Populism and the Mirror of Democracy

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

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Reading populism

It has become almost a cliché to start writing on populism by lamenting the lack of clarity about the concept and casting doubts about its usefulness for political analysis.[1] Populism is a contested concept and agreements on what it means and who qualifies as a populist are difficult because, unlike other equally contested concepts such as democracy, it has become an analytical attribution rather than a term with which most political actors would willingly identify.[2] But unless we perform a Brechtian gesture and abolish the people, populism is part of the modern political landscape and will remain so in the future. However, while there is no scholarly agreement on the meaning of populism, it is possible to identify an analytical core around which there is a significant degree of academic consensus. This core is both theoretically elegant and, as the contributions to this volume show, provides the basis for rich empirical analysis. After briefly surveying the main approaches to populism, I will present populism's analytical core in terms of three elements: a mode of identification, a process of naming and a dimension of politics. In the following sections, I look at the conditions of emergence of populism and address three key questions necessary for understanding it: Who are the people? Who speaks for the people? How does populist identification take place? I illustrate my arguments with

references to cases of populist politics from the contributors to this volume as well as examples taken from studies of populism in Latin America and elsewhere. I conclude this introduction with some reflections on the relations between politics, populism and democracy.

What is Populism?

There is little purpose in attempting to summarise the many studies of populism in the already vast academic literature on the topic. However, as part of the intellectual inquiry leading to the concept's analytical core it is important to distinguish between three ways of approaching populism, which in turn have significant internal variations. The purpose of this overview is not to look in detail at contending theories of populism, but rather to highlight the problems raised by the different approaches, as well as to draw attention to some shared assumptions that will be examined in more detail in the discussion of the concept's analytical core. For this purpose I will divide approaches to populism into three broad categories: a) empirical generalisations; b) historicist accounts; and c) (following Stavrakakis in Chapter 9, this volume) 'symptomatic readings'.

The empiricist approach looks at alleged cases of populism in an attempt to extract a set of positive definitional characteristics that could provide a distinctive group of attributes to characterise the phenomenon. One of the earliest examples of this approach is Peter Wiles' definition of populism that includes twenty-four different features, which unless we are told what their mutual relation is, makes the categorisation meaningless.[3] Other scholars list a more limited number of attributes and blend them together in a loosely descriptive definition, but the results are scarcely more illuminating.[4] Some empiricist studies of populism construct typologies of the concept. But while typologies have a useful role to play in political analysis, if they are not built up around a conceptual core they cannot account for the common element that binds together their otherwise heterogeneous elements. Most observers assume the common element to exist when they use the term populism but, for the most part,

they do so implicitly and intuitively rather than explicitly and analytically. Yet such assumptions are by no means self-evidently justifiable.[5]

A second approach consists in linking populism to a certain historical period, social formation, historical process or set of historical circumstances. Typical of the historicist reading is the vast literature on Latin American populism that restricts the term to the golden era of populist politics, spanning from the economic crisis of the 1930s to the demise of the import-substitution-industrialisation (ISI) model of development in the late 1960s. This approach stresses the close association between populist politics – as a class alliance under the leadership of a charismatic leader such as Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina, Getúlio Vargas in Brazil and Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico – and the ISI development strategy.[6] While the considerable number of populist regimes that were in power in the region over that period needs to be accounted for, this restricted interpretation of populism fails to justify its self-imposed narrow geographical and temporal limits, which exclude earlier and later cases of populism in Latin America and elsewhere.

In contrast with the previous approaches, a symptomatic reading of populism incorporates some of the features that characterise populism according to the empiricist and historicist approaches, but justifies their inclusion in terms of the concept's analytical core, based on the constitution of the people as a political actor.[7] This approach understands populism as an anti-status quo discourse that simplifies the political space by symbolically dividing society between 'the people' (as the 'underdogs') and its 'other'.[8] Needless to say, the identity of both 'the people' and 'the other' are political constructs, symbolically constituted through the relation of antagonism, rather than sociological categories. Antagonism is thus a mode of identification in which the relation between its form (the people as signifier) and its content (the people as signified) is given by the very process of naming – that is, of establishing who the enemies of the people (and therefore the people itself) are. An anti-status quo dimension is essential to populism, as the full constitution of popular identities necessitates the political defeat of 'the other' that is deemed to oppress or exploit the people and therefore to impede

its full presence. The specific content of a given populist appeal varies in accordance with the different ways this antagonistic relationship is defined. The '*other*', in opposition to 'the people', can be presented in political or economic terms or as a combination of both, signifying 'the oligarchy', 'the politicians', a dominant ethnic or religious group, the 'Washington insiders', 'the plutocracy' or any other group that prevents the people achieving plenitude. The antagonism between the *people* and its *other* and the promise of plenitude once the enemy is vanquished is neatly presented in the following popular song, sung in Peru by supporters of Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (APRA), one of Latin America's historic populist parties:

> Aprista forever forward
> Aprista we must fight
> The oligarchy will eventually be defeated
> And there will be happiness in our motherland[9]

Populism is thus a mode of identification available to any political actor operating in a discursive field in which the notion of the sovereignty of the people and its inevitable corollary, the conflict between the powerful and the powerless, are core elements of its political imaginary.[10] As Ross Perot put it, with striking clarity, 'We [the people]'re the owners of this country...', a statement echoed with a more rhetorical flourish by Venezuela's leader Hugo Chávez: 'I declare the people to be the only and the true owners of their sovereignty. I declare the Venezuelan people the true owners of their own history.'[11]

The notion of the *sovereign people* as an actor in an antagonistic relation with the established order, as the core element of populism, has a long tradition in the writings on the topic. Edward Shils claimed that populism involves subscription to two cardinal principles: the notion of the supremacy of the will of the people, and the notion of the direct relationship between people and the government.[12] Elaborating on Shils' insights, Peter Worsley summarised this commonality when he noted that, at its very loosest, the term 'populism' had been used to describe

any movement invoking the name of the people.[13] More recently, Margaret Canovan advances a definition of populism that shares with Worsley, Shils and Laclau the claim that the constitution of popular identities is at the heart of the populist appeal, by arguing that populism in modern democratic societies 'is best seen as an appeal to "the people" against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of society.'[14]

The populists' claim to embody the will of the people is hardly new or original. Notions of 'the people' and of popular sovereignty are at the heart of the narratives of political modernity and, as Canovan notes, are related to key questions about the meaning and nature of democracy. Moreover, in modern politics almost every political speech appeals to the people or claims to speak for the people, which could make it impossible to distinguish populist from non-populist political entities. But if we want to remain within a non-essentialist notion of populism we need to agree that 'the people' has no fixed referent or essential meaning, which amounts to concurring with the Humpty Dumpty-like assertion that the term means what its users choose it to mean.[15] However, to claim that 'the people' has no ultimate meaning or fixed referent is not the same as saying that it has no meaning at all. Rather, it is to argue that its meaning is constituted by the very process of naming or, as Oscar Reyes puts it in Chapter 4, that it is determined by a process of naming that retro-actively determines its meaning.

Worsley notes that appeals to the people *embrace and wean from existing attachments* 'workers, peasant/farmers, micro-entrepreneurs, tribesmen; anyone small, threatened, xenophobic [...] offering to all these a *new* communal transectional identity [...] *the Volk*'.[16] This double process of de-identification and re-identification – Worsley's 'embracing and weaning' – is central for the constitution of collective identities. Chantal Mouffe (Chapter 2) highlights the centrality of antagonism in the process of deconstruction and reconstruction of identities when she claims – against all those who believe that politics can be reduced to individual motivations and is driven by the pursuit of self-interest – the populists are well aware that politics always consists of the creation of

an 'Us' versus a 'Them'. In its extreme form, antagonism may include an element of physical violence. In his analysis of Palestinian nationalism Glenn Bowman (Chapter 5) shows how violence plays a constitutive role in the formation of nationalist identities. But antagonism is not necessarily about physical violence or even the threat of violence. Rather, it is a mode of identification. As Ernesto Laclau argues in Chapter 1, the constitution of the political frontier between the underdogs and the powerful requires that the particularities that make up the signifier 'the people' become elements in a chain of equivalences in which they only have in common the relation of antagonism itself. In other words, we can only name the people by naming its *other* because, paraphrasing Bowman, in oppressing all of them, the oppressor simultaneously renders all of them 'the same'.

The constitutive role of antagonism in processes of identification can be illustrated by the events of September 11, 2001. The inhabitants of the US are deeply fragmented by race, class, gender, religion and other markers of identity. Prior to September 11, they were also deeply divided politically, following an election that raised serious questions about the legitimacy of George W. Bush's victory. However, the terrorist attack of September 11 temporarily suspended the web of differences that traverse American society and made the people of the US identify themselves as 'Americans' – that is, as a single people threatened (in this case) by a violent external enemy. It would be wrong, however, to equate the appalling physical violence of the 9/11 attack with the constitution of a relation of antagonism. The attack itself was a material event that only acquired its meaning by being placed within a certain discursive framework in which the relation of antagonism was constituted. It was not the planes crashing into the World Trade Center but President Bush's famous 'Either you are with us, or with the terrorists' that crystallised this antagonism. In his dichotomisation of the political space Bush erased all internal differences among the US people and constituted them into a collective 'Us' against a 'Terrorist Other'. In this formulation, the positive value of the 'Us' derives not so much from the normative opposition between 'us and them' but from the abstract

in the actual naming of the 'them' as the terrorists, Terror, and not any 'them', is the normative constitutive outside of Bush's 'Us'.

The process of naming – Bush's 'Us'– did not create an American people out of a blank canvass, as obviously there was an American identity before September 11. As Sebastián Barros (Chapter 10) puts it, novelty is never completely new but always bears the traces of the relative structurality of the dislocated order, which sets up its conditions of production and reception. While US society was subject to different forms of fragmentation and dislocation prior to September 11 it was nonetheless a society in which social relations structured relatively stable identities. This means that Bush's process of constituting the 'Us' of American identity was partially grounded in existing forms of American patriotism and previous versions of what it is to be American. And yet, Bush's naming was not just the retrieving of an already fully constituted identity. It also redefined what the meaning of being American is. As he put it in his State of the Union address of January 2002, perhaps unaware of the full implications of his remark: *'Yet after America was attacked, it was as if our entire country looked into a mirror and saw our better selves.'* He was, of course, the one holding the mirror for the people to identify with and to make sense of 9/11. And he used the mirror of identification to redefine what it means to be American. Remarkably for a right-wing individualist, Bush's American people embraced collective goals and self-sacrifice in a way reminiscent of Kennedy's phrase, much maligned by the libertarian right, 'Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.'

We were reminded that we are citizens, with obligations to each other, to our country, and to history. We began to think less of the goods we can accumulate, and more about the good we can do. For too long our culture has said, 'If it feels good, do it.' Now America is embracing a new ethic and a new creed: 'Let's roll!' In the sacrifice of soldiers, the fierce brotherhood of firefighters, and the bravery and generosity of ordinary citizens, we have glimpsed what a new culture of responsibility could look like. We want to be a nation that serves goals larger than self.[17]

The collective 'Us' named by Bush was pregnant with ambiguity, as it begs the question of whom he was talking about when he divided the political space between 'them and us'. Did the 'Us' refer to the American people? And if so, to all of them or just some of them? Did it include non-American people? And if so, who were these others? The West? Those who share American values? Those who, irrespectively of their values, are against terrorism? Similar questions arise about the terrorist 'them-other'. The ambiguity of the expression overflowed the 'with us or against us' divide with a richness of meaning. However, Bush fixed the significance of the events of September 11 within a certain ideological tradition. By claiming that the event was the work of evil people and an attack against freedom, he crystallised the meaning of 9/11 in terms of a moral absolute that identified America as the incarnation of freedom, the master signifier of America's political discourse.[18] The constitutive force of Bush's signification of 9/11 as an attack on freedom was reinforced rather than diminished by his use of the term 'freedom'.[19] For the American people, traumatised by the attack, it provided a simple answer to the complex question of why the attack and why them.

