framework in terms of moral appeals and different types of identifications. For that reason I will try to visualize this psychoanalytic model in the next three pictures. The first one schematizes three orders as horizontally represented dimensions or containers of experience (Picture 3). But the Imaginary is depicted as double in its form because it has a function of mediator between the Symbolic and the Real. This is dimension of human creativity which supports the Symbolic through its idealistic images and by them gives it luring sense of consistency or illusion of functional completeness (represented as the upper part of the Imaginary). Without such support the Symbolic would be completely disarrayed and meaningless. That part of the Imaginary, which we can call representational or mental Imaginary, serves the function of temporary fixation of the social

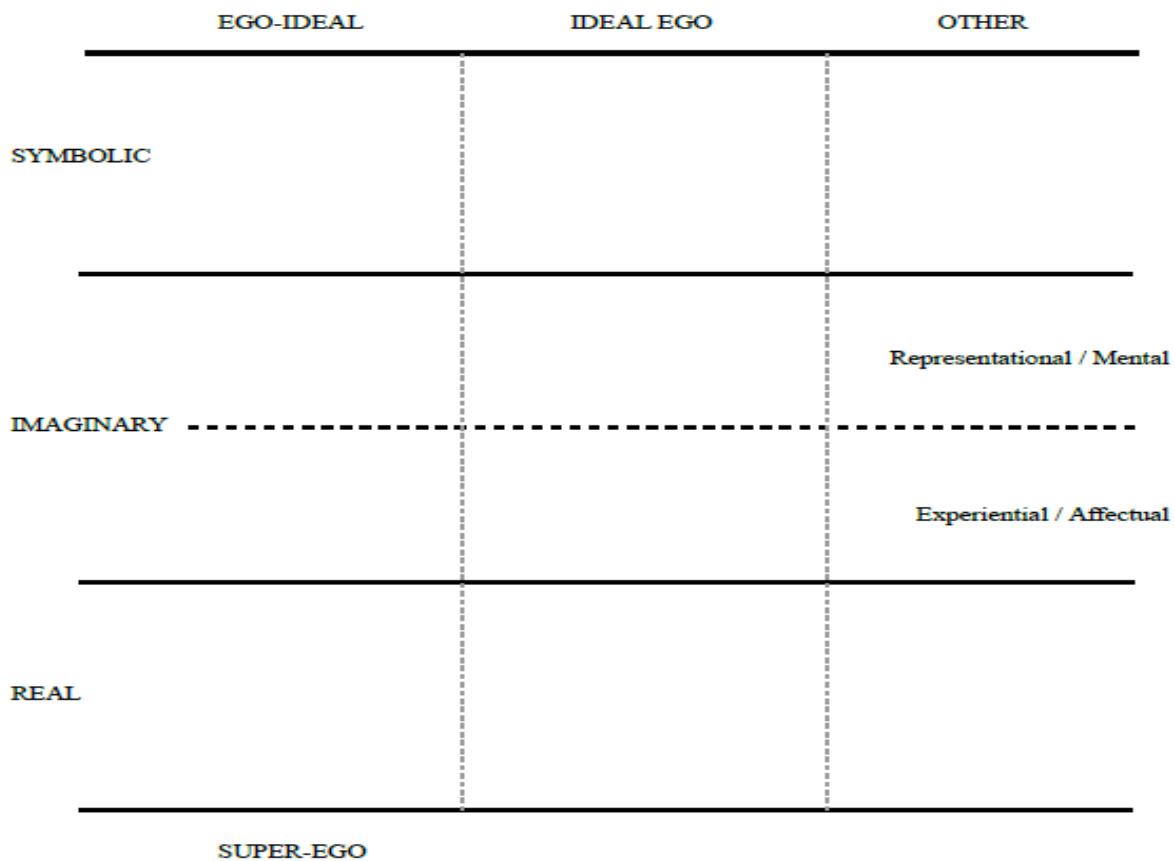
meaning and could be explained as a socio-historical and psychical creation of figures/forms/images (Castoriadis, 1987: 3), or condensed images of social myths. This would be a sphere where the core of previously explained process of social crystallization takes the place.

