# Transcript

# EuroStorie Podcast, episode 5: Populism through a philosophical lens

[Paolo Amorosa, PA] Welcome to a new episode of the EuroStorie Podcast. Hosting with me as usual is Bea Bergholm.

[Bea Bergholm, BB] Hi, nice to be here again.

[PA] And in today's episode, we are talking with Tuukka Brunila.

[Tuukka Brunila, TB] Hi, thank you for having me.

[PA] Tuukka is doing his PhD in philosophy at EuroStorie.

[TB] Exactly.

[BB] Yeah, and today we have some pretty big topics and concepts to tackle. And Tuukka has kindly accepted the challenge to discuss them with us and guide us through them. So I think we should get started. And as always, I hope you enjoy listening. And if there's anything you want to comment or let us know, please do that on social media.

[PA] Yeah, let’s begin. So, Tuukka, your research interests including intriguing things like neoliberalism, populism and sovereignty. Maybe you could start by telling a bit about yourself and how you came to work at EuroStorie?

[TB] Yes. So I've done my Masters in philosophy. Back then I was more working on this sort of abstract stuff, ontology, epistemology, historicity…That kind of stuff. Basically what I'm sort of very interested in is continental philosophy. That's basically French and German philosophy, Foucault, Frankfurt school, that kind of stuff. So anyway, I was working with Timo Miettinen, my PhD supervisor and also a guest on this podcast.

I was working as his assistant. Timo was applying to the ERC for his research on neoliberalism, ordoliberalism. And I think that from Timo I got this idea that as a philosopher, you don't have to only work on these very abstract topics, such as what is knowledge, what is truth, or such, but instead you can work with topics that are relevant to other scientists, social scientists, political scientists and so on, and try to give your own, your philosophical insight into the topics.

That's basically why I wanted to work at EuroStorie, to work with other scientists, researchers from other fields. To see how I could sort of benefit them in this interdisciplinary research and then also learn from them, about what is relevant right now and what can philosophers and their way of doing research help them.

[BB] Cool. That's, yeah, that's funny that you mentioned Timo because when he visited us, he also said that people usually have this idea of philosophy that it's some, you know, guy with a beard sitting by the fireplace and thinking to himself and being like very abstract, but it's actually a lot more concrete and kind of day-to-day than we maybe think.

[TB] Well, concrete in a way, but obviously, not sort of day-to-day… [laughs]

[BB] Yes, but in a philosophical way concrete. [laughs]

[TB] Exactly.

[PA] Yeah, so maybe let's start trying and look at how these big concepts you work with connect with, not necessarily the day-to-day, but the politics as all of us discuss it. And one academic concept that keeps taking center stage when you describe your research when we discuss it together is de-politicization and that's obviously a complicated word that not everybody uses in their day-to-day. So could you start by defining what it is, what it means and briefly how it has developed historically?

[TB] Yes, obviously the word, as you mentioned, is a very complicated and very packed one in a way that it’s even difficult to pronounce…De-politicization. So let's get that out of the way. [chuckles]

Anyway, what I seem to notice is that in research…. There are two ways to define it in a way that one is this idea that something is made to seem him as if it's not political in one way or another. So that it is claimed that economical questions, the economy, has nothing to do with politics.

Or for example, that something is simply a moral issue, that it should not be decided through political means. And then the second, this is the sort of discursive one that is simply this rhetorical way to define a question so that it should not be politicized.

And the second one which I'm more interested in is an institutional one, in a way that means simply that some questions regarding politics are distanced from democratic decision making so that it becomes more difficult to alter them through democratic means. Which then means that they're taken away from democratic politics, put them, so to say, at an arm’s length from, for example, decision making or something like that.

So historically I mean, obviously de-politicization is a critical concept in a way that it is used to refer to situations that the researcher or the person using the concept thinks that should be political or think that they are political and then they are sort of made unpolitical in one way or form. I think that a good example right now in Finland…there's been discussions about economic policies, for example. The idea that there are some that claim that economic policies are simply question of science, economics, rational issues that should not be answered ideologically. Whereas others obviously claim the opposite and say that all economic planning needs political decisions, and that's why it should not be de-politicized.

Other examples could be for example, researchers often talk about the European Union in a way that some claim that some democratically important decisions are sort of limited from the European institutions such as the European Union treaties or such not. So that it seems that some questions cannot be answered through political means.

[BB] Yeah, I remember I've seen on Twitter something about kind of contrasting ideology and rationality in these kind of economical questions and also in politics in general. Like do political parties, or any ideas, are they ideological or are they something else? Which to me seems a bit of a funny discussion to be honest.

