

From Jacobin flaws to transformative populism: Left populism and the legacy of European social democracy

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1 | INTRODUCTION

In the established landscape of research in the social sciences, populism is seen as a type of politics that chiefly revolves around the distinction between the “people” and the “elite”.¹ Within this, different forms of populism can be distinguished—ranging from right-wing and authoritarian to liberal-centrist and religious varieties. In the camp of the political left, populism is often cast as essentially a democratic endeavor. Drawing on a conception of inclusive peoplehood, which is not opposed to other vulnerable social groups “below” but solely to the “elite above”, many authors emphasize that it is crucial to pursue a populist strategy in order to overcome existing hegemonies, democratic deficits, ossifications, and class-rule (Grattan, 2016; Howse, 2019; Kempf, 2020; McCormick, 2001; Mouffe, 2018). Throughout the past few decades, the landscape of research on left populism has grown considerably. Various studies have investigated the history of anti-establishment popular movements of the 19th century, such as the Narodniki in Russia or the American Populist Party (Canovan, 1981; Kazin, 1995). Further, research has also looked at how, from the 1990s, anti-neoliberal alliances in Latin America had their momentum, entered governmental office, and established a far-reaching renewal of constitutional orders (Linera, 2014; Weyland, 2013). And in particular, in the last decade, the rejuvenation of left politics in Europe and the United States has often relied on populist approaches (Katsambekis & Kioupkiolis, 2019).

Taking a more systematic stance, theories of radical democracy have sought to demonstrate that politics in modern societies is structured around the embodiment of the “people” as an empty signifier. From this perspective, it is not by accident that left varieties of populism can be recurrently observed; their persistence reflects that politics is, at its heart, not only concerned with policy-issues but with “constructing the people” (Laclau, 2014). Thus, populism may not be episodic, accidental, or a specific ideology that brings the vital interests of ordinary people to the fore. Rather, it must be seen as a generalizable discursive strategy—in the words of Ernesto Laclau: the “royal road”—when it comes to the strive for political power (Laclau, 2005, p. 67).² In recent years, a neo-Machiavellian strand of research has emerged that is not so much concerned with the discursive construction of peoplehood, instead focusing on the

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materiality of social power. Drawing inspiration from the political philosophy of Early Modernity and Niccolò Machiavelli's insights on the exercise of political rule, these approaches assume that societies are constantly split between the "plebian" people and the ruling elites (McCormick, 2001; Vergara, 2020a). Against this backdrop, populism amounts to a plebian politics that "springs from the politicization of wealth inequality in reaction to systemic corruption and the immiseration of the masses, an attempt to balance the scales of social and political power between the ruling elite and the popular sectors" (Vergara, 2020a, p. 238).

However, the historical balance sheet of left populisms remains ambivalent. Though recurring attempts to change society through mobilizing the people against the elite can be observed, they have often revealed self-defeating dynamics:³ the collapse into authoritarian government once populism is in power, the inability to account for how complex modern societies actually operate by adhering to an all-too simple people/elite binary distinction; and the arising incapacity to identify reasons for political failure and success apart from stressing that popular mobilizations played a key role (when successful) or were diluted (when unsuccessful). In the current debate on left-populism, however, a broader camp of anti-populist critiques mainly advances objections from a normative angle (Arato, 2016; Cohen, 2019; Urbinati, 2019; Müller, 2014). It is argued that populist forms of politics are, in principle, incompatible with central achievements of liberal democracy, such as pluralism, the separation of powers, or parliamentary representation. They seem to be unavoidably entangled in authoritarian politics and, therefore, in need of being rejected as a course of political action.

This article aims to move beyond the rigidified divide between appraisals and rejections of left populism by shifting the field of inquiry: instead of investigating the relation of populism and the political as such or evaluating whether populism is compatible with principles of liberal democracy, it conducts a reconstruction of discussions in the broadly conceived camp of European Social Democracy in the "long 19th century" (Hobsbawm). Thereby, it focuses on how the leading intellectuals of this political current were reflecting on the practical potentials and limitations of a politics that is centered on the popular will. As emphasized by contemporary discourse theoretical approaches to the study of populism, politics in modern societies largely revolves around the role of the people and the conflicts that surround its articulation.⁴ Therefore, a wide range of people-centered politics can be identified—popular, populist or folkly. While the article echoes the definition of populism as people-centered politics that opposes the elites, it stresses not only its inevitability but also its limitations. It scrutinizes populism's internal pitfalls and how it reacts to the contradictions and problems inherent to the structure of the given societal order. Thereby, the article aims at circumventing a transhistorical *per se* perspective and at a closer examination of the respective social circumstances.

The ambition is not to provide an encompassing investigation of the whole theoretical landscape of social democracy, but to look for how some of the leading intellectuals grappled with the problems of a people-centered politics in the light of practical experiences in political struggle. It will be argued that we can identify an intellectual trajectory that dealt with the question of whether a politics that is centered on the popular will as opposed to the elites is able to incite social transformation and collective learning processes or, to the contrary, thwarts them. Admittedly, one should not overlook that there are severe differences between the social democratic mass parties of the 19th century and the contemporary disorganized party landscape. However, the article encourages an investigation that overcomes the juxtaposition of left populisms and other variants of progressive politics such as social movement politics (Arato & Cohen, 2021) or class-politics (Seferiades, 2019).

Drawing on the recent work of the historian Christina Morina, European Social Democracy is understood in the following as a broader social movement that extended from the mid-19th century to the First World War (Morina, 2022).⁵ It was characterized by the advent of new forms of political organization, most notably trade unions and social democratic mass parties. Despite severe internal conflicts, it was driven by a shared approach to history and society that was drawn from the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The defining feature of European Social Democracy was located in a specific mode of social inquiry. As stressed by Morina, activists and intellectuals may have engaged in controversies around a whole set of issues. They all assumed, however, that modern societies take part in the course of historical evolution and that a sound type of political action must be derived from a comprehensive inquiry that clarifies the scopes for social transformation at a given historical moment. The common denominator that constituted

coherence within the movement was the assumption that societies undergo a historical development (often described as “stages”) and that a tenable conception of political action must react to the objective problems and contradictions inherent in this process. According to Morina, the “attraction lay not primarily in a vaguely suggested utopian perspective, but in the concretely demanded scientific relevance to the present. They [the leading intellectuals and activists of European Social Democracy] drew from Marx’s work primarily a promise of knowledge geared to the here and now, not a belief in the future oriented only to tomorrow. For them, Marxism was actually a never-completed study of the real world [...]” (Morina, 2017, p. 16). This was the unifying thread of European Social Democracy that spread from the works of Marx and Engels to very different activists and intellectuals, such as Eduard Bernstein, Karl Kautsky, Vladimir Ilych Lenin, and Rosa Luxemburg.⁶ It needs to be noted that the Second International was a broad political movement. Not the least, syndicalist and anarchist ideas were prevalent in many countries and the theories of Marx and Engels were not the only intellectual resources available at the end of the 19th century.⁷ However, if it comes to reconstruct the overall mindset that ultimately coined the characteristic controversies within the European labor movement, the “invention of Marxism” (Morina) played a crucial role.