Another, lower part is related to the Real and it serves the function to fill up the void of the traumatic encounter with the Real. This part can be called affectual/experiential or bodily Imaginary. Those would be more elementary, but also socially constructed images, more accompanied with affects, which conjure up a pictorial and sensual landscape, not language (Morrison 1987 in Campbell, 2000: 224). It is the first instance of dealing with the Real and it contains mobilizational capacity, as social 'fight or flight' system, where the fear aroused by facing the Real could become a rage.



Picture 3. Three Lacanian orders/registers of experience

Populist reason deals with issues of evaluative mapping of the 'other' which contains moral framing (in terms of binaries between good and evil, sacred and profane, pure and polluted etc.). To situate it in the realm of psychoanalysis this requires insertion of several concepts that could be represented in our picture of the three orders as its vertical dimension (See the next picture). From right to left side we have concepts of the other, Ideal Ego and Ego-Ideal. On the bottom side of the last one is the Super-Ego.



Picture 4. Horizontal and vertical levels of the model.

‘The other’ refers in our particular case to the political elite, powerful, corrupted and dangerous establishment. They are the cause of populist desire, represented as groups and persons who betrayed or never appeared in the 'proper' position of power in assumed moral order. On the contrary, they are described as transgressors and perverters of such

order, and imagined similarly as the figure of evil genius in James Bond movies¹⁷. Other three concepts from the vertical dimension of the picture 4 are Ideal Ego, Ego-Ideal and Super-Ego. These three concepts were used by Freud interchangeably and inconsistently. Lacanian approach differentiates them in the following manner. Ideal Ego is an effect of identification with the image in which we appear likeable to ourselves, with the image representing 'what we would like to be' (Žižek, 1989/2008: 116), not only in individual but also in collective terms, e.g. how do we conceive the people to whom we feel to belong. Contrary to that Ego-Ideal is an effect of 'identification with the very place from where we are being observed, from where we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likeable, worthy of love'¹⁸ (ibid). The most important question here is for whom, or for what instance and which gaze the subject or collective performs the ideal-ego role? Who is to be impressed? That is identification with the gaze of the 'big Other'. This Lacanian concept is nothing else but the symbolic order, articulated as some sacred powerful instance, such as God, Reason, Nature, History, State, Science etc., or enacted by some of its authoritative representatives, describable as particular father figures¹⁹. As we can see, Ideal Ego is primarily the function of the Imaginary, while the Ego-Ideal is of Symbolical order. But what is the Super-ego, the concept that is usually understood in the way that is described as Ego-Ideal. For Lacan Super-ego is the underside of Ego-Ideal, it works through the imperative, especially expressed in the command 'Enjoy' and imposes 'tyranny...a senseless, destructive, purely oppressive, almost always anti-legal morality' (Lacan, 1988: 102). As such, it is nothing but Sade's 'Supreme Being-in-Evil' (Lacan, 1966: 773), frightening figure whose enjoyment transgress civilizational restraints. It belongs primarily to the order of the Real and functions as a necessary obscene side of the Law, which is expressed through the Ego-Ideal.

The question is how is it possible to apply this whole conceptual apparatus to understand better internal configuration of populist reason? Picture 5 is a provisional

¹⁷ See about this topic more in Žižek (1998: 3).

¹⁸ It is easier to imagine this identifications since it is invented selfie stick.

¹⁹ Although they stem from completely opposed ideology of human beings, from this description is evident similarity between Lacan's big Other and Mead's concept of generalized other.