[TB] If I may comment on that, is that historically, I mean, it goes to the heart of the question about the history of neoliberalism in a way. That how to de-politicize economic contradictions to, for example, counter socialism, social movements. And I think that this sort of a question of how to de-politicize the economy is something that is really fundamental to the history of neoliberalism. One that starts from the 1920s. Obviously that this question of how to counter these sort of strong workers movements, for example. Some researchers say that these questions are simply meant to be supra-scientists, others claim that there's this sort of authoritarian liberal state that then limits popular movements from affecting the economy for example.

[BB] Right. So you mentioned neoliberalism and that's another very big word. So maybe you could define and explain it quite briefly before going more into that.

[TB] Obviously, there's a lot of discussion on what neoliberalism is. Some people claim that there's no “ism”, some people claim that it's simply, that something is neoliberalist or what not and some people then refer to a certain group of thinkers. I think that the simplest way to approach it is that it's a question of state design, in a way.

For example, Quinn Slobodian, who visited the EuroStorie conference a year ago…In his book “Globalists” has exactly this idea that neoliberalism is about state design. The idea basically that how to sort of limit democratic possibilities to alter certain areas such as the economy and so on.

I think that for me the most, sort of historically interesting point, or the way to define neoliberalism from original liberalism or classical liberalism as they call it…Is simply to say that whereas the classical liberalists were anti-monarchists, the anti-monarchs, kings and anti-absolutist state then in relation to neoliberalism is that neoliberalism is basically anti-socialist. And that's different in the sense that it tries to limit possibilities to form workers unions, for example. Democratize the economy and this is something very different from, I would say from anti-monarchism.

[BB] OK, well, I haven't heard that distinction before. That was new information for me.

Also, I think that often when we hear about neoliberalism it refers to kind of extending the market logic to places and institutions that usually don't operate according to that logic. Like for example, the university where we also work. So is that also one definition of the concept?

[TB] Yeah, definitely. I mean, like one way it should be described as this sort of marketization or privatization. Which then flow from exactly this sort of neoliberal ideas about the state, normative ideas about how the economy works, for example.

I find that these definitions, however, become sort of ahistorical, in a way that they come to refer to a lot of different strategies, a lot of different situations. And neoliberalism becomes this really blurred and vague concept in a way…

So in that way, or personally, I prefer the one that refers to the state and state… sort of alteration, in a way.

[PA] And in relation to that, maybe, I think it's important if you also can open that for us. To make the distinction between the idea of market in classical liberalism and what it is in neoliberalism. That is something that gets usually lost. I think is very crucial. If you want to go into that.

[TB] When it comes to the market, classical liberals, obviously Adam Smith for example, talk about the market as a sort of natural phenomenon, so that for example, they talk about the invisible hand and how the markets work as their own sort of system. Whereas in a neoliberal example, for example, one strand, the German ordoliberalism, that’s a strand of neoliberalism, has this idea that the markets have to be sort of established through state measures and through market regulation and that kind of stuff.

And in this sense it no longer is this sort of a natural phenomenon. However, it should not be sort of distorted through democratic means but simplistically said, in neoliberalism the markets are no longer the sort of natural phenomena.

[BB] OK, good. Thanks for clearing that one up.

[BB] OK, so talking about, especially in the context of Europe and the current situation we are in, what is your take on how is de-politicization related to expert knowledge in this case?

[TB] Now this is a good question. I mean, obviously there's this concept of technocracy, the idea that knowledge should be the foundation of policy measures. So that basically this idea that goes back to ancient Greece and to Plato, to this idea that those that have knowledge should make the decisions. Obviously, I mean, we can see this as sort of discursive de-politicization in a way that it’s claimed that people that don't understand a topic should not have an opinion on it. And obviously I mean, it's easy to criticize this idea as undemocratic in a way.

[BB] Right.

[TB] And then the second way, I think that this is of institutional matter, one that concerns for example the European Union or the economic policy within the unions, the institutions such as the European Central Bank, for example. For example some political theorists claim that it’s sort of de-political in a way that it distances democratic decision-making, democratic legitimacy from being able to alter the European Union's economic policies for example.

[BB] Oh, okay. It was interesting because Timo Miettinen earlier in this podcast, he also talked about expert knowledge, especially in in the Finnish context and in the COVID pandemic context. And his opinion was that we still really much value expert knowledge and that many people, if they enter a discussion, for example on social media, they often do it through referring to expert knowledge. So what is your take on that? I mean do we still value expert knowledge in that way?

