



ȘCOALA NAȚIONALĂ DE STUDII  
POLITICE ȘI ADMINISTRATIVE

## DOCTORAL THESIS SUMMARY

**THE POST-2008 IDEOLOGICAL CRISIS OF THE EUROPEAN LEFT:** *Decline, transformation and crisis of the European left in the neoliberal hegemonic context of post-communist Europe*

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## SUMMARY

The early 2010s populist waves took political pundits largely by surprise. The shock that populism managed to instill within contemporary democratic systems has sent shivers throughout both ideological and geographical space. To this day, populism still poses an existential challenge to the liberal democratic regimes that have consolidated themselves over the past 70 years, since the end of the Second World War. The surprise results of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump are perhaps the highlights of how populism managed to take the mainstream political landscape by surprise. With the fall of communism, western liberal democracies had become so complacent, that even after taking severe austerity measures in order to mitigate the fallout of the 2008 financial crisis, they could not fully anticipate the socio-economic effects that these measures would have on their citizens. Populism was treading on fertile ground.

Nonetheless, these conditions were not in and of themselves sufficient to prepare the political landscape for the re-emergence of populism during the first half of the 2010s. It, was in fact, another factor that led to the electoral success of populism. We are talking about the crisis of the Left.

A vast theoretical body of studies discusses the changes that the Left underwent over the past 30 years. Some talk about the decline of the Left, some talk about the internal ideological transformations, and others argue that the Left is in crisis. This study argues that all three approaches are correct and that they are part of a historical process that started with the fall of communism.

When talking about the crisis of the Left, is it essential for us to link the discussion with the leftist parties' electoral success? While it can certainly be helpful to see what sort of political support leftist ideas can gather in society, it is not a defining condition for determining whether the Left finds itself in a crisis or not. Since electoral success can ensure a higher degree of influence within the decision-making process, it is certainly an important component that we will study in order to measure how successful leftist parties have been throughout the last thirty years. However, given the fact that, since the fall of communism in 1989, leftist parties have competed within a neoliberal hegemonic framework, even if these parties were indeed successful in terms of electoral support, they have been far from successful in influencing the socio-economic development of their respective states.

The left's main challenge is that the current dominant framework is arguably neoliberal. Following Wallerstein's theory of the capitalist world economy, the left finds itself in opposition from the very start. Therefore it constantly finds itself in a position where it has to contest the dominant framework and defend its vision. Historical challenges, such as the end of the Cold War or the economic crisis of 2008, which the left has faced over the last 30 years, illustrate this defensive position. During the Cold War, the communist left and neoliberal right were on somewhat equal footing, competing for ideological hegemony.

*The overarching thesis of the study is that the post-communist transformation of the Left has led to its own crisis.* The thesis rests on correlating a three-step historical process of decline, transformation, and crisis, in order to underline the causalities between the process of transformation and the state of crisis that the Left finds itself in. Since the process of transformation does not come about on its own, it requires either an external or internal trigger, or both. In the case of the Left, although this process of transformation began to slowly manifest prior to 1989, it was the end of the Cold War and the fall of the East European Communist regimes that represented the catalyst that led to the Left's fundamental transformation. The appearance of populism on the political scene and in this study is crucial in defining the crisis of the Left. As such, we have followed two subordinated hypotheses that help explain the thesis:

1. *Right-wing populism feigns concern for emancipation, lending it an ideological similarity with the Left;*
2. *Right-wing populism has absorbed a consistent part of the Left's electoral support, which had become alienated by the "Third-Way" compromise.*

The theoretical endeavour will begin by defining some of the critical pieces used throughout this study. The first step is to clarify what some of the fundamental concepts of this research mean. The first step will be to look at ideology to be later able to contextualize the discussion within the framework of neoliberal hegemony. The study will discuss how the state's role has developed as an instrument of reproduction of relations of production. The second step is to answer the question: what is the left? The argument is that looking at the left-right cleavage as tradition vs. emancipation better reveals the nature of ideology rather than liberty vs. equality. Since liberty and equality can be very muddy and sometimes even cross-ideological borders by appearing in both left-wing and right-wing policies, a more fundamental approach to differentiating the essence of both left and right is the distinction between tradition and emancipation.