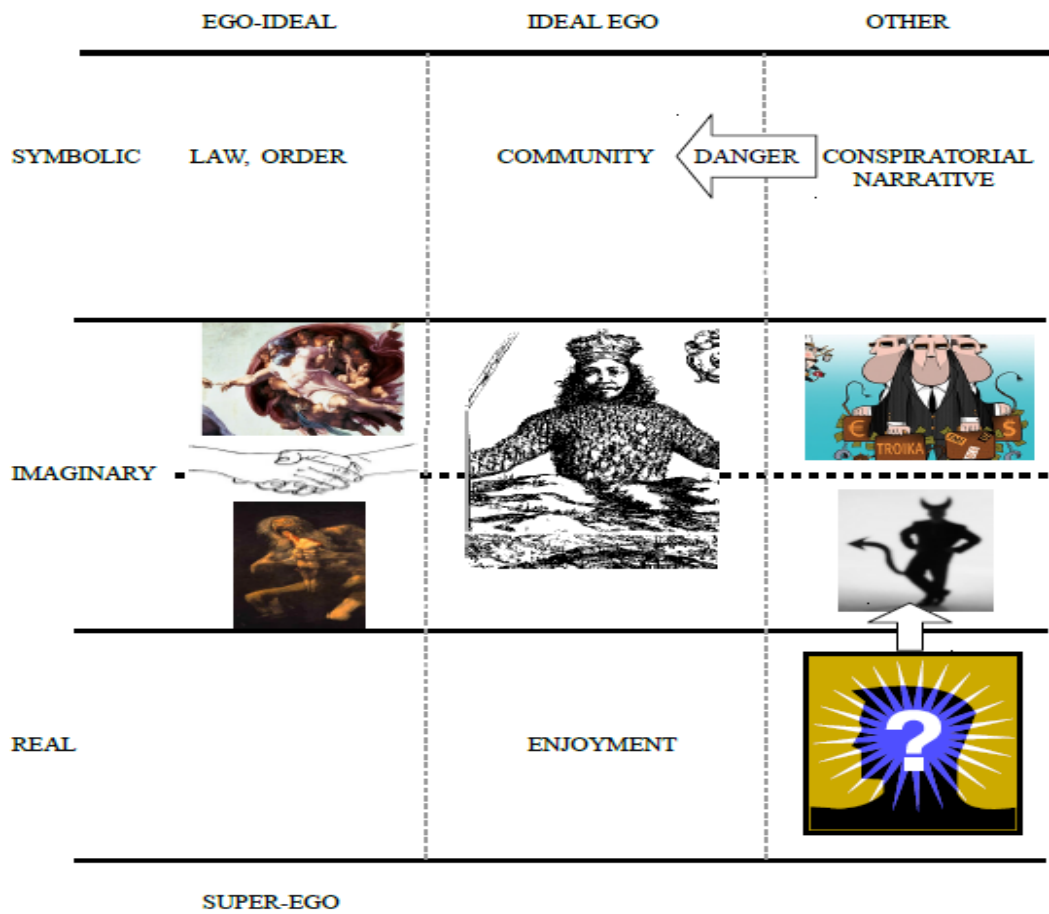
attempt which tries to be illustrative with a few well known images. It should be read in zigzag way by starting from the lowest right position at the intersection of the Real and the other.

First moment that opens up the possibility of conspiratorial interpretation is traumatic one, the one which dislocates actual understanding of socio-political reality. It starts as an appearance of the Real other, which produces uncanny feeling, as well as unconscious question: “What does the other want from me?” (ital. *Che vuoi?*). The answer is the general image of a threat, possible blurry as the picture suggests in our schematic diagram at the level of experiential imaginary. This image of the enemy is the pre-ideological core of ideology containing the spectral phantasm which fills the void in the Real while functioning as defense from *Che vuoi?* At the same time, it functions as the framework which coordinates populist desire, or the „the formal matrix, on which are grafted various ideological formations“ (Žižek, 1995: 21)²⁰. Another imaginary layer which crafts on the previous is more defined image of the enemy, constructed through the representational process, related to previously useful stereotypical constructions produced in concrete historico-political process. This representational part of the process always interacts with the previous, experiential one. It is based on culturally developed repertoires, expressed in familiar terms of available stock of lay knowledge, as it is also explained by the theory of social representations in the phase of anchoring.