[TB]

Yeah, I think that this is a very good point. It shows you that questions such as de-politicization, technocracy and that kind of stuff, they’re not that sort of clear-cut in a way that it's not simply to say that expert knowledge is bad, or that it’s anti-democratic or whatever. But rather that it's a more complicated issue, especially during the pandemic. In a way that a lot of people that were critical of technocracy and expert knowledge that kind of stuff, obviously have to reformulate their ideas now that we know that during the pandemic expert knowledge was fundamental to these policies.

[BB] Exactly.

[TB] It shows you that it’s not a simple dichotomy in a way that, we cannot simply say that democracy on the one hand and then expert knowledge on the other. But obviously we need both and obviously the situation is more complex. Something that I think we will be seeing a lot more discussion on during and after the pandemic.

[BB] Yeah, so do you mean that people who used to be critical of expert knowledge, now that we are in a very exceptional situation that most of us haven't maybe witnessed in our lifetimes before, that now they kind of have to refer to or rely on expert knowledge?

[TB] Exactly. And it shows that we definitely need experts, especially during this time. Those people that were simply black and white critical of expert knowledge….I don't mean to identify anyone, but simply to say that we have to sort of paint a more complex image of that.

There's this issue in political theory that is about that if everything is basically political, then what is the way to demarcate good policies from bad policies.

And for example, when it comes to the anti-vaccination movement, it’s very difficult to approach it normatively from the standpoint where it’s simply claimed that everything is political and everything is ideology. But if there's no sort of more complex idea about what policies are, what’s their relation to expert knowledge…Because without that, the only option is to simply throw our hands up and say that hey, it's all policies and it's all politics.

[PA] Yeah, but let me play a bit the devil's advocate here. There are also some reasons that lead to the doubting of expert knowledge and to me de-politicization relates to that very much. Because we are very familiar with situations in which it's clear that economic policies that are politically debatable are pushed as expert knowledge in an attempt to bypass the democratic process. So looking at the idea of expert knowledge on that side, what's your take on its effect on the democratic process in our politics?

[TB] I think that's a very important, and very interesting question. I think that through this idea that only experts should have an opinion on this, sort of makes it so that it's no longer evident how democratically legitimate these questions are. And I think that this problem even goes back to the philosopher I mentioned earlier, Plato, who basically says that democracy is more about rhetorically trying to change the opinion of the people for bad and for worse.

What Plato and other technocrats or technocratic philosophers forget, is that all decisions have to appeal to the people in order to be democratically legitimate in a way. And I think that in context of the European Union for example, the problem is that the people don't really feel the decisions of the Union as their own.

And in that sense simply dismissing the people and their opinion sort of dispossesses them. And I think that this is really one of the big issues about, why there has been this sort of wave of populism across Europe, perhaps across the globe. In a way that the people have at least this sort of feeling that they have been dispossessed and they are no longer able to sort of give legitimacy to the questions or the problems that are contemporary in politics.

That is, it's not simply that the technocrats or the experts give us the options what we should do. But we should also think about how to sort of give democratic legitimacy to those options and to those decisions.

[BB] So you mentioned already populism and that's another quite big word. And very shortly defined, it means the idea that there's kind of a division in the society between the ordinary people and the elites. And usually these elites are seen as corrupt and in contradiction to the ordinary people. And then populist parties then present themselves as the voice of the people. That's kind of the very short and basic definition of the term.

But maybe you as a researcher could give a bit more of academic insight into the term.

[TB] Yes, I think that these kind of questions are exactly the questions that are philosophically relevant and interesting. Obviously defining populism is a difficult one. I was teaching a course with Pedro Magalhaes, my colleague from EuroStorie on populism last year and to us it almost seemed that there's as many definitions of populism as there are researchers doing stuff on it.

[BB] For sure.

[TB] Basically, what you just gave is basically the very standard, very sort of basic idea about populism. However, personally, I think it's a bit too broad in a way that it seems that every party could be defined as populist in a way. That there are no democratic parties that do not claim to speak for the people, that do not claim to listen to them, or do not claim to represent them in a way.

In this sense almost all democratic parties could be called populist in in one way or another. I think what for me is the deciding factor is this sort of exclusionary form of populism. In a way that the populist leader claims to exclusively know what the people want and claims to exclusively represent the people in a way that other parties are illegitimate. They don't know what people really want, they don't really represent the people, they are the elite and whatnot.

And then the populist leader comes and says that he or she has a direct link to the people and only he or she knows what people want. Whereas other parties, most often than not, hopefully tolerate different opinions, different ideas, disagreements, whereas a populist leader claims to be the only one talking for the people, representing them.