Does Bush's constitution of a discursive antagonism between 'them and us' make him a populist? A non-essentialist reading of populism mixes awkwardly with attempts at labelling certain parties or politicians as 'populists', although in practice it is hard not to do so. Populism refers to modes of identification rather than to individuals or parties. As Michael Kazin put it, the use of the term 'populist' should be understood not to signify that his subjects *were* populists, in the way they were unionists or socialists, liberal Democrats or conservative Republicans, but rather that all these people employed populism as a flexible mode of persuasion to redefine the people and their adversaries.[20] And to say mode of persuasion is also to say mode of identification, because one is no longer 'the same person' after having been persuaded of a certain proposition.[21]

The 'other' of Bush's war on terrorism refers to a mainly external enemy defined in terms of evilness, rather than as the oppressor of the American people, but, as noted above, its ultimate meaning is never

clear. The search for alleged terrorists inside the US, the suspicions aroused by Arab Americans, the calls to the people to be vigilant at home, and the detention without trial of American residents as virtual prisoners of war suggest that there is indeed an enemy within. There may be no traces in Bush's discourse of the conflict between the people and the privileged few, which would mark it as a populist mode of identification. But in his speeches about September 11 there are plenty of appeals to ordinary Americans as a virtuous people, which is part of the country's populist tradition.[22] And while 'the people' may be an empty signifier that has no fixed signified, as Joseph Lowndes puts it in Chapter 6, it always evokes the traces of a certain content shaped by language and history.

The conditions of emergence of populism

Populist practices emerge out of the failure of existing social and political institutions to confine and regulate political subjects into a relatively stable social order. It is the language of politics when there can be no politics as usual: a mode of identification characteristic of times of unsettlement and de-alignment, involving the radical redrawing of social borders along lines other than those that had previously structured society. It is a political appeal that seeks to change the terms of political discourse, articulate new social relations, redefine political frontiers and constitute new identities.

To explore further the process by which populist politics can take hold of a political formation it is necessary to look at Laclau's notion of a 'chain of equivalences' and at Worsley's 'weaning and embracing' identities. Laclau (Chapter 1) argues that the condition leading to a populist rupture is a situation in which a plurality of demands coexists with an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them. In this process, a populist identity emerges out of the dislocation of the specific identities of the holders of particularistic demands (neighbours, workers, peasants, the unemployed, women, ethnic groups, etc.) and their reconstitution in the imaginary unity of the people.

The image of a chain of unfulfilled demands implies the notion of politically mobilised actors advancing their demands against a political system that is unwilling or unable to address them. Thus, the notion of unmet demands presupposes an already existing political identity – however precarious and incomplete this may be – upon which the demands can be predicated, as their holders need to know who they are in order to know what they want that cannot be provided by the system. The process that transforms these demands into an antagonistic relation with the established order thus becomes an aggregation of discontents that crystallises in a new popular identity.

It is possible, however, to radicalise Laclau's arguments about the constitutive nature of representation by arguing, as Reyes (Chapter 4) does, that the demands are constructed by the other, by desire and identification. At their most radical, populist practices operate within a social space in which people have grievances, desires, needs and wants that have not yet been constituted as political demands or, to put it in another way, people do not know how to name what they are lacking.[23] In his study of Peronism, Alejandro Groppo cites old Peronist militants' claims that Perón 'awoke the workers' and that Perón awarded the workers some welfare benefits which 'the workers had never even dreamt about'.[24] A superficial reading of these quotes would take them as an example of the paternalistic, top-down nature of populism. And yet, as Groppo points out, it is possible to interpret the workers' words as signifying a political relation in which private wants and needs were transformed into public demands by the leader's action of bringing them into public discourse. As Howard Gardner put it, the leader who will succeed is the one who best senses and delivers what an audience already desires.[25] This rapport is exemplified by Steve Stein when he says that Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, the founder and historical leader of Peru's APRA, 'served as supreme interpreter and director [in the words of an Aprista publication] of the vague and imprecise desires of the multitude'.[26]

The metaphor of awakening suggests a dormant identity that was 'already there', but the 'awakening' can be best understood as the

constitution of new political identities and the politicisation of issues that had previously not been part of the political agenda. Thus, populism is not just about a crisis of representation in which people are weaned off their old identities and embrace a new 'popular' one. It is also about the beginning of representation, allowing those who have never been represented because of their class, religion, ethnicity or geographical location, to be acknowledged as political actors. Populist leaders appeal to both the never-enfranchised and the newly disenfranchised, but there is no populist leadership unless there is a successful constitution of new identities and of a representative link with those identities. In both cases we are dealing with new relations of representation that become possible because of dislocations of the existing political order.

Traditionally, failures of representation are characteristics of times of political, cultural, social and economic upheaval, as it is at these times that previously relatively stable relations of representation and subordination become unsettled and dealigned, and thus open to new forms of identification. Without seeking to make a comprehensive typology of the conditions of emergence of populist politics, below are some of the circumstances in which relations of representation become dislocated and populism is more likely to become a dominant mode of identification.[27]

The first is a breakdown of social order and the loss of confidence in the political system's ability to restore it. Typical of these situations are economic crises manifested in phenomena such as hyperinflation. Economic crises are always about more than economics. Hyperinflation brought Hitler to power in Weimar Germany, as it did for populist politicians elsewhere, because money is a crucial institution of modern societies, articulating social relations and symbolising national identities. High inflation produces deep social dislocations as it affects notions of social time and disrupts the myriad collective and individual relations that depend on monetary exchanges. Incomes and jobs are obliterated, and the economy becomes de-institutionalised as its mooring in the national currency, the tax system and other public institutions – including the political system – is dangerously loosened.[28] Breakdowns of social order can also be produced by civil wars, ethnic conflicts or natural

catastrophes. But crises are often a combination of the economic and the political. These circumstances can be exemplified by the conjuncture in which Alberto Fujimori won the Peruvian election in 1990. At the time of the election, hyperinflation and the activities of the Shining Path guerrilla group produced a breakdown of social order that affected all sectors of Peruvian society. It was in this conjuncture of extreme political and economic instability that the figure of Fujimori emerged. As John Crabtree notes, Fujimori was the product of a desperate situation in which the alternatives appeared so much less attractive. He was not chosen by the electorate because of his political programme – he made few specific promises – but because he presented himself as a complete outsider with no links with the political establishment.[29]

A second situation is the exhaustion of political traditions and the discrediting of political parties. Allegations of corruption, malpractice or, more generally, the control of public life by a non-accountable and self-serving political elite are typical of the situation in which populism takes the form of the 'politics of anti-politics', as politicians and political parties become the 'other' of the people. In these circumstances traditional ideological templates such as left and right lose their power to organise political discourse, and parties that may have been in office for a long time are swept from power. An example of this phenomenon is the dismissal of the *partidocracia* in Venezuela, where the discrediting of Acción Democrática (AD) and Copei, the two political parties that had dominated Venezuelan politics for the second half of the past century, led to their collapse and the electoral victory of former military officer Hugo Chávez in December 1998. In Europe, corruption scandals effectively finished off the Christian Democrat and Socialist parties' political machines in Italy, and allowed the emergence of Silvio Berlusconi; and – as Chantal Mouffe shows in Chapter 2 – the voters' rejection of the Social Democratic and Conservative Parties' colonisation of the Austrian state was behind the rise of Jörg Haider's Freedom Party.

A third circumstance favouring the emergence of populist politics are changes at the level of the economy, culture and society, such as processes

of urbanisation and economic modernisation, shifts in the demographic balance between social classes, and between regional and ethnic groups, as well as, more recently, globalisation. Social turmoil and social mobility alter established identities, loosen traditional relations of subordination and open up new forms of identification. Not by chance were the 1930s and 1990s characterised by a flourishing of populist politics in Latin America, since these decades saw radical transformations in the region's models of development. In 1930s Argentina, a new working class composed of migrants from the rural provinces to the new industries in cities such as Buenos Aires and Rosario became the social base of Peronism in the 1940s. A similar process took place in Brazil over the same period. In the 1990s, economic liberalisation went hand in hand with populist politics in a number of Latin American countries, including Argentina, Brazil and Peru. But as Kurt Weyland suggests, in contrast to the 1930s and 1940s, in this case it was the growing urban informal sector rather than the shrinking industrial working class that provided the social bases for the new breed of populist leaders.[30] For instance, Alberto Fujimori's electoral triumph has been linked to the decline in the Lima-based white *criollo* establishment historically represented by Peru's traditional parties, and the emergence of new groups of rural migrants who have adopted urban ways, and a new 'mestizo' middle class.[31]

Finally, populist politics are also linked to the emergence of forms of political representation outside traditional political institutions. The emergence of the radio as a form of mass communication was associated with the first wave of populist leaders in Latin America and elsewhere. In Brazil, Getúlio Vargas used a radio programme, 'A Voz do Brasil', broadcast daily by a national network of radio stations, to appeal to the Brazilian people in a country that had very few means of national integration at that time. The ghost of Citizen Kane in the US and, more recently, Ross Perot's hugely successful 'infomercials' show that the mass media is also a powerful vehicle for populist politics in a country of continental size such as the US. And in Europe the rise of Pim Fortuyn in Holland was linked to his popularity as a TV social commentator.

Who are the people?

The people that is immortal will rebel energetically, drawing from within the all-conquering intelligence and the strong and vengeful arm ... Let the people be, do not obstruct her and do not fear her excesses. The people in its fury is like the Nile, it overflows but then it fertilises.[32]

Political and economic crises do not necessarily lead to populist politics. Other outcomes are possible under conditions of crisis, such as authoritarian governments, military dictatorships or the renewal of political institutions.[33] Populism is more than just a response to a political breakdown: it is an ingrained feature of the way in which politics is conducted, derived from the gap that exists between leaders and the led and the difficulties encountered by political organisations in mediating between them effectively.[34] However, crises of representation open up the possibility of the emergence of modes of identification that seek to bridge the gap between representatives and the represented in the name of the people.

But who are the people? And how does a fragmented and divided society become 'one people'? The question has received a variety of answers through history that are at the heart of issues of sovereignty and democracy. Tracing back the imaginary constitution of the people to early political modernity, François-Xavier Guerra notes that in the early nineteenth century the people were imagined as a living entity that 'spoke', 'wanted' or 'acted' in a unanimous way, either through particular spokesmen or by its own actions. These imaginary-real people were seen as oppressed by the powerful and prevented by them from airing their grievances, so that most of the time it remained unheard except when it burst into history, often in a brutal and uncontrolled way.[35]

As a social category the people were identified as the plebs, el vulgo, the populace, that is, as the lowest sectors of society defined in terms of their intellectual, cultural and socio-economic inferiority in relation to civilised society. This multitude, akin to il popolo minuto of medieval Italian towns, was constituted by the inhabitants of the urban slums, craftsmen, those

performing menial jobs, the unemployed and those engaged in petty crime. With no formal education or political rights, this underclass erupted into political life as actors in sporadic uprisings and brutal and often unpredictable riots. Characteristically, these uprisings were perceived as events in which emotions and passions threatened not just public order but also the rationality and manners of civilised society that underpinned order. Thus, in the nineteenth century the dividing line between this dangerous and unpredictable mob and the men of good standing was often construed as the divide between civilisation and barbarism.

With the democratisation of political life there was a fundamental shift in the imagining of the people. Under democracy, the people came to be identified as the holders of sovereignty and the term became coextensive with the citizen. However, traces of the original image of the people as dangerous and irrational plebs still resonate in late modern politics, in an uneasy articulation with that of holders of democratic rights. Thus, the people of the populist imaginary can be both dangerous and noble. As Michelet points out, the people embodies two treasures: 'first is the virtue of sacrifice, and second the instinctual ways of life that are more precious than all the sophisticated knowledge of the so-called cultured men'.[36] Talking about the US populist tradition, Kazin notes that it involves the belief that 'virtue resides in the simple people, who are the overwhelming majority, and in their collective traditions'.[37] In contrast, analyses of populism rooted in theoretical traditions as different as Marxism and modernisation theory have often stressed the lower qualities of the followers of populism. So, for instance, Gino Germani, an exponent of the latter, attributes the rise of Peronism in the 1940s to an expression of the irrationality of the newly mobilised, politically inexperienced and uneducated masses.[38]

Those with first-hand experience of the eruption of the people onto the political scene have often expressed the fears raised within the establishment by the actions of the mobilised people. Referring to the birth of populism in Peru in 1930, during which working-class people staged demonstrations and riots that destroyed the residences of some prominent persons, army general and future president Oscar Benavides

wrote: 'Unfortunately it appears as if a streak of ignorance, of madness, has invaded us, wresting from us our innermost feelings of nationality'; while another conservative commentator noted that 'the very bases of civilised life threaten to disappear'.[39]

Both lewd and virtuous, both irrational and an embodiment of the nation's true values, both a threat to democracy and the holders of sovereignty, contested and often mutually contradictory visions of the people determine the political terrain in which populist politics battles with its double and redefine who are 'the people' and what are their role in society. The social makeup of the people in different populist politics is diverse. The people of populist politics are not necessarily the poor, and have little to do with Marxist notions of class alliances against the economically dominant class. They are those who consider themselves as disenfranchised and excluded from public life.