This article reconstructs how this political movement dealt with the potentials and short-comings of populist approaches: Section 2 demonstrates that, initially, the young Marx and Engels of the 1840s and 1850s took a skeptical stance on people-centered politics. Quarrelling with the insurrectionist movements of their time, they identified Jacobin flaws that tended to construct considerable hurdles for achieving social transformation. In contrast to this critique, demonstrated in Section 3, European Social Democracy in both its reformist as well as its more radical ramifications returned to mobilize the popular will from the 1870s onward. Section 4 investigates how Rosa Luxemburg—an important figure of European Social Democracy—reacted to the rising constitutionalization of politics and society through a proto-populist restatement of social democracy as *Volksbewegung* around the 1900s. This transformative populism was meant to mobilize the people, but it should also overcome the Jacobin flaws by establishing collective learning processes. Section 5 presents the argument that European Social Democracy’s trajectory can be seen as a learning cycle itself with regard to potentials and pitfalls of left populisms. Contemporary controversies should be sensitive to these insights and thus engage in more context-dependent inquiries.

2 | MARX/ENGELS: THE JACOBIN FLAWS OF POPULAR INSURRECTIONS

Studies on the history of populism demonstrate that social movements have often relied on the distinction between the people and the elite: ranging from the different attempts to mobilize the *populus dei* (people of god) against the system of offices in the catholic church to the popular city revolts in early modernity, and then from bourgeois revolutions to large segments of the early labor movement, the reference to the people as opposed to the elites has always played a pivotal role (Dupuy, 2002; Hermet, 2001; Möller, 2020). As the French intellectual historian Pierre Rosanvallon has argued, the 19th century was a decisive stage for the spread of a people-centered politics. National statehood was consolidated and struggles for its constitutionalization became a central site of political conflict. Questions concerning how to conceive of the popular will and how it can be represented amounted to a controversial issue: “Since 1789 the instituted and the instituant, the people moving in the streets and the people embodied in representative institutions, the diversity of social conditions and the unity of the democratic principle were opposing each other” (Rosanvallon, 1998, p. 17). Though partial at the outset, nascent constitutional states established forms of popular legislation and reflected themselves as being authorized by the people as constituent power. Not least, the reference to the people was a point of departure within a politics that conceptualized under the category of “Bonapartism” and “Caesarism.”⁸ The latter combined personalized leadership with plebiscitarian legitimation, as was the case in Louis Napoleon III’s ascent to power that toppled France’s democratic revolution in 1848 and paved the way for a “unitary combination” of popular sovereignty and monarchical authority (Groh, 1972, p. 732).

However, the overall turn to the people was only one part of the story. From the early 19th century, a rather critical engagement with popular sovereignty could be identified as well. One could delve at this point into the classical works

of the nascent discipline of sociology, but it was probably none other than G. W. F. Hegel who took, in his “Philosophy of Right,” a rather critical stance on popular sovereignty. After an inquiry into the differentiation of social spheres, such as the state, the family, and the market, he advocated for a mixed constitution that should regulate the complexities of modern society instead of subordinating them to the sovereign will of the people. Hegel suspected the latter would lead to totalizing and, ultimately, destructive effects by imposing a political voluntarism that disregarded the historical achievements within these social spheres. He qualified popular sovereignty as “one of those confused thoughts which are based on a garbled notion [Vorstellung] of the people” (Hegel, 1991, §279, 319). He explained that, since popular sovereignty ran the risk of relying on “a formless mass,” it was likely to undermine the “internally organized whole” of the state (Hegel, 1991, §279, 319). With this argument, Hegel set the scene for a whole strand of discussions revolving around the relationship between politics and popular sovereignty. Admittedly, it was not his defense of the state, but the skeptical remarks on achieving historical progress through a people-centered politics that were taken up by Left- and Young Hegelians and then migrated into activist circles.⁹ From then on, attempts to change society had to deal with a fundamental problem: on the one hand, society could be characterized by a differentiation of social spheres. Against this backdrop, holistic approaches to transforming this ensemble as a whole were considered as being likely to exert destructive effects. But on the other hand, society was conceived as a totality and, hence, a transformative politics required searching for “levers” or windows of opportunity that still transcend the whole context. The main question was: to what extent is a politics that relies on the popular will a viable course of action for overcoming the societal contradictions of modern society?

Most importantly, Marx and Engels, whose works became the intellectual base for European Social Democracy, instigated a shift in evaluating popular politics. It has become a certain trend in recent political philosophy to make use of Marx’s early writings in order to think about democracy and social freedom (Abensour, 2011; Honneth, 2016; Leibold, 2020). However, there is no running away from the fact that Marx critically discussed political action. Indebted to Hegel, he started from the assumption that bourgeois societies are regulated by an interplay of different forms in politics (state form), law (legal form), and civil society.¹⁰ Thus, Marx not only defended a bold conception of “true democracy” (Marx, 2010e, p. 30) in his early writings, but he was also interested in providing an explanatory model for how the hegemony of the emerging capitalist economy and its ideological tenets were consolidated through a mutual coupling (and separation) of the political, the economic, and the legal sphere.