And obviously, going a bit further from this definition, is obviously this is sort of anti-institutional. In a way that it seems to the populist leader that institutions are not directly linked to the people, whereas he or she is. In a way that for example, in the US this is pretty evident, in a way that Trump claims that the institutions, the media, the Democratic Party, are the enemies of the people, whereas he would rather have it so that his will, which is apparently the will of the people, should not be hindered by institutions, for example.

[BB] Interesting point. Exactly.

[PA] I would like to ask you, in relation to your, let's call it scientific or academic definition of populism, would you think that there are both left-wing populism and right-wing populism? Because most often when you refer to Trump, in most cases we think of populism in the right wing in recent years. But often, especially from moderates that have often used the idea of stability of being the centrist, and looking at the streams from both political sides, to say that there is a populism also on the left.

So that they could differentiate with both, less and more extreme wings of politics, in a determinate context. But is that just apolitical strategy or somehow it’s something that would fit in an academic definition of populism as you understand it?

[TB] That's a very hard question to answer and obviously it divides a lot of the researchers as well. That some people, some resources tend to refer to populism as strictly right wing populism. Others are more liberal in the matter that tend to see that obviously, there could be left wing populist movements as well.

I think that the issue is in a way both empirical and political. Empirical in a way that, obviously, what we have seen now is more of the right wing populist movements and especially right wing governments with populist leaders. Obviously, there's example of Spain, Greece and others that there are these sort of left wing populist movements, but I think that there's also this sort of political issue. One that you sort of mentioned, is that this discussion of two extremes from exactly the center point. There's the right wing extreme and then the left wing extreme.

I think that however, when it comes to the way I feel that populism should be defined as this sort of exclusionary form of politics. It seems to be more on the right that this idea that there is this sort of exclusionary idea of the people, whereas on the left for example, the left populist movements tend to be more open to plural ideas about who can represent the people and not trying to completely delegitimize other popular parties.

For example, political theorist philosopher Chantal Mouffe has talked about the idea of left populism exactly as this sort of movement that would tolerate disagreement, tolerate other parties. However, here I would claim that this is simply no longer populism, based on the definition of populism as exclusionary, but rather something else, sort of a radical popular movement or something like that. But it's a difficult issue, one that cannot be decided beforehand.

Definitely I am open to the idea that there could be leftist populist movements that are exclusionary. It is no doubt that there are, but most of them are not. Empirically, we tend to see these sort of right wing, even far right populist movements.

[PA] And now that we have defined well and in-depth what de-politicization and populism might mean, let's try to bring them together. How do you see the interaction of these two big concepts operating in Europe's political climate today?

[TB] It's so interesting that you asked that because that’s something that I haven't been trying to bring together before, but now thinking about it, it seems that yes, in fact, de-politicization and populism are really interrelated. There seems to be this dynamic relationship in a way that… OK, we can talk about the populist movement as sort of re-politicization. However, once this sort of a populist movement becomes populist and claims to be exclusionary in a way that there is only one solution, there is only one will of the people and there's no room for disagreement.

Obviously in this situation populism seems to depoliticize the situation, it seems to end all discussion and say that the leader knows what people want and the matter is simply to move forward with it. And to make those decisions based on this direct link.

And in that way it seems to me that populism is the opposite of re-politicization, it seems to be that it starts with this sort of re-politicization and ends with de-politicization and this perhaps dynamic, perhaps dialectic movement.

And I mean, obviously in Europe, for example, it might be the case that populists have managed to re-politicize the European Union in one way or another. However it seems that there is no longer really interesting discussion or political discussion about the European Union, it’s simply yes or no. And in that way it seems that it's sort of becoming a de-political issue.

Starting the discussion on the Union, perhaps that was sort of a re-political movement, re-politicization of the union. However, after that, it seems to go into the sort of de-political one-solution-no-disagreement.

[BB] Yeah, so it seems like especially in the case of the European Union, you're either for it very strongly or against it. And is that what you mean by re-politicization, but then again, there's no discussion in between the opposite poles?

[TB] Exactly yeah.

[PA] That's interesting. So basically you're saying, if I can try to reformulate, that usually we associate de-politicization with expert knowledge, but there is also a way in which it operates through populism. So basically from whichever side you look at our politics today, we are back at a situation where what matters is the principle of authority more than whatever actual opinion you might have. Unfortunately so that we are kind of losing democratic discussion.

[TB] Absolutely. I mean, that’s very much the point that I'm trying to make. That for example, some researchers have made this point that it seems to be that populism and technocracy are sort of mirror images of one another Whereas the technocratic forms of politics claim that there's only one solution, the populists claim that there is only one way to interpret the will of the people. And in a way both go against disagreement. In a way both also are, how should I say, very oriented towards authority. Whether or not it’s scientific authority or if it's political authority.