In the American populist tradition — both in its early progressive version and the later conservative one — the people were identified with the ordinary (white) working man. In Canada, as David Laycock puts it in Chapter 7, they are ordinary, hard-working Canadians who have financed an unfairly re-distributive and freedom-denying regulatory welfare state. In mid-twentieth-century Latin America they were the new industrial working class and national entrepreneurs, and in its late-twentieth-century version, which associated populism with neoliberal economics, they were the unemployed and self-employed of the urban informal sector. In apartheid South Africa the people were the disenfranchised black majority, and in its post-apartheid society they were the alienated whites of Eugene Terreblanche. In Greece, they were those that identified themselves with the orthodox religious tradition (see Stavrakakis Chapter 9), while in contemporary western Europe they are often the same working-class people that voted Communist or socialist in the past.

At the heart of populist identification is an image of the fullness of the people, which is always incomplete, achieved by the exclusion of an outside that can never be fully vanquished. As Ernesto Laclau points out in Chapter 1, populism depends not only on a sense of internal homogeneity, but

also on a constitutive outside – a threatening heterogeneity against which the identity is formed. The 'other' of populist identities is as diverse as the identity of the people of which it is the outside: Washington insiders and financier plutocrats epitomised the enemy of the people for America's conservative populism, as much as the threat from the black ghetto and the so-called liberal establishment. The landed elite and foreign interests represented the enemy of the people in classic Latin American populism, and corrupt politicians became its other in its late-twentieth-century version. Special interests, minority groups and rights movements such as feminists and environmentalists are the other of the people in the discourse of the Canadian right. Welfare recipients, immigrants, criminals, asylum seekers and the techno-bureaucracy of the European Union are the constitutive enemies of the people for right-wing European populists.

Political battles between the 'us and them' of populist politics involve struggles to fix and unhinge the divides that constitute populist identities, and set up new political frontiers. These battles are as much against the 'other' of the people that prevents populist identity from achieving complete fullness as they are against the enemy within, which seeks to divide the popular field or set up alternative claims to represent the people. But when the political frontier between the people and their 'other' breaks down, the previous dichotomist division of the political space ceases to operate, and a number of alternatives become possible: a system of differences may develop within which a plurality of identities becomes institutionalised in a renewed pluralist political system; alternatively, a redefinition of the populist antagonism can also emerge along different lines. For instance, in Bolivia, ethnic groups that were subsumed into a unified image of the people identified by a white or mestizo political leadership in early versions of Latin American populism have in its later versions used their own cultural and ethnic differences as raw materials for the constitution of new populist identities based on ethnic identification. Finally, the dissolution of populist identities can lead to the atomisation of social identities and a collapse of all relations of representation.[40]

Who speaks for the people?

I am a little of all of you
Hugo Chávez, President of Venezuela[41]

Most studies of populism regard the populist leader as an essential element of the concept. Arguably, populism does not necessarily depend on the existence of a leader. Populist parties have survived the death of their leader, as in the case of the Justicialista (Peronist) party in Argentina. In these circumstances, populism becomes a tradition embedded in the party's myths, institutions and official discourse. However, more than a quarter of a century after his death, the figure of Perón still constitutes the myth that binds the party together, and although we can talk of populist parties, governments and regimes, it is mostly the relation between the leader and his/her followers that gives populist politics its distinct mode of identification.

Populist leaders share with the broader category of *caudillos* and other types of similarly strong, personalist leaders a style of politics based on the prevalence of personal allegiances and top-down representation over party support and institutional debate. In common with *caudillos*, and in contrast with the political forms of liberal democracy based on strong institutions and checks and balances, populist leaders are a disturbing intrusion into the uneasy articulation of liberalism and democracy, and raise the spectre of a tyranny with popular support. As Juan Pablo Lichtmajer put it in relation to *caudillismo*, populist leaders establish a relationship with their followers that goes against republican forms of political identification. Whereas the latter allegedly emerge out of a rational identification with the universal institutions of the republic, the former is associated with an irrational, instinctive and spontaneous identification with the strong leader.[42]

The following excerpt from the 1944 manifesto of Ecuador's Liberal party attacking populist leader José María Velasco Ibarra conveys widely shared assumptions about the archaic and backward nature of the *caudillos*:

The times are not made for idolatry. They cannot be because the time for providential men has gone away. The true statesman that embodies principles, personifies collective aspirations and synthesises ideals has replaced the demagogue and the caudillo. The organisation of political parties as orienting forces of political life of nations implies the extinction of old-fashioned personalistic forms of government.[43]

And yet, against the assumptions of political modernisers, populist leaders are not anachronistic figures to be superseded by the political institutions and rational debate of modern democracy. Mouffe's chapter in this volume traces the rise of populism in contemporary Europe and analyses its very modern conditions of emergence. And as Arditi, following Manin, suggests in Chapter 3, in contemporary 'audience democracy' the populist mode of representation becomes more salient due to the personalisation of the link between candidates and voters, rather than being an awkward anachronism. In short, populism is here to stay.[44]

The attribution to the leader of ill-defined charismatic powers is a common feature of the analysis of populism. However, an historical study of some of the most prominent populist leaders would show that most of them were neither particularly charismatic nor necessarily budding tyrants. Rather, the figure of the leader functions as a signifier to which a multiplicity of meanings can be attributed or, as Jason Glynos put it, as an enigma that promises meaning: the promise of a fully reconciled people.[45] In other words, if populism can be redefined as a process of naming that retroactively determines what is the name of 'the people', the name that best fills the symbolic void through which identification takes place is that of the leader himself.

The leader's populist enigma is never more evident than when he is physically absent because of exile or other reasons, as has been the case of many populist leaders, including Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador, Haya de la Torre in Peru, and Perón in Argentina. In the leader's absence, his/her return becomes a longing that crystallises every political demand as the return of the leader carries with it a promise of redemption. In his

absence, the leader's political message becomes a floating signifier as every utterance, letter or statement becomes open to conflicting interpretations by his followers, while the authority of the absent enunciator cannot be used to fix its 'true meaning'.

In Ecuador the exiled former President Velasco Ibarra came to be known as the 'Great Absentee' (*El Gran Ausente*). From exile, he became the candidate of a broad alliance of political groups with conflicting ideologies and interests, which was possible because the return of the exiled Velasco came to embody the solution to all the country's problems. Meanwhile in Perú, Haya de la Torre referred to his long period in exile in the following terms:

I waited eight years in persecution, in prison, and in exile. Eight years of solitude which were eight years of unflagging determination. Often I was alone. Often I knew the tremendous reality *of being misunderstood and forgotten*. But I never faltered. The decision to conquer, in spite of all obstacles, I never abandoned for a single day.[46]

The physical presence of the leader does not necessarily make populist discourse less ambiguous or less open to conflicting interpretations. People identify with a leader chiefly through the stories he or she relates not only with words but, more broadly, by the use of symbols, including the leader's own body and personal life. As in any other political narrative, the narrative of populism articulates a variety of myths, symbols, ideological themes and rational arguments, telling its audience where the people come from, how to make sense of their present condition, and offering a path towards a better future. The ultimate impact of the leader's appeal depends on the particular story that he/she relates or embodies, and the audience's reception to the story.

At the heart of populist narratives is populism's relation with the political. Populism both depoliticises and hyper-politicises social relations. To this effect, the populist leader often places him/herself symbolically outside the political realm, by claiming that he/she is not a

politician, or at least that he/she is 'not a politician like the others'. The construction of the leader as an outsider has little to do with his/her political career or institutional position. Jorge Pacheco Areco, president of Uruguay in the late 1960s, addressed the citizens in the following way after several years in office as president:

I am not a politician, at least not in the common sense of the term. I am a man who fights with all his force against everything which is not in the national interest.

...

Mine is the conduct of the affairs of the state, mine are the decisions which I have been taking – frequently and alone – to defend you from violence, inflation and the country's international discredit and economic delinquency.

...

Today I came to tell you that, more than ever, I regard myself as responsible not just for leading the nation towards peace and well-being but also that, without any intermediary, I intend with renewed vigour to bring forward the solutions required by the new circumstances.[48]

Through his metaphorical loneliness, Pacheco placed himself discursively outside the political system and in direct relationship ('*without any intermediary*') with the people. Politics is what traditional politicians do. The politicians, all except him, even politics as such, are not geared towards the fight against 'everything that is not in the national interest'.

The leader's personal qualities straddle the personal/political divide. As a political figure who seeks to be at the same time one of the people and their leader, the populist leader appears as an ordinary person with extraordinary attributes. Successes in business or other private pursuits are used to legitimise the leader's political persona by showing that his or her qualities are both different to and more valuable than those of ordinary politicians. As an outsider who has 'made it', the leader's journey to political leadership is not different to that of ordinary people who, through their efforts and endeavours, made it to the top of society. Ross

Perot's image as a folk billionaire is a case in point. His personal biography embodied the American Dream that any ordinary citizen can improve their lot in life through hard work and determination.[49] In a very different context, in Ecuador, Abdalá Bucaram presented himself as a person from a humble background, who belonged to the people and was discriminated against by the elites because he was the son of Lebanese immigrants. However, Bucaram sought to make clear that even if he was of the people, he was much more than the people. In his books, speeches and interviews Bucaram narrated in detail how his humble social origins had not prevented him from becoming a successful lawyer, politician and businessman, thus presenting himself as proof that ordinary people can achieve wealth and power in spite of the opposition of the establishment.[50]

In populist discourse, politics and political parties are often considered as divisive institutions that should be eliminated, or at least purified of factions and particularistic interests, to allow the people to become united. Institutions, parties and established politicians that pretend to represent the people muffle the voices they claim to represent and betray their followers. In contrast, the leader claims to have a direct rapport with the people that allows him to advance their interests without becoming prisoner to the powerful. Ross Perot highlights this condition as follows:

> The principle that separates me [from other presidential candidates] is that five and one-half million people came together on their own and put me on the ballot. I was not put on the ballot by either of the two parties, by any PAC money, by any foreign lobbyist money, by any special interest money. This is a movement that came from the people. This is the way the framers of the Constitution intended our government to be, a government that comes from the people.[51]

In order to talk politics while denouncing it as a dirty game, the populist leader often substitutes political discourse for the discourse of morals, and uses universal abstractions to contrast the high moral grounding of

his/her message with the corruption and betrayal of the political establishment. Moral divides also disqualify political adversaries, without leaving room for legitimate dissent. But moral universals acquire a different meaning by their articulation with political signifiers. The populist appeal of Greece's Archbishop Christodoulos (see Stavrakakis, Chapter 9) was based on his articulation of a religious and a nationalist discourse, in which religion defines the national identity. But lay politicians likewise appeal to lofty universals to make political points. Here is Ecuador's Velasco Ibarra:

> All of you, in this solemn moment of the nation's history, are showing the world that the material is only a transitory aspect of the life of man; that which is eternal is the striving for moral greatness, for progress and for liberty.[52]

Against the corruption of politics, populism offers a promise of emancipation after a journey of sacrifice. For instance, Haya de la Torre's speeches included themes of agony, martyrdom and regeneration, blood and purification. Suffering was the source of the spiritual energy that could transform what was corrupt and of a material nature into a superior moral being. In Haya's own words:

> We must not forget that the Aprista has to suffer to be strong. We must not forget that in the Peruvian case we struggle against barbarism, against a caste sick with hatred, envy, old age, and lack of culture that sees with disdain the rise of a superior, austere, united, and young force.[53]

Identification, however, is not a process in which the leader interpellates a passive addressee. As Gardener notes, the audience is not simply a blank slate waiting for the first, or for the best, story to be etched on its virginal tablet. The stories of the leader must compete with many other extant stories and if the new stories are to succeed, they must transplant, suppress, complement, or in some measures, outweigh the earlier story as well as contemporary oppositional counterstories.[54]

The singer [Abdalá Bucaram, a presidential candidate in Ecuador in 1996, who used to sing popular songs in his political rallies] gathered all the filth from the most pestilent sewers to throw them at the face of its audience with no other intention than to perform a spectacle.[55]

The populist gaze

It has been claimed that populist leaders manipulate their followers, blinding them to their true interests by a mixture of propaganda and charisma. And yet manipulation and ignorance are often in the eyes of the critic. As was suggested above, the other side of populism's depoliticisation of the political is the hyper-politicisation of social relations. Populism blurs the public–private dividing line and brings into the political realm both individual and collective desires that previously had no place in public life. If the feminist movement shifted the public–private divide by claiming that the personal is political, populism erases it by making the political personal and incorporating into public life issues that were left outside the political realm by the hegemonic discourse: 'The success of Bucaram's electoral style was explained by his politicisation of everyday interactions. Many voted for him to reject the politicisation of their bosses. They also voted for a candidate that symbolised plebeian culture and mannerisms.'[56] In some cases of populist politics the erosion of the divide between the personal and the political takes the form of relations of patronage and subordination:

Sánchez Cerro, on the other hand, generally avoided references to recognised occupational or social categories, emphasising instead his one-to-one commitment to each and every Peruvian ... The masses' identification with the cholo candidate [Sánchez Cerro], in turn, helped to convey a fundamental theme of his campaign: potential supporters could approach Sánchez Cerro personally to ask for individual favours.[57]

Relations of patronage are contingent and by no means characteristic of all cases of populism. However, even in those cases in which patronage

is part of the populist mode of identification, the relation of exchange between the leader and his/her followers entails more than the subordination of the client to the patron. Personal needs are met by the mediation of the leader rather than as a matter of rights, but patronage exchanges are often invested with an element of social justice. A brief analysis of the testimony of Julio Rocha, an eighty-five-year-old follower of Haya de la Torre, illustrates the articulation of the personal and the political in the populist mode of identification. Asked why he was a follower of Haya, Rocha answered:

The reason is the affection, the love and the care he has had for all of us. [He is] a gentleman that has shown appreciation for everybody, from the lowest person to the highly placed and from the highly placed to the lowest, from the millionaire to the poor. Not everybody does this. In the public meetings, for instance, at the very least he shook your hand and this showed such kindly affection ... [We follow him] because of this and at the same time because of the struggle he brought to us, to elevate ourselves a little, to make us aware of our human rights, of the rights that we all ought to have.[58]

Notable here is the erosion of the dividing line between the personal and the political, as it is both Haya's personal love and affection *and* his bringing the struggle to the workers to make them aware of their rights that are cited by Rocha as the reasons for his identification with Haya. Personal and political dignity (recognition) are inseparable in Rocha's narrative, as in many other accounts of populist identification. In a context in which the divide between the elite and the lower sectors of society was as deep as in Peru in the 1930s, the rituals of everyday life exchanges between members of the elite and the people reinforced the markers of subordination. Within this context the typical politician's gesture of shaking hands with ordinary people acquired a different dimension from the routine nature of the gesture in more equal societies: it became a marker of political equality and personal recognition. However, Rocha was not a politically naïve person who could be

contented with empty gestures. He had been a trade unionist before Haya came to public life. He continued to fight for the rights of the Peruvian people under his leadership, and he stressed the fight for workers' rights that was part of Haya's political campaign.

As noted above, a key element in many accounts of populist identification is the dignity and recognition that the leader brings to his/her followers. As a Brazilian worker wrote to President Vargas of Brazil in 1939, in contrast with his predecessor, who looked down on the workers, Vargas had acknowledged that they were 'worthy people' and 'legitimate sons of Brazil', and he had granted them 'wise and patriotic laws'. In other words, Vargas had for the first time in Brazil's history imbued the workers with personal dignity and political legitimacy, as well as passing legislation to advance their interests.[59] As was said of the relation of Ecuador's Velasco Ibarra to his followers, 'He made them feel important, like participants in charting Ecuador's destinies.'[60]

While material concessions are an important element for the identification of the leader with his followers, the symbolic dimension of the process cannot be separated from its material elements. Slavoj Žižek notes that imaginary identification is identification with the image in which we appear likeable to ourselves. Žižek points out that the trait by which we identify with someone is by no means necessarily a glamorous feature. This trait can also be a certain failure, weakness or even the guilt of the other, so that by pointing out the failure we can unwittingly reinforce the identification.[61] Identification with an apparent failure of the other explains why it is that the more their adversaries demonise the populist leaders, the more it usually reinforces the people's identification with them.

Identification is strengthened by the leader's adoption of cultural elements that are considered markers of inferiority by the dominant culture. In the US, George Wallace purposely mispronounced words to create an image of an uneducated hillbilly, a trait that highlighted both his distance from the centres of power and his proximity to the people (see Chapter 6). From Perón's vindication of the shirtless – los descamisados – in contrast to the suited followers of his country's traditional parties, to the

wearing in public space of the traditional pollera (clothing associated with indigenous women) by Remedios Loza, a congresswoman for La Paz, Bolivia, populist leaders transform what the dominant culture considers signs of inferiority into symbols of the dignity of the people. In Ecuador, Abdalá Bucaram's lack of manners and unorthodox campaigning style, incorporating profanities and verbal improprieties, was presented by the media as an embarrassment to the country's civility, and proof that he was unfit for high office. However, as Carlos de la Torre notes, by consciously embodying the dress, language, mannerisms and masculinity of the common people, who were despised by elites and their middle-class imitators, Bucaram presented himself as a man of common origins who had ascended through society, and who deserved to be the leader of the nation: 'Bucaram inverted the meaning of accusations that he was "crazy" (loco) and unfit for the presidency, transforming himself into the beloved loquito (the diminutive of loco) Abdalá.'[62]

Populist identification also derives from what Oscar Reyes calls 'the solidarity of the dirty secret'.[63] 'The populist leader who says what 'we all secretly think but feel guilty about' changes the rules of political discourse, and transforms what the hegemonic discourse regards as the irrational prejudice of uneducated people into part of the political agenda. Wallace's use of racial coding to appeal beyond his traditional southern constituency was an example of this discursive operation, as was Pim Fortuyn's ability to articulate popular concerns about immigrants within the Netherland's liberal hegemonic discourse (we cannot tolerate more Muslim immigrants because they discriminate against women and will destroy our tolerant culture).

However, populism's idealisation of the 'good common people' – an image as far removed from the complexity of popular culture and beliefs as the upper-class denigration of the populace as irrational ignoramuses – also serves to legitimise relations of domination. By turning upside down the traditional view of the southern rednecks as backward bigots, and transforming it into the very essence of what being American was about, Wallace was legitimising a vision of America that consolidated the marginalisation of black people and the acceptance of the racial

status quo. And while Fortuyn's political discourse was ideologically much more complex than Wallace's, he nonetheless gave political respectability to prejudices against immigrants.

Populism, politics and democracy

The divide between the people and its 'other' defines the political nature of populism. Antagonism is central to politics, because it is through antagonism that political identities are constituted, and radical alternatives to the existing order can be imagined. As Laclau argues, without the traces of social division we have no politics but administration. But Laclau's argument is vulnerable to the misrepresentation that the only form of politics is the permanent revolution, in which the creation and recreation of an enemy is a necessary condition for political action. However, if populism is politics par excellence (based as it is on relations of antagonism), it also represents the negation of politics. The unified people at one with its leader, as represented in the populist imaginary, defines the end of history as much as liberalism's illusion of pluralism without antagonism, the social order of Hobbes' Leviathan or Marx's classless society. Of course, the final unity of the people is an illusion, as is a classless society. As Laclau reminds us, because it is impossible to erase the traces of the particular from the universal, identification always fails to produce full identities. Rather, it generates a dialectic of aspiration, disappointment, and grievances.[64]

Politics is about challenging the institutional order with the radical language of the excluded, but it is also a dimension of the practices that make institutions operative, and contribute to both their subsistence and erosion through time. As such, it operates in the spaces between the political logic of the permanent revolution and the technocratic logic of liberal democracy. The fact that rights are legally codified in modern in legal or administrative discourse. Democratic demands are as much constitutive of the political in modern societies as is the chain of equivalences that subvert the said order.

This brings us to some final considerations on the relations between populism and democracy, a topic that is addressed by several of the contributors to this volume (see particularly Mouffe and Arditi). Populism has traditionally been regarded as a threat to democracy. The vertical relation between the populist leader and his/her followers; the alleged appeal to the raw passions and basest instincts of the crowd; the disregard for political institutions and the rule of law – all make populism an easy target for those who use it as a term of derision. In most cases of populism, top-down control tends to outweigh the empowerment that may arise from political mobilisation.[65]

However, Canovan raises a disturbing question when she asks why, if notions of popular power and popular decision are central to democracy, are populists not acknowledged as the true democrats they say they are.[66] As Mouffe in this volume reminds us, behind the rise of right-wing populism in contemporary Europe is an attempt to reassert popular sovereignty as the essence of democracy, an aspect that has been substantially underplayed in actually existing liberal democratic regimes.

Populism may expose liberalism's democratic blindspots, but its relation with democracy is also problematic. If democracy is about the enactment of the will of the people, its survival depends on the acknowledgement that the people's will can never be fully enacted, and that the people do not exist except as part of an ever-receding imaginary horizon. In other words, because there could only be contested versions of who the people are, and who has the right to speak on their behalf, we can only have provisional versions of popular sovereignty, and therefore the argument for the toleration of differences is not only a liberal argument but a democratic argument as well. As Claude Lefort reminds us, in a democracy power is an 'empty place' that can only be provisionally occupied.[67] If the uncertainty associated with a place of power which remains 'empty' is negated by a political discourse that claims to speak for the people as its unmediated representative – and which, under the cover of this identification, seeks to appropriate the place of power – it is democracy itself, and not just liberalism, that is being denied. Taken to the extreme populism descends into totalitarianism. Democracy, as a

space of contest, hinges on recognising both the constitutive lack at the centre of being and the longings for wholeness that people invest in identification with others; a double recognition that helps to keep open the space of contestation by, in William Connolly's words, 'loosening demands for a generalized way of being'.[68]

This does not mean that populism is necessarily a form of totalitarianism, or that it is always the enemy of democracy. Attempts to enact the will of the people are an intrinsic part of democratic struggles, which have always involved a great deal more than parliamentary procedures. As Worsley puts it:

There is always a tension in our conception of a just society between the rights of minorities and the rights of the majority. Insofar as populism plumps for the rights of majorities to make sure – by 'intervening' – that they are not ignored (as they commonly are) populism is profoundly compatible with democracy.[69]

Populism reminds us of the totalitarian ghosts that shadow democracy. But it also reminds us that all modern democratic societies are a compromise between democratic and non-democratic logics, and that the checks and balances of modern liberal democracy simultaneously guarantee and limit the popular will (as they were originally intended to do by the constitutionalists). In modern global society, populism raises uncomfortable questions about those who want to appropriate the empty site of power, but also about those who would like to subordinate politics to technocratic reason and the dictates of the market. By raising awkward questions about modern forms of democracy, and often representing the ugly face of the people, populism is neither the highest form of democracy nor its enemy, but a mirror in which democracy can contemplate itself, warts and all, and find out what it is about and what it is lacking. If the reflection is not always a pretty sight, it is because, as the ancient Greeks already knew, democracy has an underside, which they called demagogy, because democratic representation can never live up to its promise, and because even the most democratic political regime

is a mixture of elements of democracy with others of a non-democratic nature in which principles of technocratic rationality and guardianship constrain or override the principle of the sovereignty of the people.

1

Populism: What's in a Name?

ERNESTO LACLAU

Any definition presupposes a theoretical grid giving sense to what is defined. This sense — as the very notion of definition asserts — can only be established on the basis of differentiating the defined term from something else that the definition excludes. This, in turn, presupposes a *terrain* within which those differences as such are thinkable. It is this terrain which is not immediately obvious when we call a movement (?), an ideology (?), a political practice (?), populist. In the first two cases — movements or ideologies — to call them populist would involve differentiating that attribute from other characterisations at the same defining level, such as 'fascist', 'liberal', 'communist', etc. This engages us immediately in a complicated and ultimately self-defeating task: finding that ultimate redoubt where we would find 'pure' populism, irreducible to those other alternative characterisations. If we attempt to do so we enter into a game in which any attribution of a social or ideological content to populism is immediately confronted with an avalanche of exceptions. Thus we are forced to conclude that when we use the term some actual meaning is presupposed by our linguistic practices, but that such a meaning is not, however, translatable into any definable sense. Furthermore, we can even less, through that meaning, point to any identifiable referent (which would exhaust that meaning).

What if we move from movements or ideologies as units of analysis, to political practices? Everything depends on how we conceive of that move. If it is governed by the unity of a subject constituted at the level of the ideology or the political movement, we have not, obviously, advanced a single step in the determination of what is specifically populist. The difficulties in determining the populistic character of the subjects of certain practices cannot but reproduce themselves in the analysis of the practices as such, as far as the latter simply *expresses* the inner nature of those subjects. There is, however a second possibility — namely, that the political practices do not *express* the nature of social agents but, instead, *constitute* the latter. In that case the political practice would have some kind of ontological priority over the agent — the latter would merely be the historical precipitate of the former. To put it in slightly different terms: practices would be more primary units of analysis than the group — that is, the group would only be the result of an articulation of social practices. If this approach is correct, we could say that a movement is not populist because in its politics or ideology it presents actual *contents* identifiable as populistic, but because it shows a particular *logic of articulation* of those contents — whatever those contents are.