This point of departure had huge repercussions when it came to clarifying the role of political action. Given the circumstances of modern society, a people-centered politics could not be seen as the privileged site for inducing sudden social change. This led to political tensions within the circles of the early labor movement: as noted by Alan Gilbert, Marx adopted “a long-term strategic view and openly disdained immediate popularity” (Gilbert, 1981, p. 122). His “views differed fundamentally from those of more short-sighted democrats, anarchists, or communists who demanded instant victory (Weitling, Heinzen, Bakunin, Kriege, Ruge)” (Gilbert, 1981, p. 122). Marx remained ambivalent: on the one hand, he lauded democracy as the “solved riddle of the constitution” and defended popular sovereignty against Hegel’s conception of statehood in the “Kritik des Hegelschen Staatsrechts” (Marx, 2010b, p. 29). On the other, he was highly critical of approaches to political action that aimed at resurrecting the Jacobin legacy of the French Revolution.¹¹

This critical attitude can be reconstructed from his critique of French insurrectionism in the 1840s.¹² By French insurrectionism, one has to understand the circles of revolutionaries—mainly inspired by Filippo Buonarroti’s Jacobin activism in the late French Revolution and his later published book “Babeuf’s Conspiracy for Equality” (Buonarroti, 1836)—whose aim was to incite an insurrection in the city of Paris and, thereby, commence a revolutionary process “in the name of the sovereign will of the people” (Deppe, 1970, p. 47).¹³ A central figure was the revolutionary Auguste Blanqui who amounted to political leader in France’s revolution of 1830 and from then on stuck to an insurrectionist political strategy (Draper, 1986, 120 ff). Marx and Engels argued that the French insurrectionist circles undermined the “process of revolutionary development” because they envisaged launching “a revolution on the spur of the moment, without the conditions for a revolution” (Marx & Engels, 2010, p. 318). They qualified the insurrectionists as “alchemists of the revolution” who make use of “incendiary bombs, destructive devices of magic effect, revolts

which are expected to be all the more miraculous and astonishing in effect as their basis is less rational" (Marx & Engels, 2010, p. 318). In the later introduction to Marx's writings on the class struggles in France, Engels echoed this stance; he described the insurrectionist endeavors as "rebellions in the old style" which relied on "street fighting with barricades," but eventually turned out to be "outdated" as they did not engage with the central tenets of modern society (Engels, 2010, p. 517).

A longer reflection on these issues was developed by Marx in 1844 in a so-called "Randglosse (Critical Marginal Notes)" for the journal "Vorwärts". It was a reply to the left-Hegelian intellectual Arnold Ruge, at that time a friend of Marx's (Jones, 2016, 194 ff). In his initial article, Ruge appealed to the Prussian King to introduce social reforms and abolish poverty. After criticizing Ruge for acknowledging the Prussian King as political authority, Marx turned to a closer inspection of French insurrectionism. He argued that the old political methods of the French Revolution were prone to fail. This was not only due to their technical outdatedness; they also exhibited a voluntaristic conception of politics, namely, to impose a political will on the social whole. To explicate these Jacobin flaws, Marx detailed a critique of what he called the political mind. He wrote:

The *political mind* is a *political mind* precisely because it thinks *within* the framework of politics. The keener and more lively it is, the *more incapable* is it of understanding social ills. The *classic period* of political intellect is the *French Revolution* [...]. The principle of politics is the *will*. The more one-sided and, therefore, the more perfected the *political mind* is, the more does it believe in the *omnipotence* of the will, the more is it blind to the *natural* and spiritual *limits* of the will, and the more incapable is it therefore of discovering the source of social ills. (Marx, 2010d, p. 199)

Here, Marx argued that—despite uttering radical phrases—the social movements of his time proved unable to transform modern society. The prevalence of the political mind that assumed the "omnipotence of the will" ultimately prevented the activists from identifying the "source of social ills" within the societal architecture. He expanded this critique through a reference to proletarian uprisings in France:

The more developed and the more comprehensive is the political understanding of a nation, the more the proletariat will squander its energies—at least in the initial stages of the movement—in senseless, futile uprisings that will be drowned in blood. Because it thinks in political terms, it regards the will as the cause of all evils and force and the overthrow of a particular form of the state as the universal remedy. Proof: the first outbreaks of the French proletariat. (Marx, 2010d, p. 204)

The voluntaristic approach collapses into an epistemic flaw: the political mind erects limits that undermine the search for adequate strategies in the quest for social change. As this approach revolves around the "omnipotence of the will," it insinuates that society is governed by the struggle between free-standing will-formations and not by the contradictions between and within social spheres.

This can be read as a critique of people-centered politics. Casting the popular will as the unity that sets everything in motion, the political mind is not able to understand the avenues of historical evolution. Society, however, does not evolve solely through political will-expression, but also through other sites of social change. Still indebted to the legacy of the late French Revolution, this popular voluntarism gives rise to a Jacobin flaw and momentous shortcuts when it comes to self-reflection and strategy choices. People-centered approaches advocate, without proper scrutiny, that the mobilization of the people is the prime strategy of choice. This assumes that any possible defeats must always be due to a weakness of popular will—either it was not mobilized intensely enough, it was not broad enough, or it was diluted. A tragic circle unfolds: the radical activists build barricades and the reformists issue reform bills, and so on, with even more enthusiasm, intensity, and will-power than before. However, they ultimately fail in many cases, not due to weakness of will but due to the avenues of social evolution. By adhering to a narrow political mind, they have deprived themselves of the means for understanding why they failed.

Through this critique, Marx rejected French insurrectionism as well as Ruge's popular appeal to the Prussian King. It may be hyperbolic to follow Shlomo Avineri at this point, who identified in Marx a "stubborn opposition, throughout his life, to a political émeute of the working class" (Avineri, 1969, p. 194). Nevertheless, one can identify an evaluative shift in discussing people-centered politics: instead of engaging in recurrent and, in many cases, utterly failing attempts to change society through collective action centered on the popular will (be it in the guise of reformist or insurrectionary approaches), one must take interest in the more delicate question concerning how political action is able to contribute to the transformation of the systemic set-up of modern societies at all.¹⁴

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that in the *Randglossen* of the 1840s, Marx hinted at a possible course of political action that could break the tragic cycle of will-politics. He lauded the "industrial uprising" of the Silesian weavers in 1844, opposing it to French insurrectionism (Marx, 2010d, p. 205):¹⁵ While the latter was flawed through a voluntaristic political mind, the weavers started their protest from within the economy. They did not wave flags or sing political anthems but soberly fought for better working conditions and wages. Marx stylized them as the more promising candidate because they immediately addressed class-divides in the capitalist economy: "The Silesian uprising begins precisely with what the French and English workers' uprisings end, with consciousness of the nature of the proletariat. The action itself bears the stamp of this superior character" (Marx, 2010d, p. 201). Marx described them as even more universalistic than the political insurrection—carrying a "universal soul"—since they took issue with the production and reproduction of material life of society as a whole (Marx, 2010d, p. 205). Though Marx cast the "industrial uprisings" as a "political act," he hinted at the self-overcoming of the political mind. In a well-known passage, he argued that they proceeded from the political to the social revolution:

A revolution in general—the overthrow of the existing power and dissolution of the old relationships—is a political act. But socialism cannot be realised without revolution. It needs this political act insofar as it needs destruction and dissolution. But where its organising activity begins, where its proper object, its soul, comes to the fore—there socialism throws off the political cloak. (Marx, 2010d, p. 206)

In this passage, the "*Randglossen*" brought a conception of class-based politics to the fore that opened up an alternative to insurrectionism. It was ultimately taken up by the social democratic current in the labor movement: to overcome the Jacobin flaws, it seemed more plausible to adopt an analytical perspective on capitalist societies and envisage a class-based politics centered on labor.

As we know from the manifold reconstructions of European Social Democracy, however, this one-directional transfer of politics from the political to the economic system could not be observed (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Przeworski, 1987, 7 ff). Even in Marx's and Engels' writings, the strive for popular legislation in the political sphere increasingly became a focal point—be it that Marx lauded the laws that limited the working day as "magna carta" (Marx, 2010a, 306 f.) or that Engels argued that the "rebellions of the old-style" should be replaced by new-style ones. Engels highlighted the struggle for democratic legislation in order to constitute a republican majority:

The irony of world history turns everything upside down. We, the "revolutionaries," the "overthrowers"—we are thriving far better on legal methods than on illegal methods and overthrow. The parties of order, as they call themselves, are perishing under the legal conditions created by themselves. They cry despairingly with Odilon Barrot: la légalité nous tue, legality is the death of us; whereas we, under this legality, get firm muscles and rosy cheeks and look like life eternal. (Engels, 2010, p. 522)

Marx and Engels inspected the scopes for achieving emancipation through democracy and they were aware of the tensions between republicanism and liberal constitutionalism.¹⁶ Yet, they also dealt with the problems of unmediated popular will formation as they resonated in bonapartistic and ceasaristic political rule. Most notably, Engels was not only pleading in favor of a democratic republic as a fertile ground for proletarian emancipation, but also

highlighted the possibility that it can collapse into a reactionary scheme. In a letter to August Bebel, he wrote in 1884:

As to pure democracy and its role in the future I do not share your opinion. Obviously, it plays a far more subordinate part in Germany than in countries with an older industrial development. But that does not prevent the possibility, when the moment of revolution comes, of its acquiring a temporary importance as the most radical bourgeois party (it has already played itself off as such in Frankfurt) and as the final sheet-anchor of the whole bourgeois and even feudal regime. At such a moment the whole reactionary mass falls in behind it and strengthens it; everything which used to be reactionary behaves as democratic.¹⁷

In sum, Marx and Engels pursued a strategic approach and defined their stances according to the concrete situation at stake. However, as it turned out, the problem of the popular will and popular sovereignty could not be bypassed by transferring it to the economic sphere and class-based politics. The more that social democratic mass parties emerged in different countries, the more the decisive conflicts again revolved around the representation of the people. Not the least, Marx partly changed his attitude toward communal ownership in his late writings and sympathized with parts of the Russian Narodnik movement (e.g. lauding Chernyshevsky, the author of the influential novel “What is to be done?,” in the foreword to the second edition of *capital*). As evidenced by Jones, this was mainly due to Marx’s engagement with the legal regulation of communal land tenure in Germany that ultimately led him to re-evaluate Russia’s economic structure (Jones, 2016, 579 ff).¹⁸

3 | BERNSTEIN/LENIN: THE RETURN OF THE PEOPLE

From the 1870s, European Social Democracy had its heyday. Trade unions and social democratic parties emerged which were committed to a Marxist variety of anti-capitalism and a class-based conception of politics. But Marx was too quick in his forecast of a shift from popular to class-based politics. In particular, European Social Democratic Parties strongly congregated around the struggle for democratizing the political system in the name of the people: “Between the 1870s and 1890s, country by country across the map of Europe, socialist parties were formed to give government by the people coherent, centralized, and lasting political form. Until the First World War and to a great extent since, those parties carried out the main burden of democratic advocacy in Europe” (Eley, 2002, p. 5). The labor movement largely returned to people-centered politics and rallied around the fight for universal suffrage. As Adam Przeworski has demonstrated in his comparative study on European Social Democracy, one can observe a shift from class-based politics to popular politics: while from the 1840s, activists were trying to constitute the proletariat as a distinct force by “separating it from the masses of the people,” from the 1870s the people as mass became the central point of reference (Przeworski, 1987, p. 54).

To illustrate this shift, it may be illuminating to take closer look at two intellectual figures who, although often portrayed as antagonists, both ultimately resorted to people-centered approaches. The first was Eduard Bernstein who played a key role in spreading the Marxist legacy and was the most prominent advocate of a reformist political strategy. By conceiving of social democracy as a “coalition of democratic popular elements” in order to advance the strive for a majority, he modified its orientation toward class-politics (Bernstein, 1905, p. 670). Bernstein argued that social democracy should not appeal to a narrowly conceived class but rather to a broader “people of the dispossessed”:

If one counts in it all persons without property, all those who have no income from property or from a privileged position, then they certainly form the absolute majority of the population of advanced countries. But this proletariat would be a mixture of extraordinarily different elements, of classes that have

more differences among themselves than had the “people” of 1789, who certainly as long as the present conditions of property are maintained have more common—or, at least, similar—interests than contrary ones [...] (Bernstein, 1899, p. 103)

Bernstein assumed that the working-class could exert the “hegemony within the people” and assemble “completely different elements of the population”—up to the point that the “labor party” and the “people’s party” become “identical” (Bernstein, 1899, p. 103).