We can call this whole process as primary mechanism of trauma development, but it is also possible another one that I will call the secondary process. It refers to those situations when the trauma is not constructed from the frightening, frustrating moment, e.g. in the second generations of traumatized people who didn't experienced it directly. In such process, already developed social representation of enemy and its evil doings, 'forged' at the levels of representational Imaginary and Symbolic, can be transferred to the new generation in the form of stereotype or prejudice by simple mechanism of instrumental conditioning. For example, someone who is raised to hate without the contact with the

²⁰ We can ask ourselves whether is this a necessary reaction? If particular socio-symbolic system is dislocated then the answer is yes. Cognitivists would say this is the automatic reaction. Another question is: is it possible to change it? Answer is yes if the question is about empowering social constructions in their facing with the Real and changing its boundaries by finding new ways to 'encircle' it in symbolical and imaginary ways.

hated group will usually automatically apply learned believes when encountering them, even with visceral reaction.



Picture 5. Populist conspiratorial thinking explained



Picture 6. Depicting the enemy in populist discourse

Illustration that I use on the level of representational Imaginary in the picture 5 is from the Greek popular culture which metaphorizes their own current arch-enemy, *Troika*, composed of European Commission, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank, depicted as three mafia members, corrupted by definition, wearing nontransparent glasses, money but also whips, ready to buy the country's soul. In order to explain this dimension of populist conspiratorial imaginations it is possible to use many other pictures and symbols as it is presented by three examples on the picture 6. They are always expressed in condensed and polysemic meaning.

The next dimension of conspiratorial interpretation is Symbolic, consisting of the main narrative of conspiracy, as well as signifiers of the signifieds from the Imaginary level, codes, binaries and other relationships between signifiers in terms of the story's plot, main characters, expressed moral evaluations, world-views and other possible overlapping conspiratorial or non-conspiratorial interpretations. On this level the conspiracy of powerful elites is articulated as danger for the community of the people. What I mean by this concept is in accordance with Benedict Anderson's (1983/1991) definition of imagined community as shared social construction in terms of 'deep and horizontal comradeship...[and] fraternity' (7), fantasized as in Picture 1, but by a group so large that their members cannot know all other fellow members. It is usually related to the people of the nation, although it can be imagined more locally or more globally²¹. What they share on the Imaginary level and consider as endangered by conspiracy is the symbolic embodiment, a body politic which has a sacred status. The well known picture of *Leviathan* I use as an exemplary of such imagination of symbolically unified collective body, incorporated by singular bodies. In *Leviathan* version imagination is in the form of living organism and by that it can be considered as politically biased conception, historically more used by right-wing populist movements. However, what would be the leftist image of the community of the people? That could be seemed as hardly to say because the left politics was mostly dealing with the class and only indirectly with the people. But wasn't the phrase 'working people', used in the states of real-socialism for ideological interpellation the signifier of radical egalitarian and populist politics with the aim to transform the whole by

²¹ I'm using the phrase "people of..." by assuming that is possible to appeal in populist ways other types of the people: people of the town, of some region, of the planet, people of the Book etc.

making it the same as one of its parts – working class. Accordingly, social equality, based on vague myth 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!' was one of the sources for accomplishing populist dream of a unified community. Also, very rich tradition of posters from Socialist realism era with explicit mobilizational function is full of symbolical bodies, imbued with values of unitedness, progress, power of work, equality, collectivism, common ownership etc. But, we are all familiar with the ways it functioned and how it ended. What is even more disturbing is the similarity of iconography of soviet communism and nazism²². But these extreme examples also show the common denominator of mythical body on the level of Imaginary.

Some authors, like Stavrakakis and Katsambekis (2014: 131) contend recently that Syriza's interpellation of its voters is based on negative commonality, 'not on the basis of a common positive characteristic, of some sort of pre-existing essentialist unity, but on the basis of *sharing a lack that pervades them all*'. But that lack is based on equally imaginary construction of what was lost, which is only certain form of the myth of lost paradise of the people of nation. Another problem with this conception is whether it is possible to establish implied post-phantasmatic radical politics that will somehow avoid creation of political myths, even as necessary fictions. Whatever that be, there is a clear lack of vision at the left in terms of imagining political community, which is powerful identificational and mobilizational source for political praxis.