If we look at ideologies as instruments that aid individuals in making sense of the world around them, as Terry Eagleton argues, we can see the merits of the tradition vs. emancipation dichotomy since it does not overlap as clearly as the liberty vs. equality

dichotomy. Daniel Fitzpatrick defines tradition as 'crystallisations of the past which remain in the present', and they are both material and ideational. Of course, in our context, we shall look at the ideational nature and how traditional ideas have helped shape the right-wing spectrum of ideology. Emancipation, on the other hand, as Ernesto Laclau puts it, represents a 'radical discontinuity' between itself and the social order that preceded it.

This study defines the left as the set of ideologies that share the fundamental principle of emancipation as guiding their vision of society. However, these ideologies vary in terms of the profoundness of emancipation needed to better society as a whole. "The right", on the other hand, is represented by the set of ideologies that use tradition as a framework for understanding the world. Both sets contain varying degrees of their dominant characteristic, with more pronounced degrees of these characteristics representing the "radical left" and the "far-right" spectrums.

The second stage of theorisation is to contextualize the dichotomy of tradition vs. emancipation within the context of neoliberal hegemony. "Capitalism" is defined as the economic system based upon the private ownership of the means of production, and "neoliberalism" as an ideology that argues for the virtues of the free market economy. In order to frame the distinction between tradition and emancipation, the study uses Wallerstein's theory of the capitalist world economy, which paints the picture of the economic forces that structure the contemporary world. The relationship between centre and periphery, with the underlying tendency of resource centralization by way of how the economic relationships are structured, is fundamental to understanding the following point: states are instruments of reproducing relations of production.

This means that states have become intrinsically connected with the hegemonic character of neoliberalism in order to allow further the forces of capitalism to manifest themselves. Under the neoliberal hegemony, it has become harder and harder to distinguish ideologies from one another since they all tend to borrow ideas from the hegemonic ideology. This state of matter emerged during the late seventies to early eighties and consolidated after the fall of communism in 1989. The idea of 'the end of history', which was so prevalent during the first half of the nineties decade, underpins this fact.

The last part of the theoretical chapter will approach the subject of populism. Since populism has become prevalent after the global economic crisis of 2008, it represents a surfacing of the tensions that have festered between democracy and neoliberalism. The normative coupling between democracy and neoliberalism that framed the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War is a process spanning over many decades. The 1989 moment only served to consolidate the link between the two and thus condemn democracy to suffer any criticism that is brought to neoliberalism. Here, populism takes shape on the background of

democratic fatigue that set across Europe during the late nineties and the beginning of the 21st century and blossoms after the economic crisis in 2008. This is not to say that populism was not an issue before 2008; democratic fatigue already opened the stage for populist discourse. Rather 2008 represented a crisis of legitimacy for the system, both democratic and neoliberal.

In the second part of this study, we shall look at contemporary events that have shaped the crisis in which the left finds itself today. The goal is to describe an overarching three-staged process that can be broken down as follows: the first stage is the decline of the left, which started in the late 1980s and was again accelerated by the fall of communism in 1989; the second stage is the transformation period, bounded by the years 1994 until 2008 when the left desperately tried to reinvent itself along more moderate lines in order to stabilise its declining electoral appeal; the third and final stage is the identity crisis which was triggered by the global economic crisis of 2008 and has lasted for almost a decade.

Accordingly, this part of the study is broken down into chapters that allow a deeper theorisation and analysis of each step of the process.

Chapter three will deal with the decline of the left. Even though the Cold War was still in full effect and the collapse of the Soviet Union was an unimaginable event, the neoliberal hegemony was already starting to manifest itself throughout that period. The economic relationships forming between the states under the Liberal Democratic sphere of influence hyper-accelerated the growth process that put the West so far in front of the East.

After describing the ideological context of the eighties, we will look at what the 1989 'moment' meant for former communist Europe and democratic Europe. This step is essential because it also coincides with the beginning of democratic fatigue. Democratic fatigue was already setting in in Western Europe. However, it only took Eastern Europe about ten years of transition to reach the same point in which the rest of Europe was already at, simply because it underwent post-communist democratisation and these democratic institutions were relatively new.