Interestingly, this turn to the people could also be observed in the more radical currents of social democracy, and in none other than Lenin. Admittedly, he was often portrayed as the prime opponent of Bernstein’s reformist approach. However, there are some underlying connections between the two, as both were trying to overcome an economic conception of class politics (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, 29 ff and 55 ff). Most notably, Lenin was an ardent follower of European Social Democracy. As demonstrated in a recent comprehensive study on his approach to party politics, the Lenin of the 1890s and 1900s “must be thought of as a Russian Social Democrat” whose “fundamental project was to help build a party in Russia that was as much like Western Social-Democratic Parties” (Lih, 2008, p. 5).¹⁹ Thus, he rejected the so-called Narodnik’s movement, which took off in the Russia of the 1870s and is, nowadays, investigated in the research as an early case of populist politics (Canovan, 1981, 59 ff; Hermet, 2001, 169 ff). The “friends of the people” (Narodniki) movement gathered social reformers and intellectuals. They mobilized against the Tsarist regime and highlighted communal ownership. Lenin was skeptical of its romantic undertones and the envisaged return to small entities of folkly self-organization (Lenin, 1961). To him—echoing the weak, but still observable advent of capitalism in Russia—the industrial working class formed the pivotal starting point for social transformation. Socialism was not a lofty claim or a utopia but resulted from the “inevitability of the capitalist system being transformed into a socialist system as a result of the socialization of labor” (Lenin, 1961, p. 186). A few years later, however, when Lenin engaged in discussions about an effective party formation, he abandoned his initial reservations toward the people. In “What is to be done?” from 1902, he advocated a generalized notion of peoplehood against the established power structure. Lenin stylized the Roman “tribune of the people” as the ideal type of activist. Neither the Narodniks’ return to the inherited forms of communal ownership nor the “trade union secretary”, who advocates for the partial interest of his limited industrial constituency, served as model. According to Lenin, an effective political leader must be able to reduce complexity and raise generalizable claims in the name of the whole. Lenin noted:

[...] the social democrat’s ideal should not be the trade union secretary, but *the tribune of the people*, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; “who is able to generalise all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation [...]”. (Lenin, 1960, p. 423)

Although Lenin was still committed to a socialist strategy, he was clear about the need to reduce the complexities of society to a “single picture” and reclaim the popular will.

These underlying connections between Bernstein and Lenin raise the question concerning how to make sense of the oscillation between the critique and the return of a people-centered politics in European Social Democracy. Contrary to Marx’s speculations about the transfer of meaningful political struggle from the political sphere to the economy, the political system underwent a further constitutionalization in the 19th century. Though taking part in the capitalist ensemble of social systems, the constitutional state increasingly expanded its role in making collectively binding decisions that claimed to constitute and bind society as a whole. In his encompassing analysis of the advent of modern statehood, the constitutional sociologist Chris Thornhill has demonstrated that “rudimentary features of constitutional orders” were emerging in most European states, guaranteeing “basic mechanisms of representation” as well as “clear public procedures to determine the introduction, promulgation and enforcement of laws” (Thornhill, 2011, p. 254). To contest existing power-relations, it became—under these conditions—attractive to espouse popular sovereignty. The turn to the people was a reaction to the fact that constitutionalism was established (and, vice

versa, contributed immensely to the constitutionalization of the political sphere). The existing order was contested by re-claiming the role of the people against the ruling constituted powers.

4 | LUXEMBURG'S VOLKSBEWEGUNG: TRANSFORMATIVE POPULISM AND COLLECTIVE LEARNING

Rosa Luxemburg's proposal for strategic renewal from the 1900s on reacted to the apparent problem that surrounded this shift. As European Social Democracy increasingly took part in the constitutionalized spheres of modern society, it established internal divisions of labor ranging from the participation in communal and regional councils to the trade unions that started to bargain on institutionalized grounds with the entrepreneurs. Luxemburg was highly critical of social democracy falling prey to dispersion within—what she called—“industrial constitutionalism” (Luxemburg, 2008, p. 134). Instead of achieving partial advances in these different spheres, she advocated a political strategy that aimed at mobilizing the masses through a holistic *Volksbewegung* (people's movement; Luxemburg, 1974a, p. 149). Luxemburg inserted an innovative twist because she considered such collective action not simply as counter-power; as the following shows, she envisaged a transformative process that was meant to incite collective learning processes. Thereby, she stepped beyond the Jacobin flaws. Politics was not solely concerned with the imposition of will but with the discovery of latent transformative options within the social fabric. Admittedly, she threw the baby out with the bathwater, as will be argued later, because of her generalized dismissive attitude toward all types of societal differentiation. However, one can identify a considerable move from a left to a transformative populism.

At the outset, Luxemburg observed new types of social conflict in modern societies and emphasized the role of new popular movements (*Volksbewegungen*):²⁰ “The historical hour itself calls for forms of popular movements and creates new ones, improvises hitherto unknown means of struggle, examines and enriches the arsenal of the people, unconcerned with the party's decrees” (Luxemburg, 1974a, p. 149).²¹ Their characteristic trait was that they were not painstakingly prepared and directed by organized party sections or trade unions. They relied on spontaneous mass activity and eventually created their own institutions of self-organization: the councils.²² Luxemburg gave a systematic outline of this observation in her famous text “The Mass Strike” from 1906. Taking her cue from the strike movements in Russia and the St. Petersburg insurrection in 1905, she relocated the role of collective mass-action. The few industrial workers in Russia at that time were not the only ones to gather in the streets; rather, as Luxemburg analyzed, there was “a many-colored complex of various sections of the population, a chaos of conflicting interests” (Luxemburg, 2008, p. 113). Luxemburg elevated this popular movement to a lesson for European Social Democracy, urging that the repertoire of politics must be expanded: the general mass strike was the decisive step toward making the envisioned social democratic transformation of capitalist societies conceivable.