What should be also noticed regarding *Leviathan* is its double form, its structure of double phantasm (Salecl, 2002: 31; Žižek, 1996: 87; Stavrakakis, 1999). Underneath already described symbolic body are: land, establishments and human activities²³, a living space, sacred territory of the people so valuable that cannot be described by words²⁴. All

²² On this basis Slovenian artistic group *Neue Slowenische Kunst* caused a huge scandal in former Yugoslavia with poster announcing celebration of the *Youth Day* in 1987. Soon after high-ranked officials chose it as the central symbol of manifestation, it was discovered by one anonymous reader of the newspapers that the poster was based on another one used in Nazi propaganda. See more about that on: <http://times.nskstate.com/documentary-the-fine-art-of-mirroring-day-of-youth-1987/>

²³ According to Kristiansson's and Tralau's (2014) analysis of this picture in the light of iconographic tradition, there are some not so obvious features which actually depict situation on the ground and sea as a stage of war, which is important for our analysis as *par excellence* condition for unified action of the people.

²⁴ Maybe the best crystallization of such mystical relatedness to the home-land is described by Tolkien in dwarfs relation to the arkenstone. It neatly fits with Lacan's use of the concept of *agalma* as mysterious object triggering love. Agalma

these experiential elements constitute so often pronounced vague phrase of 'our way of life', which is conceived as under siege.

As we deal here with psychoanalysis it is assumed that on the level of the Real, danger is felt as the danger for our own enjoyment. Through assumed conspiracy elites are perceived as agents who try to prevent or destroy enjoyment of being in community, of being a part of something bigger than itself, expressed in a sense of belongingness and certainty, and taken-for-grantedness that is naturalized or sacralized on symbolic and imaginary dimension. In other words, that is a sense of peoples' entitlement to enjoy its community as themselves (compare to Žižek, 1993: 200-204), or to be on their own. So, in the last instance, conspiring elites are accused for destroying or stealing the enjoyment of the people. So, they assume the role of 'thieves of enjoyment' (Salecl, 2002).

By this discussion we have covered relationship of Ideal Ego towards the other. The last dimension of this problematics is of the Ego-Ideal, by which we attempt to further differentiate types, or better to say, dynamic positions of populism. The basic question is for what kind of gaze is such Ideal Ego created and performed? In other words, on behalf of what kind of Order and Law these populist conspiratorial constructions function, or what kind of idea of Law and Order they adopt. Again we do not deal with them in usual sense of the words, but in more condensed ways.

Here we are approaching the territory of Freudian myths of two father figures, developed in his book *Totem and Taboo* (1913/1950/2001). In our diagram this Freud's story of hypothetical historical situation should be read from the bottom to the top of the column. In a nutshell, according to Freud, before civilization the basic unit of social life was a horde, ruled by the primal father, who was the tyrannical figure, enjoying without restrains all women he possessed, and forbidding the same enjoyment to his sons. If they didn't obey they were driven out from the horde or killed²⁵. What did they do? At one point

is phantasmatic construction conceived as precious object assumed to exist inside of the body of loved entity, personal or collective. Lacan adopts this concept from Plato's *Symposium*, where Alcibiades uses this word to grasp the hidden yet fascinating object he believed to be enclosed in the depths of Socrates' hideous body (Nobus, 2000: 129), something as secret and invisible but of great value.

²⁵ I choose to represent this mythical figure of primal father in the diagram by Goya's painting "Cronus Devouring His Children".

in pre-history, (equivalent for us to mythical time) they united...

...came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end of the patriarchal horde. United, they had the courage to do and succeeded in doing what would have been impossible for them individually. (Some cultural advance, perhaps, command over some new weapon, had given them a sense of superior strength.) Cannibal savages as they were, it goes without saying that they devoured their victim as well as killing him. The violent primal father had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers: and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength. (164-165).

