

Péter Csigó

Report on STSM research trip to England, June 2016

The aim of this Short Term Scientific Mission has been to develop new research connections for exploring the depths of the systemic challenges – especially disorder and elitism – that populist trends represent in today's democracy. (As explained in my proposal, I see elitism and populism as two sides of the same coin in contemporary politics, all actors of which being elitist and populist at the same time).

I spent the first two weeks of June 2016 in England (May 30 – June 14), where I was primarily based at LSE but also made visits outside London. My stay in England has been very successful. I could promote my theory and book on mediatized populist democracy, and present my critique of its mainstream understandings. The trip has been a success also in terms of establishing links for future common thinking, possibly joint research.

During my stay at LSE, I had the privilege of enjoying the hospitality of prof. Nick Couldry, Head of the Media and Communication Department. Prof. Couldry knows my work, as previously he was kind to serve as reviewer of my book manuscript and the upcoming publication of the book is greatly due to his approving remarks. During my stay, we had several opportunities to discuss the prospects and the argument of the book. Beyond his many perceptive and helpful remarks about my work, he has introduced me into the argument of his own (and Andreas Hepp's) upcoming book. Reading the manuscript has been a revelative experience, as I had to realize that this new mediatization theory uses almost the same set of building bricks (concepts, questions, critiques) as my theory, only to build a model that is almost diametrically opposed to mine. The fact that the two approaches offer very different solutions to the same commonly felt challenges opens enthralling horizons for future mutual critique and validity test but also for a shared move beyond the status quo – notably in the research of mediatized populist politics and mediatized 'cultural populism' (in McGuigan's sense).

I had the wonderful opportunity to present my work to professors and graduate students of the Media Department, in the framework of the department's regular Lunchtime Research Dialogue Seminar. During this enthralling, 90 minutes long presentation and Q&A, LSE colleagues raised highly relevant questions regarding populist democracy, many of these issues have been discussed in detail. Nick Couldry pointed to the problem that if my theory aims to establish collective speculation about 'the people' as a key systemic factor of populist democracy, that is, if 'bubble blowing' is systemic reality and not just a metaphor, then the conceptual tools of Bourdieu's field analysis might be most appropriate to use. Sonia Livingstone has also called for more in-depth analysis of the institutional structure of the discourse that speculates on 'the people' in today's mediatized democracy. In the discussions, the relation between elitist and populist politics has been raised. Nick Anstead has raised the question of whether and how populist speculation is influenced by the state of other subsystems, for example economy, given that in a period of growth it is easier for political elites to please the people than in a time of crisis. Bart Cammaerts has inquired on whether political elites speculating on the people are held in a state of false consciousness shaped by (neoliberal or other) ideology. Sonia Livingstone has raised whether new knowledge elites like Google, with their new take on the 'voice of the people' make part of the populist speculation process.

Still in LSE I connected Ana Lomtadze, a graduate student researching a new articulation of extreme right wing movements, the new pro-European movements like Generation Identity which step up in the name of a shared European identity (marked by Christianity, democracy and solidarity) which

they oppose with outside (especially Muslim) civilizations. We have discussed how it would be possible to analyse these new initiatives – an Eastern European version being called Alternative Europe – in a comparative research framework. I have connected Ana with José Pedro Zúquete from this COST network, in the hope of a common research project.

During my stay in England, I have visited prof. Zygmunt Bauman and Aleksandra Kania in Leeds. Since my book interprets collective speculation on the people as a systemic crisis of “liquid” mediatized politics in liquid modernity, it directly relates to prof. Bauman’s theory and his analysis of contemporary political crisis. In liquid modernity, Bauman envisions a new imbalance in which power and politics are dissociated, actors of conventional politics like party representatives are deprived of power as it shifts into the hands of new, international and corporate elite players. We have discussed whether the system of ‘populist democracy’ identified by Peter Mair may be seen as a reflection of this imbalance, a compensation for the emptying of conventional party infrastructures, national political elites’ attempts to gain popular legitimacy in a time when they are losing power. Prof. Bauman knew my book well, he even wrote a blurb for the book (the other blurb has been kindly written by prof. Couldry), and he has given important advice about how to proceed further in analysing populism as a sign of the unstable disorder – or Interregnum as he calls it – of liquid modern politics.

My visit in England has been extremely helpful in the further development and in the promotion of my efforts to explain the systemic crisis of today’s elitist-populist democracy. The visit has laid the bed for the further promotion of my upcoming book and also for future research cooperations.