With closer inspection, this claim was connected to an important assumption about the evolution of capitalist societies. Remaining indebted to the mode of inquiry that was typical for European Social Democracy, Luxemburg started her argument with a critique of societal differentiation. She observed that an “industrial constitutionalism” was established into which social democracy was already being integrated (Luxemburg, 2008, p. 134). Here, she identified momentous problems because the political sphere was separated from the economic-industrial sphere, each being the object of two separate types of self-organization within the labor movement: social democratic parties and trade unions. Luxemburg feared “the total separation and independence of the two organizations of the labor movement, the social democracy and the trade unions” (Luxemburg, 2008, p. 168). Since they operated in their respective social fields, they adapted to these inherent logics. Thereby, the conflict between labor and capital was dispersed and ultimately de-politicized:

As a matter of fact the separation of the political and the economic struggle and the independence of each is nothing but an artificial product of the parliamentary period, even if historically determined. On the one hand in the peaceful, “normal” course of bourgeois society, the economic struggle is split into

a multitude of individual struggles in every undertaking and dissolved in every branch of production. On the other hand the political struggle is not directed by the masses themselves in a direct action, but in correspondence with the form of the bourgeois state, in a representative fashion, by the presence of legislative representation. (Luxemburg, 2008, p. 169)

By focusing its politics on either parliamentarism (political system/state constitution) or on the trade unions and corporatism in the workplaces (economic constitution), social democracy underwent a dispersion. The transformative goal was abandoned as a result of being absorbed within the respective patterns of bargaining and conflict resolution. Class conflict communicated itself not as a general struggle for a new societal whole, but either as a conflict between different parties in the political system running for public office or as a sectoral conflict between specific groups of the workforce and business interests. It dispersed into “a multitude of individual struggles”.

The mass strike, however, presented itself as a course of action that could bring the holistic ambition into play again. For Luxemburg, it should reunite the whole of social democracy into a movement-like unity: taking its cue from simple conflicts—for example, over wages, working hours, and so on—it seemed possible that a popular transgression could address foundational issues in society as a whole.²³ Accordingly, short-term disputes, if only properly politicized, could provoke “a spontaneous shaking and tugging at these chains” (Luxemburg, 2008, p. 129), which would put the already constituted procedures and mechanisms of societal differentiation of capitalist societies into question. Luxemburg envisaged a “real people’s movement”: “If the mass strike, or rather, mass strikes, and the mass struggle are to be successful, they must become a real people’s movement, that is, the widest sections of the proletariat must be drawn into the fight” (Luxemburg, 2008, p. 158).

Obviously, Luxemburg’s approach shares populist characteristics by its reclaiming of constituent power against the elite (Maione, 2021). Assuming a holistic perspective, it aimed at overcoming existing mechanisms of differentiation and mediation. There are two aspects that make her approach distinct: the first is that the *Volksbewegung* was not only meant to insert a counter-power and correct the elite-bias, but also followed a transformative ambition. The second aspect is that the holistic approach was not solely introduced as an instrument to further various political goals on contingent grounds, but was also meant to overcome the dispersive flaws of industrial constitutionalism. Since the latter absorbed political agency into specialized procedures, it hindered the activists from exploring the real problems of the social whole and undermined an adequate process of knowledge gathering and reflection. Adhering to European Social Democracy’s mode of inquiry, Luxemburg made an epistemic case: the *Volksbewegung* was considered the only option to further collective learning processes because it was located at a distance from constituted powers. In her critical discussion of the Russian Revolution, Luxemburg highlighted this epistemic case as follows:

It is not the generation of a mood of revolutionary euphoria that can engender the historic capacity for action within the German proletariat—on the contrary, this can only be achieved through insight into the dreadful earnestness and extreme complicatedness of the tasks at hand, it can only emerge from political maturity and intellectual independence, from a capacity for critical judgment on the part of the masses (a faculty systematically extirpated over decades by German Social Democracy under various pretexts). (Luxemburg, 1974c, p. 335)²⁴

Interestingly, Luxemburg turned a widely held objection against populist politics upside down. Many observers have cast the holistic standpoint that creeps within notions of the “people” as an expression of unrestrained passions for communal association and irrational impulses toward grasping the whole. But for Luxemburg, the *Volksbewegung* was the privileged site for rationally understanding how capitalism as an encompassing societal framework operates precisely *because* it is geared toward grasping the social whole. One can say that Luxemburg proceeded from a left-populism—understood as invoking the people in order to further certain political objectives and advance in the struggle for political power—to a transformative populism: it should establish a process of collective learning “from below” and overcome the Jacobin flaws that Luxemburg saw—again—resurfacing in the Russian Revolution of 1917: “The Bolsheviks are the historical heirs of the English Levelers and the French Jacobins” (Luxemburg, 1974c, p. 342).

However, in contrast to imposing external-scientific knowledge in guiding political action, Luxemburg emphasized the fundamental role of *praxis*: knowledge gathering should be located in the experiential world of popular political action itself (Maione, 2021, p. 476). In an almost pragmatist fashion, she stressed its often unforeseeable and uncertain concomitants: “It is a terra incognita. A thousand problems. Experience alone is capable of making corrections and opening up new paths” (Luxemburg, 1974c, p. 360). A dense passage can also be found in her Junius pamphlet on the “Crisis of Social Democracy” from 1916:

The modern proletariat comes out of historical tests differently. Its tasks and its errors are both gigantic: no prescription, no schema valid for every case, no infallible leader to show it the path to follow. Historical experience is its only school mistress. Its thorny way to self-emancipation is paved not only with immeasurable suffering but also with countless errors. The aim of its journey—its emancipation depends on this—is whether the proletariat can learn from its own errors. (Luxemburg, 1974a, p. 53).

Thus, politics is not only about imposing political will. It is about the elaboration of an adequate world-disclosing critique and an open process of self-correction. According to Luxemburg, a laborious “thorny way of self-liberation” opens up, on which the *Volksbewegung* should be able to free itself from superfluous relations of domination in a collective learning process.

Obviously, it must desist from establishing practices or institutional arrangements that are inclined to undermine the open-ended endeavor of world-disclosure and error-correction. It is from here that Luxemburg elaborated her critique of dogmatism and authoritarian leadership. She suspected both of restraining the afforded knowledge-gathering through applying fixed schemes and plans (disregarding historical experience and undermining an open mode of reflection). It would be misleading to stylize Luxemburg as a grassroots democrat. Over and over, she emphasized the crucial importance of political leadership; the social democratic “Führerschaft” (leadership) should guide the exploration of possible courses of action up to the point where the people themselves amount to the primary historical agents:

But this abolishes the opposition between the “leadership” and the “following” majority, and turns the relationship of the masses to the leaders upside down. The only role of the so-called “leaders” in social democracy is to educate the masses about their historical tasks. The prestige, the influence of the “leaders” in Social Democracy grows only in proportion to the amount of enlightenment they accomplish in this sense, that is, precisely in proportion to how they destroy the previous basis of all leadership, the blindness of the masses, in proportion, in a word, to how they divest themselves of their leadership, make the masses leaders and themselves executors, tools of conscious mass action. (Luxemburg, 1974b, p. 396)

In these passages, Luxemburg argued that leadership plays an instrumental role in fostering the learning process. Full-blown leaderism, however, is detrimental to self-emancipation as it thwarts knowledge-gathering. Luxemburg hints at the possibility that the role of leaders and cadres is subverted in the process. Here, she alludes to a rather Rousseauian conception of vertical organ separation: in the course of the successful *Volksbewegung*, the cadres switch their roles from being leaders to simply becoming executive “tools” of mass-action’s *volonté générale*. Admittedly, it remains unclear how this switch can be effectively achieved. However, Luxemburg refers to the possibility that the basic structures of political action themselves can be subverted. Again, the emphasis is on an open-ended process that transcends the limitations of politics—be it the heroic imposition of political will on social matter or the role of personalized leadership.