A last remark is necessary before we enter into the substance of our argument. The category of 'articulation' has had some currency in theoretical language over the last thirty or forty years — especially within the Althusserian school and its area of influence. We should say, however, that the notion of articulation that Althusserianism developed was mainly limited to the *ontic* contents entering into the articulating process (the economic, the political, the ideological). There was some *ontological* theorisation as far as articulation is concerned (the notions of 'determination in the last instance' and of 'relative autonomy'), but as these formal logics appeared as necessarily derived from the ontic content of some categories (for example, the determination in the last instance could *only* correspond to the economy), the possibility of advancing an ontology of the social was strictly limited from the very beginning. Given these limitations, the political logic of populism was unthinkable.

In what follows, I will advance three theoretical propositions: 1) that to think the specificity of populism requires starting the analysis from units smaller than the group (whether at the political or at the ideological level); 2) that populism is an ontological and not an ontic category — i.e. its meaning is not to be found in any political or ideological content entering into the description of the practices of any particular group, but in a particular *mode of articulation* of whatever social, political or ideological contents; 3) that that articulating form, apart from its contents, produces structuring effects which primarily manifest themselves at the level of the modes of representation.

Social demands and social totality

As we have just asserted, our starting point should be the isolation of smaller units than the group and the consideration of the social logics of their articulation. Populism is one of those logics. Let us say, to start with, that our analysis postulates an asymmetry between the community as a whole ('society') and whatever social actor operates within it. That is, there is no social agent whose will coincides with the actual workings of society conceived as a totality. Rousseau was perfectly aware that the constitution of a general will — which was for him the condition of democracy — was increasingly difficult under the conditions of modern societies, where their very dimensions and their heterogeneity make the recourse to mechanisms of representation imperative; Hegel attempted to address the question through the postulation of a division between civil and political society, where the first represented particularism and heterogeneity (the 'system of needs') and the second the moment of totalisation and universality; and Marx reasserted the utopia of an exact overlapping between communitarian space and collective will through the role of a universal class in a reconciled society. The starting point of our discussion is that no attempt to bridge the chasm between political will and communitarian space can ultimately succeed, but that the attempt to construct such a bridge defines the specifically political articulation of social identities.

We should add, to avoid misunderstanding, that this non-overlapping between the community as a totality and the actual and partial wills of social actors does not lead us to adopt any kind of methodologically individualistic approach to the question of agency. The latter presupposes that the individuals are meaningful, self-defined totalities; it is only one step from there to conclude that social interaction should be conceived in terms of negotiations between agents whose identities are constituted around clear-cut interests. Our approach is, on the contrary, entirely holistic, with the only qualification that the promise of fullness contained in the notion of an entirely self-determined social whole is unachievable. So the attempt at building communitarian spaces out of a plurality of collective wills can never adopt the form of a contract — the latter presupposing the notions of interests and self-determined wills that we are putting into question. The communitarian fullness that the social whole cannot provide cannot be transferred either to the individuals. Individuals are not coherent totalities but merely referential identities which have to be split up into a series of localised subject positions. And the articulation between these positions is a social and not an individual affair (the very notion of 'individual' does not make sense in our approach).

So what are these smaller units from which our analysis has to start? Our guiding thread will be the category of 'demand' as the elementary form in the building-up of the social link. The word 'demand' is ambiguous in English: it has, on the one hand, the meaning of *request* and, on the other, the more active meaning of *imposing* a request — a claim — on somebody else (as in 'demanding an explanation'). In other languages, like Spanish, there are different words for the two meanings: the word corresponding to our second meaning would be *reivindicación*. Although when in our analysis we use the term 'demand' we clearly put the stress on the second meaning, the very ambiguity between both is not without its advantages, because the theoretical notion of demand that we will employ implies a certain undecidability between the two meanings — in actual fact, as we will see, they correspond to two different forms of political articulation. Let us also add that there is a common hidden assumption underlying both meanings: namely that the demand is not

self-satisfied but has to be addressed to an instance different from that within which the demand was originally formulated.

Let us give the example of a straightforward demand: a group of people living in a certain neighbourhood want a bus route introduced to transport them from their places of residence to the area in which most of them work. Let us suppose that they approach the city hall with that request and that the request is satisfied. We have here the following set of structural features: 1) a social need adopts the form of a *request* – i.e. it is not satisfied through self-management but through the appeal to another instance which has the power of decision; 2) the very fact that a request takes place shows that the decisory power of the higher instance is not put into question at all – so we are fully within out first meaning of the term demand; 3) the demand is a punctual demand, closed in itself – it is not the tip of an iceberg or the symbol of a large variety of unformulated social demands. If we put these three features together we can formulate the following important conclusion: requests of this type, in which demands are punctual or individually satisfied, do not construct any chasm or frontier within the social. On the contrary, social actors are accepting, as a non-verbalised assumption of the whole process, the legitimacy of each of its instances: nobody puts into question either the right to present the request or the right of the decisory instance to take the decision. Each instance is a part (or a differential point) of a highly institutionalised social immanence. Social logics operating according to this institutionalised, differential model, we will call *logics of difference*. They presuppose that there is no social division and that any legitimate demand can be satisfied in a non-antagonistic, administrative way. Examples of social utopias advocating the universal operation of differential logics come easily to mind: the Disraelian notion of 'one nation', the Welfare State, or the Saint-Simonian motto: 'From the government of men to the administration of things'.

Let us now go back to our example. Let us suppose that the request is rejected. A situation of social frustration will, no doubt, derive from that decision. But if it is only *one* demand that is not satisfied, that will not alter the situation substantially. If, however, for whatever reason, the variety of

demands that do not find satisfaction is very large, that multiple frustration will trigger social logics of an entirely different kind. If, for instance, the group of people in that area who have been frustrated in their request for better transportation find that their neighbours are equally unsatisfied in their claims at the levels of security, water supply, housing, schooling, and so on, some kind of solidarity will arise between them all: all will share the fact that their demands remain unsatisfied. That is, the demands share a *negative* dimension beyond their positive differential nature.

A social situation in which demands tend to reaggregate themselves on the negative basis that they all remain unsatisfied is the first precondition – but by no means the only one – of that mode of political articulation that we call populism. Let us enumerate those of its structural features that we can detect at this stage of our argument: 1) While the institutional arrangement previously discussed was grounded on the logic of difference, we have here an inverse situation, which can be described as a *logic of equivalence* – i.e. one in which all the demands, in spite of their differential character, tend to reaggregate themselves, forming what we will call an *equivalential chain*. This means that each individual demand is constitutively split: on the one hand it is its own particularised self; on the other it points, through equivalential links, to the totality of the other demands. Returning to our image: each demand is, actually, the tip of an iceberg, because although it only shows itself in its own particularity, it presents its own manifest claim as only one among a larger set of social claims. 2) The subject of the demand is different in our two cases. In the first, the subject of the demand was as punctual as the demand itself. The subject of a demand conceived as differential particularity we will call *democratic subject*. In the other case the subject will be wider, for its subjectivity will result from the equivalential aggregation of a plurality of democratic demands. A subject constituted on the basis of this logic we will call *popular subject*. This shows clearly the conditions for either the emergence or disappearance of a popular subjectivity: the more social demands tend to be differentially absorbed within a successful institutional system, the weaker the equivalential links will be and the more unlikely the constitution of a popular subjectivity; conversely, a situation in which a plurality

of unsatisfied demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them differentially co-exist, creates the conditions leading to a populist rupture. 3) It is a corollary of the previous analysis that there is no emergence of a populist subjectivity without the creation of an internal frontier. The equivalences are only such in terms of a lack pervading them all, and this requires the identification of the source of social negativity. Equivalential popular discourses divide, in this way, the social into two camps: power and the underdog. This transforms the nature of the demands: they cease to be simple requests and become fighting demands (*reivindicaciones*) – in other words we move to the second meaning of the term 'demand'.

Equivalences, popular subjectivity, dichotomic construction of the social around an internal frontier. We have apparently all the structural features to define populism. Not quite so, however. A crucial dimension is still missing, which we have now to consider.

Empty and floating signifiers

Our discussion so far has led us to recognise two conditions – which structurally require each other – for the emergence of a populist rupture: the dichotomisation of the social space through the creation of an internal frontier, and the construction of an equivalential chain between unfulfilled demands. These, strictly speaking, are not two conditions but two aspects of the same condition, for the internal frontier can only result from the operation of the equivalential chain. What is important, in any case, is to realise that the equivalential chain has an *anti-institutional* character: it subverts the particularistic, differential character of the demands. There is, at some point, a short-circuit in the relation between demands put to the 'system' and the ability of the latter to meet them. What we have to discuss now are the effects of that short-circuit on both the nature of the demands and the system conceived as a totality.

The equivalential demands confront us immediately with the problem of the representation of the specifically equivalential moment. For, obviously, the demands are always particular, while the more universal

dimension linked to the equivalence lacks any direct, evident mode of representation. It is our contention that the first precondition for the representation of the equivalential moment is the totalisation (through signification) of the power which is opposed to the ensemble of those demands constituting the popular will. This should be evident: for the equivalential chain to create a frontier within the social it is necessary somehow to represent the other side of the frontier. There is no populism without discursive construction of an enemy: the *ancien régime*, the oligarchy, the Establishment or whatever. We will later return to this aspect. What we will now concentrate on is the transition from democratic subject positions to popular ones on the basis of the frontier effects deriving from the equivalences.

So how does the equivalence *show* itself? As we have asserted, the equivalential moment cannot be found in any positive feature underlying all the demands, for – from the viewpoint of those features – they are entirely different from each other. The equivalence proceeds entirely from the opposition to the power beyond the frontier, which does not satisfy any of the equivalential demands. In that case, however, how can the chain as such be represented? As I have argued elsewhere,[1] that representation is only possible if a particular demand, without entirely abandoning its own particularity, starts also functioning as a signifier representing the chain as a totality (in the same way as gold, without ceasing to be a particular commodity, transforms its own materiality into the universal representation of value). This process by which a particular demand comes to represent an equivalential chain incommensurable with it is, of course, what we have called *hegemony*. The demands of Solidarność, for instance, started by being the demands of a particular working-class group in Gdansk, but as they were formulated in an oppressed society, where many social demands were frustrated, they became the signifiers of the popular camp in a new dichotomic discourse.

Now there is a feature of this process of constructing a universal popular signification which is particularly important for understanding populism. It is the following: the more the chain of equivalences is extended, the weaker will be its connection with the particularistic

demands which assume the function of universal representation. This leads us to a conclusion which is crucial for our analysis: the construction of a popular subjectivity is possible only on the basis of discursively producing *tendentially* empty signifiers. The so-called 'poverty' of the populist symbols is the condition of their political efficacy – as their function is to bring to equivalential homogeneity a highly heterogeneous reality, they can only do so on the basis of reducing to a minimum their particularistic content. At the limit, this process reaches a point where the homogenising function is carried out by a pure name: the name of the leader.

There are two other important aspects that, at this point, we should take into consideration. The first concerns the particular kind of distortion that the equivalential logics introduce into the construction of the 'people' and 'power' as antagonistic poles. In the case of the 'people', as we have seen, the equivalential logic is based on an 'emptying' whose consequences are, at the same time, enriching and impoverishing. Enriching: the signifiers unifying an equivalential chain, because they must cover all the links integrating the latter, have a wider reference than a purely differential content which would attach a signifier to just one signified. Impoverishing precisely because of this wider (potentially universal) reference, its connection with particular contents tends to be drastically reduced. Using a logical distinction, we could say that what it wins in *extension* it loses in *intension*. And the same happens in the construction of the pole of power: that pole does not simply function through the materiality of its differential content, for that content is the *bearer* of the negation of the popular pole (through the frustration of the latter's demands). As a result, there is an essential instability which permeates the various moments that we have isolated in our study. As far as the particular demands are concerned nothing anticipates, in their isolated contents, the way in which they will be differentially or equivalentially articulated – that will depend on the historical context – and nothing anticipates either (in the case of the equivalences) the extension and the composition of the chains in which they participate. And as for the two poles of the people/power dichotomy, their actual identity and

structure will be equally open to contestation and redefinition. France had experienced food riots since the Middle Ages but these riots, as a rule, did not identify the monarchy as their enemy. All the complex transformations of the eighteenth century were required to reach a stage in which food demands became part of revolutionary equivalential chains embracing the totality of the political system. And the American populism of farmers, at the end of the nineteenth century, failed because the attempt at creating chains of popular equivalence unifying the demands of the dispossessed groups found a decisive obstacle in a set of structural *differential* limits which proved to be stronger than the populist interpellations: namely, the difficulties in bringing together black and white farmers, the mutual distrust between farmers and urban workers, the deeply entrenched loyalty of Southern farmers to the Democratic Party, and so on.