And in this sense, I mean, coming back to the question about left and right wing populism, is that obviously on the right there's more belief in this sort of authority, I would say. It goes back to this conservative idea that all authority is better than no authority. Whereas on the left, perhaps there are more…How to say this without sounding too one-sided… Well OK, anyway. On the left it seems that there are values about democracy, right to disagree and that kind of stuff, that seems to be sort of anti-authority in a way.

And in that this sort of question of authority, one that perhaps connects technocracy and right-wing populism, is something that is missing on the left. And then it seems that left wing populism is something that we don't perhaps see that much.

[BB] I kind of feel talking about these things like we’re coming full circle. Like no matter how much you discuss these topics, we always get to the point where we are back at the concept from where we started, and kind of everything is this or nothing is that…

[TB] That's philosophy. [laughs]

[BB] Yeah, I think we're getting to the point of it. [laughs] So that's interesting.

[PA] So moving on to our now signature final questions. We like to ask you what book has influenced your thinking or is a favorite of yours for any reason and why? And it doesn't have to be an academic or in even a factual one.

[TB] Obviously, the first one that comes to mind is academic. I'm really inspired by Michel Foucault and his writings.

On this idea that doing philosophy can be historical. It can be about certain political moments and then trying to understand it and trying to make philosophical points and ask philosophical questions about power, knowledge, and so on. And that sort of seems to be what I'm doing in a way.

And then personally, I recently read this book, the Disaster Artist that’s a sort of biography about a film maker that makes this big cult film The Room. Basically one way to describe it is that it’s so terrible that it’s good.

And basically the book is about this director/writer/producer’s friend or roommate that then describes the whole process. And the reason why I'm fascinated by this is that it seems that there are these persons that are completely swept by their own idea of infallibility.

They have this sort of God complex that they can do everything and nothing can stand in their way, and they don't really listen to criticism or anything. The reason I'm interested in this person is not that I want to be inspired by them, but simply that this way of thinking seems to be so alien to me in a way. As somebody who works at the academia where almost everyone is suffering from this minor or major scale impostor syndrome.

[BB & PA in unison] Yeah, exactly.

[TB] It becomes so interesting to read about these characters. For example, the person that I've tried to organize the failed Fyre Festival or the person that tried to create or establish this blood sampling project, Theranos, and so on.

These persons that really do not see the reality in the same way that we do, and I find that utterly fascinating.

[BB] Maybe we could absorb some of their self-confidence for our academic impostor syndrome.

[PA & TB in unison] Not all of it, absolutely. Maybe a bit.

[TB] I mean, obviously there's the lesson in the story that seeing the potential threats... Because obviously if you don't, then you're gonna end up with utter disasters as these persons did.

But I mean, perhaps we can, you know, learn something, that you know believe in yourself. Because if these people believed in themselves, perhaps we are not…

[BB] We can do it too.

[TB] We’re probably not total frauds or anything.

[BB] Yeah, that's a good point. So, the next question. If you could go back in the history of humankind, where would you go and why?

[TB] This is such a difficult question, because obviously if you put out all of the implications that would you go and change something, but rather simply focus on like, what are the interesting periods…

Then to me, it seems that the 1990s were pretty interesting. In a way that we have the economic depression, fall of the Soviet Union, fall of the Berlin Wall, so called victory of liberalism, capitalism and so on.

And I think that during this period a lot of the ways in which we understand politics today, a lot of the ways in which we criticize politics today, comes from this experience from the 90s.

Some call it the post-political period. Some called it the reinvention of liberalism, the reinvention of capitalism and so on. I think that this period, the 90s in general, is a period when a lot of things that are still relevant today happened.

The advancement of the European Union, establishment of some of the instruments of the Monetary Union for example. And all this sort of coming in this decade or perhaps even the early 00s. That's, I would say, a really interesting period, one that I've not lived politically myself, because I was born in 1991. So my memories are a bit different.

Anyway, I think that the 90s have a lot of implications for today.

[BB] For sure, good answer. OK, so that was everything for today. Thanks Tuukka and Paolo. This was a pleasure and thanks to everyone who listened to us. And as I mentioned, you can follow us on the Eurostorie website. It's Eurostorie.org. And also on Twitter at EuroStorie or Facebook. We hope you give us feedback and let us know what you think. Thanks everyone, bye bye and see you next time.

[PA] Bye!

[TB] Bye bye, thank you.

[BB] The Centre of Excellence in law, identity and the European narratives is funded by the Academy of Finland. We would also like to thank Antonio Lopez Garcia for the jingle music.