To be sure, Luxemburg often formulated in general statements leaving us with crucial challenges: what are the conditions for movements that endure rather than fail? How can we make sense of collective learning extending from the macro-social level to its micro-foundations? A restatement would, obviously, be a demanding endeavor.²⁵ This should

not lead us to overlook the fact that Luxemburg's approach can be reconstructed as an advance; it can be seen as a step in a learning process itself because it drew conclusions from the critical evaluation of existing experiences ranging from Jacobin flaws and the limitations of class-politics to the dispersive tendencies in industrial constitutionalism.

5 | WHAT CAN BE LEARNT FROM THIS LEARNING CYCLE?

As we have seen, it is possible to reconstruct the reflections that surrounded the advent of social democratic mass parties as already addressing some intricacies of left populism. European Social Democracy started as a movement that adhered to a critique of popular sovereignty. Despite these insights, it reverted back to the popular will. One should be careful to equate European Social Democracy with the recent surge of left populisms since the 2010s in Europe. But, as pointed out by numerous studies (Gerbaudo, 2017; Katsambekis & Kioupiolis, 2019; Kioupiolis, 2016), a similar tendency can be observed: Starting from social movement practices and ideologies, the turn to a people-centered politics in countries such as Spain, France, or Greece were identified.

As demonstrated in this article, the recurrence of populism should not be seen as an interplay between anti-populism and populism, but as a learning cycle. The concept of a learning cycle in the context of social movements was used by the German Historian Michael Vester in his seminal study on the advent of the British labor movement from 1792 to 1848 (Vester, 1975, 25 ff).²⁶ In this study, Vester examined how the practical "cycles of struggle" in the emergent strikes and campaigns intersected with intellectual advances in drawing conclusions from these experiences, leading to a refinement and re-orientation of political strategy. In spite of setbacks and failures, Vester was able to identify "feedback cycles" at the intersection of political action and intellectual reflection (Vester, 1975, p. 19).

The cycle that this article has reconstructed passed through three stages: it started with *stage one* in the mid-19th century, where Marx and Engels drew conclusions from the apparent Jacobin flaws of insurrectionary tendencies. They assumed that a sound conception of politics should take the structure of modern capitalist society into account. This led to the transferal of promising courses of political action to the economic sphere and its inherent contradictions ("class-politics"). In *stage two*, in the late-19th century, European Social Democracy returned in all its reformist and revolutionary ramifications to a politics that aimed at achieving social transformation through invoking the popular will. This was largely due to the constitutionalization of the political system that was meant to take collectively binding decisions and made it necessary to overcome class politics. In *stage three*, Luxemburg drew conclusions from the obvious problems of industrial constitutionalism by conceiving of a transformative populism: on the one hand, it should overcome the dispersive flaws through invoking a holistic *Volksbewegung* as transformative lever. On the other, it should overcome the Jacobin flaws through an emphasis on collective learning processes. The envisaged *Volksbewegung* was not only the place of counter-power, but also of exploration, the gathering of knowledge, and self-correction. Thereby, Luxemburg laid the foundations for a transformative populism: a populism that should not only further simple goals or conquer public offices, but should also transform society and the agents themselves up to the point where the characteristic contradictions and societal differentiation of modern society are transcended.

Luxemburg's take on collective learning processes was rather sketchy. It would go beyond the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive account of the relation of politics, populism, and collective learning processes. However, some short-comings of Luxemburg's account must be considered. A serious problem—which has accompanied "Luxemburgist" political approaches from the outset—was that she basically identified social differentiation as such with capitalist society and rejected it in all its ramifications. Adopting a rather vitalistic perspective, she advocated "uninhibited, effervescent life," "creative power," and "social instincts instead of egoism, mass initiative in place of lethargy" (Luxemburg, 1974c, 360 ff). Accordingly, the inquiry is, from the outset, restricted because constituted procedures and mechanisms of social differentiation are seen as *always* playing out in a negative direction—be it through co-opting opposition into social systems or through obfuscating a sound perspective on the social whole. Here, Luxemburg tended to neglect the state of the art of her own social movement, namely European Social Democracy, which was concerned with a more sophisticated analysis of modern society. At least, it has always been conceded in this

tradition that differentiation processes can play out in a progressive direction and that capitalism must be overcome from within the internal contradictions of social systems—and not solely through assuming a generalized oppositional “mass”-standpoint on the social whole. Luxemburg neglected the fact that there can be many non-populist moments where enthusiastic self-empowerment and holistic movement may not be conducive to bringing about social transformation. By inflating the *Volksbewegung*, her conception runs the risk of undermining the necessary collective learning as it becomes difficult to explore non-populist courses of action that may prove to be promising in many situations.²⁷

Thereby, she deprived transformative populism of the means to concretize learning processes. Mechanisms of differentiation are urgently needed in order to explore the world, cope with the flood of knowledge, and achieve (and acknowledge) partial advances. By the dissolution into holistic mass dynamism, the *Volksbewegung* can collapse into a blockade because the learning process is overloaded from the outset. In light of the holistic project, every partial step weighs itself against the backdrop of a “whole” that must be immediately approached. It remains difficult to establish indirect or more complex strategies of goal attainment. The scope of learning is severely restricted as everything is geared toward *not touching upon the ideal of mass mobilization*.²⁸ A restatement of transformative populism would have to rely on a more open mode of inquiry that considers the merits of a holistic perspective, but does not dismiss mechanisms of differentiation from the outset. Most importantly, a reflexivity is needed that keeps itself open to the manifold sources of social transformation—scientific knowledge, economic innovation, aesthetic experience—instead of constantly highlighting the importance of high intensity movement activism.