This leads us to our second consideration. Throughout our previous study, we have been operating under the simplifying assumption of the de facto existence of a frontier separating two antagonistic equivalential chains. This is the assumption that we have now to put into question. Our whole approach leads us, actually, to this questioning, for if there is no a priori reason why a demand should enter into some particular equivalential chains and differential articulations rather than into others, we should expect that antagonistic political strategies would be based on different ways of creating political frontiers, and that the latter would be exposed to destabilisations and transformations.

If this is so, our assumptions must, to some extent, be modified. Each discursive element would be submitted to the structural pressure of contradictory articulating attempts. In our theorisation of the role of the empty signifiers, their very possibility depended on the presence of a chain of equivalences which involves, as we have seen, an internal frontier. The classical forms of populism – most of the Latin American populisms of the 1940s and 1950s, for instance – correspond to this description. The political dynamic of populism depends on this internal frontier being constantly reproduced. Using a simile from linguistics we could say that while an institutionalist political discourse tends to

privilege the syntagmatic pole of language – the number of differential locations articulated by relations of combination – the populist discourse tends to privilege the paradigmatic pole, i.e. the relations of substitution between elements (demands, in our case) aggregated around only two syntagmatic positions.

The internal frontier on which the populist discourse is grounded can, however, be subverted. This can happen in two different ways. One is to break the equivalential links between the various particular demands, through the individual satisfaction of the latter. This is the road to the decline of the populist form of politics, to the blurring of the internal frontiers and to the transition to a higher level of integration of the institutional system – a transformist operation, as Gramsci called it. It corresponds, broadly speaking, to Disraeli's project of 'one nation', or to the contemporary attempts by theoreticians of the Third Way and the 'radical centre' at substituting administration for politics.

'The second way of subverting the internal frontier is of an entirely different nature. It does not consist in *eliminating* the frontiers but in *changing their political sign*. As we have seen, as the central signifiers of a popular discourse become partially empty, they weaken their former links with some particular contents – those contents become perfectly open to a *variety* of equivalential rearticulations. Now, it is enough that the empty popular signifiers keep their radicalism – that is, their ability to divide society into two camps – while, however, the chain of equivalences that they unify becomes a different one, for the political meaning of the whole populist operation to acquire an opposite political sign. The twentieth century provides countless examples of these reversals. In America, the signifiers of popular radicalism, which at the time of the New Deal had a mainly left-wing connotation, were later reappropriated by the radical Right, from George Wallace to the 'moral majority'. In France the radical 'tribunicial function' of the Communist Party has, to some extent, been absorbed by the National Front. And the whole expansion of fascism during the inter-war period would be unintelligible without making reference to the right-wing rearticulation of themes and demands belonging to the revolutionary tradition.

What is important is to grasp the pattern of this process of rearticulation: it depends on partially keeping in operation the central signifiers of popular radicalism while inscribing in a different chain of equivalences many of the democratic demands. This hegemonic rearticulation is possible because no social demand has ascribed to it, as a 'manifest destiny', any a priori form of inscription – everything depends on a hegemonic contest. Once a demand is submitted to the articulatory attempts of a plurality of antagonistic projects it lives in a no-man's-land vis-à-vis the latter – it acquires a partial and transitory autonomy. To refer to this ambiguity of the popular signifiers and of the demands that they articulate we will speak of *floating signifiers*: The kind of structural relation that constitutes them is different from the one that we have found operating in the empty signifiers: while the latter depend on a fully fledged internal frontier resulting from an equivalential chain, the floating signifiers are the expression of the ambiguity inherent to all frontiers and of the impossibility of the latter acquiring any ultimate stability. The distinction is, however, mainly analytic, for in practice empty and floating signifiers largely overlap: there is no historical situation where society is so consolidated that its internal frontier is not submitted to any subversion or displacement, and no organic crisis so deep that some forms of stability do not put limits on the operativity of the subversive tendencies.

Populism, politics and representation

Let us put together the various threads of our argument so as to formulate a coherent concept of populism. Such a coherence can only be obtained if the different dimensions entering into the elaboration of the concept are not just discrete features brought together through simple enumeration, but part of a theoretically articulated whole. To start with, we only have populism if there is a series of politico-discursive practices constructing a popular subject, and the precondition of the emergence of such a subject is, as we have seen, the building up of an internal frontier dividing the social space into two camps. But the logic of that division is dictated, as we know, by the creation of an equivalential chain

between a series of social demands in which the equivalential moment prevails over the differential nature of the demands. Finally, the equivalential chain cannot be the result of a purely fortuitous coincidence, but has to be consolidated through the emergence of an element which gives coherence to the chain by signifying it as a totality. This element is what we have called *empty signifier*.

These are all the structural defining features which enter, in my view, into the category of populism. As can be seen, the concept of populism that I am proposing is a strictly *formal* one, for all its defining features are exclusively related to a specific mode of articulation – the prevalence of the equivalential over the differential logic – independently of the actual *contents* that are articulated. That is the reason why, at the beginning of this essay, I asserted that 'populism' is an ontological and not an ontic category. Most of the attempts at defining populism have tried to locate what is specific to it in a particular ontic content and, as a result, they have ended in a self-defeating exercise whose two predictable alternative results have been either to choose an empirical content which is immediately overflowed by an avalanche of exceptions, or to appeal to an 'intuition' which cannot be translated into any conceptual content.

This displacement of the conceptualisation, from contents to form, has several advantages (apart form the obvious one of avoiding the naïve sociologism which reduces the political forms to the preconstituted unity of the group). In the first place, we have a way of addressing the recurrent problem of dealing with the ubiquity of populism – the fact that it can emerge from different points of the socio-economic structure. If its defining features are found in the prevalence of the logic of equivalence, the production of empty signifiers and the construction of political frontiers through the interpellation of the underdog, we understand immediately that the discourses grounded in this articulatory logic can start from *any* place in the socio-institutional structure: clientelistic political organisations, established political parties, trade unions, the army, revolutionary movements, and so on. 'Populism' does not define the actual politics of these organisations, but is a way of articulating their themes – whatever those themes may be.

Secondly, we can grasp better, in this way, something which is essential for the understanding of the contemporary political scene: the circulation of the signifiers of radical protest between movements of entirely opposite political signs. We have made reference before to this question. To give just one example: the circulation of the signifiers of Mazzinism and Garibaldianism in Italy during the war of liberation (1943–45). These had been the signifiers of radical protest in Italy, going back to the Risorgimento. Both fascists and communists tried to articulate them to their discourses and, as a result, they became partially autonomous vis-à-vis those various forms of political articulation. They retained the dimension of radicalism, but whether that radicalism would move in a right or in a left direction was at the beginning undecided – they were floating signifiers, in the sense that we have discussed. It is obviously an idle exercise to ask oneself what social group expresses itself through those populist symbols: the chains of equivalence that they formed cut across many social sectors, and the radicalism that they signified could be articulated by movements of entirely opposite political signs. This migration of signifiers can be described if populism is conceived as a formal principle of articulation; not if that principle is concealed behind the particular contents that incarnate it in different political conjunctures.

Finally, approaching the question of populism formally makes it possible to address another, otherwise intractable issue. To ask oneself if a movement *is* or *is not* populist is, actually, to start with the wrong question. The question that we should, instead, ask ourselves, is the following: *to what extent* is a movement populist? As we know, this question is identical to this other one: to what extent does the logic of equivalence dominate its discourse? We have presented political practices as operating at diverse points of a continuum whose two *reductio ad absurdum* extremes would be an institutionalist discourse, dominated by a pure logic of difference, and a populist one, in which the logic of equivalence operates unchallenged. These two extremes are actually unreachable: pure difference would mean a society so dominated by administration and by the individualisation of social demands that no struggle around internal frontiers – i.e. no politics – would be possible; and pure

equivalence would involve such a dissolution of social links that the very notion of 'social demand' would lose any meaning – this is the image of the 'crowd' as depicted by the nineteenth-century theorists of 'mass psychology' (Taine, Le Bon, Sighele, etc.).

It is important to realise that the impossibility of the two extremes of pure difference or pure equivalence is not an empirical one – it is logical. The subversion of difference by an equivalential logic does not take the form of a total elimination of the former through the latter. A relation of equivalence is not one in which all differences collapse into identity, but one in which differences are still very active. The equivalence eliminates the *separation* between the demands, but not the demands themselves. If a series of demands – transport, housing, employment and so on, to go back to our initial example – are unfulfilled, the equivalence existent between them – and the popular identity resulting from that equivalence – requires very much the persistence of the demands. So equivalence is still definitely a particular way of articulating differences. Thus between equivalence and difference there is a complex dialectic, an unstable compromise. We will have a variety of historical situations which presuppose the *presence* of both, but at the same time, their *tension*. Let us mention some of them:

1) An institutional system becomes less and less able to differentially absorb social demands, and this leads to an internal chasm within society and the construction of two antagonistic chains of equivalences. This is the classic experience of a populist or revolutionary rupture, which results generally from the types of crisis of representation that Gramsci called 'organic crises'.

2) The regime resulting from a populist rupture becomes progressively institutionalised, so that the differential logic starts prevailing again and the equivalential popular identity increasingly becomes an inoperative *langue de bois* governing less and less the actual workings of politics. Peronism, in Argentina, attempted to move from an initial politics of confrontation – whose popular subject was the *descamisado* (the equivalent of the *sans-culotte*) to an increasingly institutionalised

discourse grounded in what was called 'the organised community' (*la comunidad organizada*). We find another variant of this increasing asymmetry between actual demands and equivalential discourse in those cases in which the latter becomes the *langue de bois* of the state. We find in them that the increasing distance between actual social demands and dominant equivalential discourse frequently leads to the repression of the former and the violent imposition of the latter. Many African regimes, after the process of decolonisation, followed this pattern.

3) Some dominant groups attempt to constantly recreate the internal frontiers through an increasingly anti-institutional discourse. These attempts generally fail. Let us just think of the process, in France, leading from Jacobinism to the Directoire and, in China, the various stages in the cycle of the 'cultural revolution'.

A movement or an ideology – or, to put both under their common genus, a discourse – will be more or less populistic depending on the degree to which its contents are articulated by equivalential logics. This means that no political movement will be entirely exempt from populism, because none will fail to interpellate to some extent the 'people' against an enemy, through the construction of a social frontier. That is why its populist credentials will be shown in a particularly clear way at moments of political transition, when the future of the community is in the balance. The degree of 'populism', in that sense, will depend on the depth of the chasm separating political alternatives. This poses a problem, however. If populism consists in postulating a radical alternative within the communitarian space, a choice at the crossroads on which the future of a given society hinges, does not populism become synonymous with politics? The answer can only be affirmative. Populism means putting into question the institutional order by constructing an underdog as an historical agent – i.e. an agent which is an *other* in relation to the way things stand. But this is the same as politics. We only have politics through the gesture which embraces the existing state of affairs as a system and presents an alternative to it (or, conversely, when we defend

that system against existing potential alternatives). That is the reason why the end of populism coincides with the end of politics. We have an end of politics when the community conceived as a totality, and the will representing that totality, become indistinguishable from each other. In that case, as I have argued throughout this essay, politics is replaced by administration and the traces of social division disappear. Hobbes' Leviathan as the undivided will of an absolute ruler, or Marx's universal subject of a classless society, represent parallel ways – although, of course, of an opposite sign – of the end of politics. A total, unchallengeable state and the withering away of the state are both ways of cancelling out the traces of social division. But it is easy, in that sense, to see that the conditions of possibility of the political and the conditions of possibility of populism are the same: they both presuppose social division; in both we find an ambiguous *demos* which is, on the one hand, a section within the community (an underdog) and, on the other hand, an agent presenting itself, in an antagonistic way, as *the whole* community.