In order to assess whether or not the left has been in decline since the fall of communism, we will look at three elements: the various left-wing ideologies themselves, the left-wing political parties that have existed throughout Europe, and two critical events that have had a significant impact on the activity of those parties over the last 30 years. We will look at the last 30 years since there is already ample study and debate over the identity and role of the left after the end of the Second World War. First, however, the study will briefly summarize these discussions and integrate them into the argument to create a broader context for understanding the idea of a left in "crisis".

We will differentiate between two main categories of left-wing ideologies: moderate and radical. By 'radical', Luke March and Cass Mudde understand a commitment to the fundamental systemic change of the system in which the radical actor exists (emancipatory dimension). The moderate dimension mainly consists of centre-left parties which established the social-democratic 'third way'. The radical dimension comprises various types such as the communists, the democratic socialists, the popular socialists, and the greens. This will paint the picture of what the left looked like across Europe at the beginning of the nineties and understand what the process of transformation looked like in the beginning. In this part, we will merge the classification models of March and Mudde with those of Ishiyama and Bozoki to create a single unified taxonomy model which covers the various shapes and sizes that the left took after 1989. Of course, this taxonomy is more fluid in time since more parties and movements appear according to any given context, and the model will adapt to these events to accordingly and accurately encompass them.

The discussion about each specific left-wing ideology will take place both on a theoretical and historical level. Therefore, it is vital first to identify the specificities of the various left-wing ideologies to understand their approach to the various challenges presented to them. This step is also critical because it will help us point out some of the internal tensions present within the left that have led to its decline.

The next chapter approaches the third and final part of the crisis process. In order to be more specific, we do not mean that the left's identity crisis was a direct result of the economic crisis of 2008; instead, it was supplanted by populism (both right and left) in terms of representing the citizen's rights on economic issues. In other words, the rise of populism put the left in an identity crisis facilitated by the economic crisis.

To talk about how the crisis manifested in terms of democratic and economic response, we will first analyse the events leading up to it. Europe was in a moment of economic and democratic convergence. The way the forefathers of the European Union project set, and it was a line that was strictly followed. Economic integration, first and foremost, meant facilitating the entry of FDIs into the former communist countries to inject capital into their respective economies to become competitive on the free market. This was supposed to help the economy by ensuring a flow of economic know-how in terms of management, and capital, which would create jobs and help fuel the economy. The problem was that the local capital was already on its back foot in terms of competitiveness versus the western foreign capital. The overreliance on FDIs to secure the transition as quickly and seamlessly as possible created a dependence by these countries on foreign investment. In order to be as attractive as possible and compete with the other former communist countries, states had to give up on their social welfare institutions slowly. The flexibilisation of the labour force was one such

instrument. The social securities that helped secure people's livelihoods were stripped away under the guise of labour flexibility. This had devastating effects once the crisis hit.

After describing the effects of the economic crisis on the way people perceive democratic institutions and illustrating the crisis of legitimacy, we will further analyse the relationship between liberal democracy and populism and show how populism's rise in the post-2008 context was only natural. The growing tension between the electorate and their representatives, the lack of feedback from democratically elected institutions, the growing feelings of disenfranchisement on the side of the electorate and the cartelisation of party politics, party systems that favour two big actors which alternate in government and sometimes even collaborate and difficult conditions of entry for new political contenders on the side of the elected, all of these have paved the way for a system which works without any citizen input aside from the elections.

In this muddy context, right-wing populism emerges slowly but surely to take the lead in the critique of the establishment. Finally, we shall illustrate and compare the electoral results and relative political strength of the left in the post-2008 context to the results of the emerging populist movements swept across Europe.

For the last part, we look at the post-communist political development of Romania in order to illustrate the precarious conditions for any left-wing party to gain relevance, and how inevitable the rise of the right-wing populist party AUR was. Thus, we have underlined the important role that key actors played in Romanian politics and the way in which they integrated the populist discourse ever since the 1990s.

Despite not being the only case of mainstream populism, Romania serves as an example of how endemic conditions of precariousness can lead to the integration of populism into mainstream politics in the periphery of the global economy, which makes it even harder for left-wing parties and policies to find their way into a position of government, in an ever more hostile socio-political environment.

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