To conclude, a nuanced inspection must be conducted in order to determine when populist approaches seem suitable for furthering social transformation in a given situation or when—to the contrary—they prove self-defeating. Instead of advocating left populism or anti-populism per se, it is necessary to engage with more context-dependent inquiries of left populisms in history, as well as in our contemporary world, and ask whether they incite or block collective learning processes, whether they regress to typical flaws, or whether they draw conclusions from past experiences.

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ENDNOTES

¹ See for an overview: Kaltwasser et al. (2017).

² For a critique, see Arato (2019).

³ See for a functionalist critique: Thornhill (2020); for an historical investigation: Möller (2022); for a discourse-theoretical approach to evaluate the success and failure of populisms: Venizelos and Stavrakakis (2022).

⁴ Laclau (2005), Stavrakakis (2017).

⁵ In the following, I cite the German version: Morina (2017).

⁶ Admittedly, there are apparent problems in the underlying philosophy of history that have been stressed extensively throughout the last decades. However—in spite of all shortcomings—the question remains how to explain and evaluate social change and, finally, provide foothold for political action, see for the recent discussion on progress and regression: Jaeggi (2018), Allen (2016), and Kitcher (2017).

⁷ Hobsbawm (1989, 124 ff).

⁸ For a conceptual elaboration, see: Mangoni (1976), Wippermann (1983), and Antonini (2020).

⁹ For the advent of the Young Hegelians, see the classical study: Löwith (1981, 65 ff); see for how the discussion of people-centered politics trickled down into the early works of Marx and the early works of the young composer Richard Wagner in his “Zürcher Kunstschriften,” see: Möller (2020), Münkler (2021, 63 ff).

¹⁰ For a systematic reconstruction of how Marx approached the “modern social world” as being regulated through the separation of state and civil society, see: Leopold (2007, 63 ff). In the later preface to “A contribution of the critique of the political economy” from 1859, Marx saw the main “conclusion” of his engagement with Hegel’s Philosophy of Right in the 1840s as: “neither legal relations nor political forms could be comprehended whether by themselves or on the basis of a so-called general development of the human mind, but that on the contrary they originate in the material conditions of life,

- the totality of which Hegel, following the example of English and French thinkers of the 18th century, embraces within the term “civil society”; that the anatomy of this civil society, however, has to be sought in political economy” (Marx, 2010c, p. 262). While rooted in the “material conditions of life,” Marx nevertheless identified a characteristic separation between legal form, political form, and civil society that constituted the regulating framework of capitalism.
- ¹¹ See Maguire (1978, p. 10): “Of course Marx is a Jacobin if by that name we mean one who is committed to the values of liberty, fraternity and equality proclaimed by the French Revolution. [...] But the crucial distinction between the Jacobins and Marx is his realization, and their inability and refusal to grasp, that within the structure of the bourgeois world this project is tragically impossible.”
- ¹² For a thorough reconstruction of Marx’s relation to French insurrectionism, see: Draper (1986, 145 ff).
- ¹³ For the legacy of French insurrectionism, see also: Rosanvallon (2000, 144 ff).
- ¹⁴ See Gilbert (1981, p. 15). Marx drew on the allegory of the midwife in order to clarify the role of political action: in situations of crisis, the systemic set-up is in such a disarray that political action can perform the role of a transformative tool that is able to lever the blockades and contradictions: “And even when a society has got upon the right track for the discovery of the natural laws of its movement—and it is the ultimate aim of this work, to lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society—it can neither clear by bold leaps, nor remove by legal enactments, the obstacles offered by the successive phases of its normal development. But it can shorten and lessen the birth-pangs” (Marx, 2010a, p. 10).
- ¹⁵ See also Gilbert (1981, 41 ff).
- ¹⁶ See Leipold (2020).
- ¹⁷ See Engels to Bebel (https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/letters/84_12_11.htm).
- ¹⁸ Stavrakakis and Venizelos pursue a different perspective and emphasize Marx’s political sympathies for the Russian Narodniki (Venizelos & Stavrakakis, 2022, p. 9).
- ¹⁹ For Lenin’s initial indebtedness to European Social Democracy, see also: Morina (2017, 314 ff).
- ²⁰ See with a view to conceptions of strategy: Freedman (2013, 286 ff).
- ²¹ In the English translation, *Volksbewegung* is mistakenly translated as “revolutionary movement,” see Luxemburg (1919, p. 110).
- ²² For a reconstruction of councils as “transitional constitutional structure,” see Vergara (2020b, 182 ff).
- ²³ In the research literature, it has been argued that Luxemburg’s approach shows similarities to the political theory of Hannah Arendt (Vollrath, 1973). However, there are crucial differences: admittedly, both approaches focus on the creative and transformative dimension of political action, but Luxemburg does not de-couple politics from existing simple struggles in everyday life and the economic sphere. Instead of defining politics through its by-products (such as Arendt’s notion of “acting together in concert”—for a critique of such theoretical approaches, see: Elster, 1983, 43 ff), Luxemburg outlines an entire process that still relies on a “goal-oriented” notion of political action (for a critique of an Arendtian reading of Luxemburg, see: Haug, 2007).
- ²⁴ I use the recent translation by Nicholas Gray that can be found here: <https://www.rosalux.de/stiftung/historisches-zentrum/rosa-luxemburg/on-the-russian-revolution>.
- ²⁵ See recent attempts to conceive of social transformation as learning processes: Jaeggi (2018), Von Redecker (2021), Möller (2022).
- ²⁶ Vester (1975, 25 ff). For an English translation of the central findings of the study, see: “The Emergence of the Working Class as a Learning Process” (<https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/emergence-working-class-learning-process>).
- ²⁷ Consider, for example, problems related to economic and administrative reform or foreign politics where the grammar of opposing elite-dominance from a popular angle does not meet the real existing problems, or situations where it is more promising to defend existing societal differentiation instead of overcoming it.
- ²⁸ Admittedly, Luxemburg wrote her text on the mass strike before the force of regressive mass politics was evidenced by the triumph of nationalism in the First World War and the fascist movements of the 1920s.

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