But, they didn't only fear and hate him. As he was providing them shelter and security in their childhood they also loved him and admired. So, they sensed guilt for the crime they did. Out of their ambivalent feelings they repressed the crime and started to worship the father as a Totem, represented usually by some animal, which is forbidden to be killed. Also, to prevent further similar situations of the fight all against all and to secure further social organization they also renounced of the women from its tribe²⁶. For the sake of future they developed two social taboos of murderer and incest. For Freud, this would be the earliest appearance of religion in the history of mankind, and for him 'it illustrates the close connection existing from the very beginning of time between social institutions and moral obligations' (Freud, 1939: 133 – 134). In the course of time sacred figure of (now imagined as caring, almighty) father will assume different shapes but remain in the structure of monotheism²⁷.

For our analysis these two father figures as socially constructed archetypes - one tyrannical and other caring and protective paternal figure - are mythical constructions of different orders that have its expression in populist reason. But, there is the third Freudian myth here – which is in fact conspiracy at the heart of civilization – the myth of social contract among equals of fraternal clan, in order to prevent killing each other and ending

²⁶ Although they appear, women are treated here, as in the long run of the history, only as a commodity and not as political subjects.

²⁷ Such divine father figure is represented in diagram by Michelangelo's fragment from the Sistine chapel as image of the God creating the Adam.

like the father²⁸. They restrain their own desires in order to live peacefully and to avoid violent 'state of nature'. Moreover, Freud (1930/1962: 42) considered such situation of replacing the power of individual by the power of the community as the decisive step of civilization, represented in our diagram as the image of shaking hands. This situation is also starting point for potentially democratic development. But, as we can see through the whole history it was precarious, ambivalent and easily transformed into orders under the rule of one or another type of father figures.

But what do they have with our contemporary forms of populism? These mythical images are ultimate phantasms of political orders on behalf of whom particular populisms are articulated. They are imagined positions of Law and Order for whose advancements populisms speak and act when they articulate their CTs to cope with powerful inimical elites. These three positions at the level of the Ego-Ideal could be easily related to the structural positions of populism as they were described by Benjamin Arditi at the beginning of this paper. The first one, populism in power is a part of today's democratic politics where political leaders acquire more and more discretionary power. Although democratic politics is about the people and populism is one of its rhetorics, frames of thinking, and mobilizing devices, such use of populism could be easily abused by those leaders. Their structural position and relation to media gives them an opportunity to practice previously described politics of mood to gain the support of less and less actively involved citizens, who seem to be more and more tranquilized consumers of the spectacle and automatic voting machines. There is no space here to discuss the issue whether we actually live in post-democracy (Crouch, 2004) or simulated democracy (Lengyel & Ilonszki, 2012), but those tendencies open up the space for identification of leaders, as well as their followers more with authoritarian order, especially at the Imaginary level, while they could still use language and institutions of democratic order. Only small circles of political and economic elites are really in the game and if one tries to address critically that issue, it is easy to dismiss him as notorious conspiracy theorist. Furthermore, they can use CTs to point out who is the enemy of the people. We already witnessed authoritarian populist regimes

28 For considering Freud's story from *Totem and Taboo* as a rhetorical strategy similar to social contract theorists see Brunner (2001: 157)

through the XX century²⁹, which can today, with advancement of informational technology, spread its word much easier to gain popular support and admiration, especially if their leaders show effective and fast solutions against powerful outer and inner enemies, whoever they are. Due to the logic that *power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely*, and increase of concentration of personalized power, that could even lead to establishment of totalitarian regime - the real nemesis of democracy and its underside. Total control and obedience, tyrannical rule, institutionalized fear and primacy of will of the leader are the ultimate articulation of such regime. If we conceive our diagram dynamically, it is (for now only theoretically) possible for one movement to assume democratic position but with time it can transform itself on this dimension to authoritarian or even totalitarian regime, if carrier groups and significant proportion of citizens change their identification with the political Ego-Ideal. Also, CTs of these regimes should be different. Partially, it depends to what kind of particular ideology populism is attached, and how much is political context and global situation perceived as dangerous. Also, as we move from democracy toward totalitarianism populist CTs will imagine political community more monolithically, be more applied openly by state institutions, more paranoid, interconnected and incorporated in policy measures as part of repressive, as well as ideological state apparatus. Whether this is correct or not, and how the whole process is occurring, especially the dynamics in relationship between populist leaders and their followers is a matter of further research.