This conclusion leads us to a last consideration. As far as we have politics (and also, if our argument is correct, its derivative which is populism) we are going to have social division. A corollary of this social division is that a section within the community will present itself as the expression and representation of the community as a whole. This chasm is ineradicable as far as we have a *political* society. This means that the 'people' can only be constituted in the terrain of the relations of representation. We have already explained the representative matrix out of which the 'people' emerges: a certain particularity which assumes a function of universal representation; the distortion of the identity of this particularity through the constitution of equivalential chains; the popular camp resulting from these substitutions presenting itself as representing society as a whole. These considerations have some important consequences. The first is that the 'people', as operating in populist discourses, is never a primary datum but a construct – populist discourse does not simply *express* some kind of original popular identity; it actually *constitutes* the latter. The second is that, as a result, relations of representation are not a secondary level reflecting a primary social reality

constituted elsewhere; they are, on the contrary, the primary terrain within which the social is constituted. Any kind of political transformation will, as a result, take place as an internal displacement of the elements entering the representation process. The third consequence is that representation is not a second best, as Rousseau would have had it, resulting from the increasing chasm between the universal communitarian space and the particularism of the actually existing collective wills. On the contrary, the asymmetry between community as a whole and collective wills is the source of that exhilarating game that we call politics, from which we find our limits but also our possibilities. Many important things result from the impossibility of an ultimate universality – among others, the emergence of the 'people'.

The 'End of Politics' and the Challenge of Right-wing Populism

CHANTAL MOUFFE

The theme of populism has recently been put at the centre of attention in Europe. The unexpected qualification of Jean-Marie Le Pen for the second round of the presidential elections in France in May 2002 and the excellent results of the Pim Fortuyn List, which came second in the Dutch legislative elections on May 15 – after the murder of their leader – have created a shock which has forced Western democracies to finally take seriously the growth of right-wing populism. To be sure, such parties have already existed for some time, but they were considered marginal and their strong presence in countries like Austria was explained by specific national idiosyncrasies, so it was possible to dismiss them as a ghost from the past, soon to be brushed away by the advances of the process of 'modernisation'

However, the increasing success of right-wing populist parties in most European countries and their increasing popular appeal makes it very difficult to maintain such a thesis. So instead of being seen as an exception, those parties are now presented as the main threat to our democratic institutions. But the fact that they have become a central subject of discussion has not meant that progress has been made in coming to terms with their nature. The reason is that the theoretical framework informing most democratic political thinking precludes grasping the roots of

populist politics. Hence the disarray in which all those who proclaimed the end of the adversarial model of politics find themselves. Having announced the dawn of a consensual politics 'beyond left and right', they are suddenly confronted with the emergence of new political frontiers which pose a real challenge to their post-political vision. By constructing an opposition between 'the people' and the 'establishment', not only does right-wing populism shatter the consensual framework, it also brings to the fore the shallowness of the dominant theoretical perspective. Indeed if, as I will argue, the attraction exerted by right-wing populist discourse is the very consequence of the 'end of politics' Zeitgeist which prevails nowadays, we should not be surprised by the incapacity of most theorists to explain what is currently happening.

The thesis that I want to put forward is that, far from being a return of the archaic and irrational forces, an anachronism in times of 'post-conventional' identities, to be fought through more modernisation and 'Third Way' policies, right-wing populism is the consequence of the post-political consensus. Indeed, it is the lack of an effective democratic debate about possible alternatives that has led in many countries to the success of political parties claiming to be the 'voice of the people.'

The shortcomings of the liberal conception

An important part of my argument will be of a theoretical nature because I am convinced that in order to understand the appeal of right-wing populist discourse it is necessary to question the rationalist and individualist tenets which inform the main trends of democratic political theory. The refusal to acknowledge the political in its antagonistic dimension, and the concomitant incapacity to grasp the central role of passions in the constitution of collective identities, are in my view at the root of political theory's failure to come to terms with the phenomenon of populism.

While of course not new, those limitations have been reinforced by the recent evolution of liberal democratic societies and the effects of the prevailing ideological framework. This framework presents two aspects:

free market on one side, human rights on the other. Jointly they provide the content of what is today generally understood by 'democracy'. What is striking is that the reference to popular sovereignty – which constitutes the backbone of the democratic ideal – has been almost erased in the current definition of liberal democracy. Popular sovereignty is now usually seen as an obsolete idea, often perceived as an obstacle to the implementation of human rights.

What we are witnessing, actually, is the triumph of a purely liberal interpretation of the nature of modern democracy. According to many liberals, democracy is secondary with respect to liberal principles. As Charles Larmore, for instance, puts it, 'Liberalism and democracy are separate values whose relation, it seems to me, consists largely in democratic self-government being the best means for protecting the principles of a liberal political order.'

Although I agree with Larmore that liberalism and democracy are separate values, I do not think that the relation that exists between them could be reduced to an instrumental one of means/ends, as many liberals would have it. While human rights are indeed crucial and constitutive of the modern form of democracy, they cannot be considered the only form in which democratic politics. Without effective democratic participation in those democracies concerning the common life, there can be no democracy.

Between terms have been used to refer to the new type of 'politeia' regime: sovereign democracy, the democratic revolution: liberal democracy, representative democracy, constitutional democracy, parliamentary democracy, pluralist democracy. They all point to the fact that we are dealing with the articulation between two different traditions: the liberal tradition and the democratic tradition. This articulation happened during the nineteenth century and it was established between liberal and democratic. What is often missed [...] as C.B. Macpherson indicated[2], was that liberalism was democratised and democracy was liberalised. This process [...] was therefore different.

Since then the history of liberal democracies has been characterised by the sometimes violent struggle between social forces whose objective was to establish the supremacy of one tradition over the other. This struggle has served as a motor for the political evolution of Western societies, and it has led to temporary forms of stabilisation under the hegemony of one of the contending forces. For a long time this adversarial form of confrontation was considered legitimate, and it is only recently that this model has been declared outdated. For some, the end of the confrontation means the victory of liberalism over its adversary, while for others, the most democratically minded liberals, it means the end of an old antagonism and the reconciliation between liberal and democratic principles. Both groups, however, see the present consensus as a great advance for democracy.

What those liberals fail to grasp is the necessary tension which exists between the logic of liberalism and the logic of democracy, and the impossibility of a final reconciliation. In fact to announce the end of the confrontation signifies accepting the prevailing liberal hegemony, and foreclosing the possibility of envisaging an alternative to the existing order.

The liberal conception also misses the crucial symbolic role played by the democratic conception of popular sovereignty. The legitimacy of modern liberal democracy is grounded on the idea of popular sovereignty, and those who believe that it can be discarded are profoundly mistaken. The democratic deficit that manifests itself in a multiplicity of ways in a growing number of liberal democratic societies is no doubt a consequence of the fact that people feel that no real scope is left for what would be a meaningful participation in important decisions. In several countries this democratic deficit has contributed to the development of right-wing populist parties claiming to represent the people and to defend its rights, which have been confiscated by the political elites. It is worth noting that they are usually the only parties which mobilise the theme of popular sovereignty, viewed with suspicion by traditional democratic parties.

The end of politics?

The effacement of the theme of popular sovereignty in liberal-democratic societies constitutes a first important element for apprehending the current rise of right-wing populism, and we can already see how it has to do with the kind of liberal consensus existing today both in political life and in political theory. There is indeed a striking convergence between the lack of effective alternatives offered to citizens in advanced industrial societies and the lack of an adequate theoretical grasp of the complex relationship existing between democracy and liberalism. This explains in my view why it has become so difficult to challenge the prevailing liberal hegemony. Think for instance of the way in which, in one form or the other, most social-democratic parties have been converted to the ideology of the 'Third Way'. Nowadays the key terms of political discourse are 'good governance' and 'non-partisan democracy'.

Politics in its conflictual dimension is deemed to be something of the past, and the type of democracy that is commended is a consensual, completely depoliticised democracy. This 'politics without adversary'[3] chimes with the consensual way in which the discourse of human rights is utilised. Indeed the subversive potential of human rights is neutralised by their articulation with the neoliberal dogma. Human rights are reduced to providing the moral framework that such a politics needs to support its claims of representing the general interest beyond partisan fractions.

As a consequence of neoliberal hegemony, most crucial decisions concerning social and economic relations have been removed from the political terrain. Traditional democratic political parties have become unable to face societal problems in a political way, and this explains the increasing role played by the juridical sphere as the realm where social conflicts can find a form of expression. Today, because of the lack of a democratic political public sphere where a political confrontation could take place, it is the legal system which is made responsible for organising human co-existence and for regulating social relations. This displacement of the political by the legal terrain as the place where conflicts are resolved has very negative consequences for the workings of democracy.

No doubt this fits with the dominant view that one should look for 'impartial' solutions to social conflicts, but this is precisely where the problem lies. There are no impartial solutions in politics, and it is this illusion that we now live in societies where political antagonisms have been eradicated that makes it impossible for political passions to be channelled through traditional democratic parties.

In my view, it is the incapacity of traditional parties to provide distinctive forms of identifications around possible alternatives that has created the terrain for the flourishing of right-wing populism. Indeed, right-wing populist parties are often the only ones that attempt to mobilise passions and create collective forms of identifications. Against all those who believe that politics can be reduced to individual motivations, and that it is driven by the pursuit of self-interest, they are well aware that politics always consists in the creation of an 'us' versus a 'them' and that it implies the creation of collective identities. Hence the powerful appeal of their discourse, because it provides collective forms of identification around 'the people'.

If we add to that the fact that, under the banner of 'modernisation', social-democratic parties have in most countries identified themselves more or less exclusively with the middle classes, and that they have stopped representing the interests of the popular sectors – whose demands are considered 'archaic' or 'retrograde' – we should not be surprised by the growing alienation of an increasing number of groups who feel excluded from the effective exercise of citizenship by the 'enlightened' elites. In a context where the dominant discourse proclaims that there is no alternative to the current neoliberal form of globalisation, and that we have to accept its laws and submit to its diktats, it is small wonder that more and more workers are keen to listen to those who claim that alternatives do exist, and that they will give back to the people the power to decide. When democratic politics has lost its capacity to shape the discussion about how we should organise our common life, and when it is limited to securing the necessary conditions for the smooth working of the market, the conditions are ripe for talented demagogues to articulate popular frustration.

The current state of liberal-democratic societies is therefore particularly favourable for the development of right-wing populism. The displacement of the idea of popular sovereignty dovetails with the idea that there is no alternative to the present order, and this contributes to the creation of an anti-political climate that is easily exploited to foment popular reactions against the governing elites. We should realise that, to a great extent, the success of right-wing populist parties comes from the fact that they provide people with some form of hope, with the belief that things could be different. Of course this is an illusory hope, founded on false premises and on unacceptable mechanisms of exclusion, where xenophobia usually plays a central role. But when they are the only ones to offer an outlet for political passions, their pretence of offering an alternative is seductive, and their appeal is likely to grow. To be able to envisage an adequate response, it is urgent to grasp the economic, social and political conditions that explain their emergence. And this requires the elaboration of a theoretical approach that does not deny the antagonistic dimension of the political.

Politics in the moral register

I think that it is also crucial to understand that it is not through moral condemnation that those parties can be fought, and this is why most answers have so far been completely inadequate. Of course, a moralistic reaction chimes with the dominant post-political perspective, and it had to be expected. This is why it is worth examining it in some detail since this will bring us important insights into the way political antagonisms manifest themselves today.

As we saw earlier, the dominant discourse announces the end of the adversarial model of politics and the advent of a consensual politics beyond left and right. However, politics always entails an us/them distinction. This is why the consensus advocated by the defenders of the 'non-partisan democracy' cannot exist without drawing a frontier and defining an exterior, a 'them' which assures the identity of the consensus and secures the coherence of the 'us'. To put it in another way, the

consensus at the centre, which is supposed to include everybody in our post-political societies, cannot exist without the establishment of a frontier, because no consensus -- or no common identity, for that matter -- can exist without a frontier. There cannot be an 'us' without a 'them', and the very identity of a group depends on the existence of a 'constitutive outside'. So the 'us of the good democrats' needs to be secured by the determination of a 'them'. Nowadays the 'them' is provided by what is designated as the 'extreme right'. This term is used in a very undefined way to refer to an amalgam of groups and parties whose characteristics and objectives are extremely diverse and it covers a wide spectrum which goes from fringe groups of extremists, skinheads and neo-nazis to the authoritarian right and a variety of right-wing populist parties.

Such a heterogeneous construct is of course useless to grasp the nature and causes of the new forms of right-wing politics. But it is very useful to secure the identity of the 'good democrats' and to procure a positive image of the post-political consensus. It is clear that, since politics has supposedly become 'non-adversarial', the 'them' which is necessary to make possible the 'us' of the good democrats cannot be envisaged as a political adversary, and the frontier has to be drawn in the moral register. So, to draw the frontier between the 'good democrats' and the 'evil extreme-right' is very convenient, since the 'them' can now be considered as a sort of moral disease which needs to be condemned morally, not fought politically. This is why no attempt is made to try to understand the reasons for its existence -- an understanding, in any case, made impossible by the amalgam on which the very notion of 'extreme-right' is based. Moreover, attempts at understanding are deemed suspect, and perceived as a move towards condoning something which is morally unacceptable. As a consequence, moral condemnation and the establishment of a cordon sanitaire have become the dominant answers to the rise of right-wing populist movements.