Finally, populism, as it is expressed in radical democratic movements, is itself a sort of interruption and dislocating power for existing political regimes, especially when pragmatic dimension of politics fails to fulfill promises of its redemptive side or produce results which are perceived as unbearable and repressive. It opens up the possibility of radical alterity to what it considers as unsustainable condition and it demands a new social contract. Although their origins and consequences are different, and some of them have resulted in violence, civil wars and non-democratic regimes, that type of populism was expressed in recent uprisings of Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Taksim Square protests,

²⁹ Gasiorowski (2006: 111) emphasize here Juan Peron's regime in Argentina and Gamal Abdul Naser's in Egypt, although the first one is a candidate for multiple classifications. On the other hand, Stuart Hall (1983) characterized even Thatcherism as a form of authoritarian populism.

Hong Kong Occupy Central etc. Their common denominators were radical demands for change or complete removal of corrupted political and economic regimes. The main aim of these movements was larger involvement and participation in power of those who are effectively excluded from making important decisions which affect the whole political community. As outbursts of 'the political' they are constitutive moments of re-entrance of the people into politics with demand for agency, or for 'the right to tell right from wrong in the public sphere' (Abulof, 2011). Yet their consequences are ambivalent because such moments are also windows of opportunity for various carrier groups to set the stage, at least partially, for further political formations that could steal the revolution and transform spring to winter.

Three further illustrations

Beside these radical democratic examples, it is possible to show the exemplars of other forms of conspiratorial thinking in populism expressing deep mobilizational images and their corresponding symbolic articulations in dimensions of political antagonism, community and order. All our three illustrations revolve around the idea of cancer.

The first one, which illustrates totalitarian and tyrannical regime of nazism, is Hitler's depiction of Jews as a cancer on the healthy collective body of German nation, conceived as *Volksgemeinschaft*, unified by race and organized in organic harmony, the body that needs *Lebensraum*, reached by extermination or enslavement of supposed lower races. All that was done in the name of terrifying idea of ruthless historical destiny. Unsurprisingly, the prominent place in such ideology was occupied by the obsession with the so-called spear of destiny, which was a symbol of empire, unstoppable machine so powerful that can kill even the weak God of Christianity.



Picture 7. Spear of Destiny by Fra Angelico (1440)

Another example of right-wing authoritarian regime would be from my home country, Croatia, where the first president, Franjo Tudjman, considered Croatian Serbs as ‘cancer in the heart of Croatia, cancer which was destroying Croatian national being’³⁰, as well as permanent factor of destabilization, settled on the ‘soft belly’ of Croatian territory. He was constructing them in such way in the name of conceived heroic order of ancestors, medieval kings and modern politicians and intellectuals who all supposedly dreamt the ‘thousand-year-old-dream of independence’ (Tanner, 2001) and resurrection of the Kingdom of Croatia.



Picture 8. Map of Croatia and occupied territories (in red) by so called Republic of Serbian Krajina.

Third example would be, now very popular in Venezuela, idea of Hugo Chavez that USA, as historical enemy infected him and other five Latin American presidents with the cancer to prevent integration of Hispanic America into Great Nation and world energy power, which was supposed to be established in the name of heroic order of Simon Bolivar, *El Libertador*³¹. Bolivar was a prominent mythical figure in the life of Hugo Chavez, who was also trying to reunite neighbor countries into the new Gran Colombia. He also renamed his country as the Bolivarian republic of Venezuela. But, his obsession with Bolivar was also expressed by leaving the empty chair for him during the cabinet meetings, as well as exhuming Bolivar’s skeleton in order to test whether he was poisoned in a murder

³⁰ Full speech in English is available at: <http://emperors-clothes.com/docs/tudj.htm>. [Accessed on 10 November 2015]

³¹ See more about this CT at: <http://news.discovery.com/human/psychology/was-hugo-chavez-murdered-leaders-death-fuels-cancer-conspiracies-130312.htm>. Also, the idea of social, political and economic integration of that part of the world is realized in the intergovernmental organization ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America). It is comprised of 11 countries and it has its own, for now only virtual common currency called Sucre. For more information follow the link: <http://alba-tcp.org/en> [both web pages accessed on 10 November 2015].

conspiracy³². Chavez's core populist conspiratorial ideas were built-in the introductory remarks of his political platform, released in 2012 for presidential elections as the 'Proposal of the Candidate Of the Homeland, Commander Hugo Chavez for the Socialist Bolivarian Government, 2013-2019'³³:

Once again the circumstances have made me stand in front of the people to let them know about my determined and renewed commitment towards the defense of National Independence. This is the time, like never before, to give a face and a meaning to the Socialist Homeland we are all fighting for. This government program for the period 2013 – 2019 has been designed to pursue these supreme goals: Independence and Socialist Homeland!!

As our Liberator had said, back in 1820: *We are unswervingly determined to win independence or else*. Final independence or else should be the motto of today's Bolivarian men and women. Final independence is our cause and our permanent task.

Independence, from the point of view of the present circumstances and context, makes us look into the past to find a true course towards the future. That is why we, men and women, confront the reactionary thesis of the empire and the bourgeoisie that is contrary to the Homeland, with the combatant, creative and liberating thesis of Independence and Socialism, which is an open project and dialectical construction: Independence is not complete; we are forging it through our daily and permanent struggle.

It is our task to fully realize the liberation dream that has never ceased to throb in our Homeland and is still throbbing today. And so I believe, based on the combatant faith and the loving reason that encourage me: we feel obliged by our heroic legacy, and such an urge becomes a banner and a commitment for all of us, men and women. In the times we are living in we must face up to these challenges; so many sacrifices can not be rendered futile. Turning them into the flesh and blood of the new life shall continue to be the ultimate aspiration that compels and defies us.



But, what even better illustrates in iconic way all three dimensions of populist reason is the next picture, published in the same document, representing the new international politics and the role of Latin America and Venezuela in the multipolar world. Let this ideological construction to speak for itself.

Picture 9. Foreign policy of the new Bolivarian Revolution.

³² See about this Ego-Ideal identification of Hugo Chavez more at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/07/24/hugo-chavez-obsessed-with_n_658304.html. [Accessed on 10 November 2015].

³³ This document is available at: <http://links.org.au/node/3079>. [Accessed on 10 November 2015].

Conclusion, or what was not said and what is to be done

Through this paper I've tried to build comprehensive social psychoanalytic framework for understanding populism by focusing on CTs as personifying ways to articulate political relationship toward the arch-enemy. I also consider this framework as an expression of conflictual functioning of contemporary society, where conspiratorial ways of thinking, imagining and feeling inscribe more human agency than it is actually present, but also produce it more than it is usual for our highly mediated society. In this world we still create unfinished social and political formations by relying on cultural ideals. Is this a permanent human condition? I really don't know. I hope I showed the dynamics of populism as highly ambivalent social and political phenomenon that contributes to such image of the world.

I haven't said nothing in this paper about methodological procedures that should be applied in analysis based on presented theoretical framework to discern all concepts I invoked and to put to test relations between them. Such analysis should be a sort of discursive thick description of signifying practices or social texts that will start from recognition of particular CT as interrupting sequences of political reality. Further interest would be in its symbolic and imaginary structure, as well as in analysis of its relations to multiplying contexts in tumultuous discourse formations of populism. Maybe it could be called archeology of Symbolic and Imaginary with recognition of the Real. The next step would be empirical analysis of particular cases and if we take into consideration only the last hundred years it looks like a lifetime project. And it starts from 'the scratch'³⁴.

³⁴ What simultaneously had worried me and also inspired me on this whole study of conspiracy theories was one particular speech from my country from 1996, available at: <https://youtu.be/6DJNtqO31XQ>. [Accessed on 10 November 2015]

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