The increasing moralisation of political discourse that we are witnessing goes hand in hand with the dominant post-political perspective. Far from indicating a new stage in the triumphant march of democracy, such a phenomenon represents a very negative development. Let's not

misunderstand my point. It is not my intention to defend Realpolitik and to deny that normative concerns should play a role in politics. But there is a big difference between morality and moralism, which limits itself to the denunciation of evil in others. Yet today's good democrats are so confident that they have the truth, and that their mission is to impose it on others, that they refuse to engage in debate with those who disagree. It is no doubt easier to present them as a moral enemy, to be destroyed and eradicated, instead of having to envisage them as adversaries in the political terrain.

In fact what is happening is very different from what the advocates of the post-political model, like Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, would want us to believe. It is not that politics with its old antagonisms has been replaced by moral concerns about 'life issues' and human rights. The political in its antagonistic dimension is very much alive, and political antagonisms are still with us. The main characteristic of our 'end of politics' age is that politics is now played out in the register of morality, and that antagonisms are being framed in a moral vocabulary. Far from having disappeared, frontiers between us and them are constantly drawn, but nowadays they are drawn in moral categories, between 'good' and 'evil', between the 'good democrats' who defend the universal values of liberal democracy and the 'evil extreme right', racist and xenophobic, which must only be 'eradicated'.

What I am suggesting is that what has been presented as the disappearance of antagonism is in fact the generalisation of a different form of its manifestation. To be sure, the moralistic type of rhetoric is not new. It has been used before, and the Americans are particularly fond of it. Remember Reagan's 'evil empire', not to mention the current crusade of George W. Bush against the 'axis of evil'? But this language was usually reserved for international relations, while now it pervades domestic politics. And in that field the consequences are different, because such a rhetoric transforms the very way we envisage the workings of democratic politics.

When politics is played out in the moral register, democracy is endangered. Besides preventing us from adequately grasping the nature and

causes of current conflicts, this moralisation of politics leads to the emergence of antagonisms that cannot be managed by the democratic process and redefined in what I propose to call an 'agonistic' way – i.e. as a struggle not between enemies, but between 'adversaries' who respect the legitimate right of their opponents to defend their position.[4] It is clear that when the opponent is defined in moral terms, it can only be envisaged as an enemy, not as an adversary. With the 'evil them' no agonistic debate is possible. This is why moral condemnation replaces political struggle and why the strategy consists in building a cordon sanitaire to quarantine the affected sectors. As far as right-wing populist parties are concerned this strategy is generally counterproductive since, as we have seen, their appeal is often linked to their anti-establishment rhetoric, so their exclusion by the governing elites serves to reinforce their oppositional image.

There is an urgent need to understand that it is the incapacity to articulate proper political alternatives around the confrontation of distinctive socio-economic projects that explains why antagonisms are nowadays articulated in moral terms. Since there is no politics without an us/them discrimination, when the 'them' cannot be envisaged as a political adversary it is constructed as 'evil', as a moral enemy. This explains the flourishing of moralistic political discourse in circumstances where the adversarial model of politics has lost its capacity to organise the political system, and when its legitimacy has been undermined by Third Way theorists. The 'extreme right' is therefore very handy for providing the 'evil them' necessary to secure the 'good us'. This of course is not meant to deny the existence of something that should be properly called 'extreme-right', but to insist on the danger of using this category to demonise all the parties who defend positions that are seen as a challenge to the well-meaning centre-establishment.

Right-wing populism in Austria

I have chosen the case of Austria to illustrate my argument because this will give me the opportunity to examine the two aspects of my thesis: the

negative consequences of consensus politics, and the inadequacy of the moralistic answer to the challenge of right-wing populism.[5]

To grasp the reasons for the success of the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) it is necessary to recall the type of politics that prevailed in Austria since the beginning of the second Austrian Republic. When Austria was reestablished in 1945 the three existing parties — the Socialist Party (SPÖ), the People's Party (ÖVP) and the Communist Party (KPÖ) — decided to govern in coalition in order to avoid the conflicts that had dominated the First Republic, which had exploded into a civil war in 1934. The KPÖ was quickly excluded because of the effects of the Cold War, and the coalition reduced to the SPÖ and the ÖVP. Those parties were the representatives of the Christian-conservative and the Socialist Lagers around which Austrian society was organised after the break-up of the Habsburg monarchy. They devised a form of co-operation through which they managed to establish their control on the life of the country in a variety of fields: political, economic, social and cultural. Thanks to the 'Proporz system' the most important posts in the banks, hospitals, schools and nationalised industries were divided between their respective elites. Furthermore, the development of social and economic partnership secured co-operation between the organisations representing employers and employees in order to reach acceptable compromises, thereby avoiding industrial conflicts and strikes.

To be sure, this kind of consensus politics played an undeniable role in providing the basis of stability for the political system, and when in 1955, after ten years of Allied occupation, Austria won its sovereignty and independence, it had recovered its confidence and prosperity. But the fact that — except for the years between 1966 to 1983 — the SPÖ and the ÖVP formed a Grand Coalition to govern the country led to the blocking of the political system, since very little space was left for any type of contestation not directed against the system itself. Indeed, even when governing alone, the two main parties continued to maintain close contacts through the 'Sozialpartnerschaft'. This created the conditions which were later to allow a gifted demagogue like Jörg Haider to

articulate the diverse forms of resentment against the governing coalition and its bureaucratic machine, in the name of 'democracy' and 'liberty'.

When Haider took control of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) in 1986, the party was facing extinction.[6] The FPÖ, which in 1956 had succeeded the League of Independents (VDU), founded in 1949, was heir to the third component of the Austrian political structure — the German national-liberal Lager which had supported national-socialism and had therefore been marginalised after the war. Since 1960, the FPÖ had tried to redefine itself as a centrist third party under the leadership of a former SS officer, Friederich Peter, by cultivating an image of a progressive, liberal party. But it had been weakened by three years of participation as a junior partner in a coalition with the SPÖ, between 1983 and 1986, and its potential vote was estimated at between 1 and 2 per cent.[7] The situation was therefore critical, and intra-party disputes culminated in 1986 at the Innsbruck conference in the ousting of the party chairman, Norbert Steger. Things changed quickly with the new leadership of Jörg Haider, who drastically transformed the party's orientation, and from then on the FPÖ experienced a dramatic upsurge in electoral support. Notwithstanding temporary setbacks, its share of the vote increased steadily until the November 1999 elections when it became the second party in the country, slightly overtaking the ÖVP with 27 per cent of the vote. Despite lengthy negotiations the ÖVP and the SPÖ were unable to agree on terms for reconvening their coalition, and a new coalition government was established between the ÖVP and the FPÖ in February 2000.This alliance was violently denounced in Austria and abroad, and the other EU members retaliated with a series of measures aimed at isolating the new government. However, the ÖVP/FPÖ coalition managed to withstand this opposition, and when it collapsed in September 2002 it was because of an internal struggle, not external pressure. I will come back to these events when I discuss the response to right-wing populist parties, but we first need to examine the rise of the FPÖ under Haider.

Haider's strategy

As soon as he assumed the leadership, Haider transformed the party into a protest party against the 'Grand Coalition'. He actively mobilised the themes of popular sovereignty and freedom of choice in order to articulate the growing resistance to the bureaucratic and authoritarian way in which the country was governed by the consociational elites. At first his campaigns were directed against the federal government, which he accused of corruption, excessive political patronage, and presented as being responsible for rising unemployment. He advocated the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, lower taxes and a reduction of regulation on business and individuals. From the 1990s onwards, starting with the federal parliamentary campaign in Vienna, the theme of immigration began to play a central role, and the discourse of the party acquired a clearly populist character. It was at that moment that the party, presenting itself as the voice of the 'little man' against the 'establishment', began to appeal to working-class voters disillusioned with the SPÖ.[8]

An important element to take into account in this shift of loyalties was the profound impact of the transition to a post-fordist form of capitalist regulation on the composition and forms of organisation of the working class. Its consequence was the erosion of the traditional links between the workers and the SPÖ. The forms of 'quasi-clientelism' which existed before became eroded, as the workers lost several of the benefits of the consociational system. Since, in the meantime, the Socialist Party under the leadership of Franz Vranitzky, had moved towards the political centre – renaming themselves 'social-democrats' and becoming more middle class in orientation – the terrain was laid for the workers to be attracted by the populist rhetoric of Haider.[9] Besides providing a channel of expression for the increasing disaffection with the political system, the FPÖ also served as an outlet for the growing anxiety and fears induced by the process of globalisation. By articulating all the diverse forms of resentment through a xenophobic discourse, the party could present itself as defending the interests of 'the people'

both against the uncaring political establishment and the foreigners, visualised as a threat to the jobs of 'good hard-working Austrians' and their traditional way of life. No doubt the unconditional support given to Haider by the popular daily *Kronen Zeitung*, read by around 3 million Austrians, also contributed greatly to the amazing growth of the FPÖ during those years.

The discursive strategy of Haider[10] consisted in constructing a frontier between an 'us' of all the good Austrians, hard workers and defenders of national values, against a 'them' composed of the parties in power, the trade union bureaucrats, foreigners, and left-wing artists and intellectuals who were, all in their own way, contributing to the stifling of political debate. In his book *Die Freiheit, die ich meine* he declares:

The ruling political class has got the formation of public opinion in its hands and individual opinion is neglected. A dialectical process of extensive nationalisation of society and socialisation of the state has broken the classic separation of state from society. Ideas and opinions of the citizens cannot be conveyed directly but have been usurped by institutions, interest groups and parties. Between them and the state a power game takes place, leaving little scope for individual freedom and self-determination.[11]

In his view one of the main issues where popular consultation is foreclosed is the question of immigration and multiculturalism. He forcefully argues for the people to be able to decide how many immigrants to allow: 'The question is, Who should decide which path to take? In my opinion: the people. Whoever doubts the role of the people as the highest sovereign, questions the very essence of democracy. People have the right not just to go to the polls every four years but are entitled to have a say in questions which are decisive for the future of their country.'[12]

A debate has been raging in Austria and elsewhere concerning the nature of the FPÖ, many people insisting that it should be described as right-wing extremist, even neo-nazi.[13] There is no doubt that an aspect of the FPÖ's rhetoric was also aimed at rallying the nostalgics of the

Third Reich, and one should not overlook the specificity of the Austrian situation and the complex relationship of many Austrians with their past. Moreover, coming from a nazi family, Haider has a very ambiguous attitude towards the crimes of nazism that he tends to minimise.[14] But it would be a serious mistake to overemphasise this element and to attribute the FPÖ's success to it. Those nostalgic sectors correspond only to a very small fraction of its electorate and, although they cannot be denied, the references to the nazi years do not play an important part in the party's ideology. To claim that Haider and his party are 'neo-nazi' completely misses the specificity of this new form of right-wing politics. It might satisfy the good conscience of those who reject any type of collaboration with them, but it does not help anyone to grasp the causes of their success and their appeal for so many workers and young people.

In fact it can be argued that the strategy of *Ausgrenzung* aimed at permanently excluding the FPÖ from government, thanks to the cordon sanitaire established by the two main parties, contributed to its remarkable rise in the last decades. The refusal of the SPÖ and the ÖVP under the last two legislatures even to consider the possibility of an alliance with the Freedom Party allowed it to be perceived as 'victim' of the political establishment, and reinforced its populist appeal. Indeed it could appear to be like David fighting against Goliath, defending the 'little people' against the elites in power.

It is clear that Austrian politics was trapped in a vicious circle. On one hand, the lack of a real democratic discussion about possible alternatives resulting from consensual politics was at the origin of the success of the FPÖ; on the other, success contributed to the permanence of the coalition, whose main justification had become to stop Haider coming to power. The negative consequences of such a situation were exacerbated by an attempt by the government to arrest the progress of the FPÖ by implementing some of the policies that it was advocating, mainly in the field of security and immigration.[15]

It must be stressed that this strategy to win back voters was accompanied by a strident moral condemnation of Haider's xenophobia, and by his demonization as 'nazi'. Of course, such a hypocritical stance made it

impossible to challenge the FPÖ seriously. But the moralistic response to the rise of Haider was very convenient for the governing parties, because it exonerated them from making any autocritique, and from acknowledging their responsibility in his success.

The impasse of moralism

It is always very tempting to claim the moral high ground, but it does not provide a political strategy and it is likely to decrease the appeal of right-wing populist movements. In that respect the case of Austria is very instructive, and it brings us important insights concerning the mistakes to be avoided. Indeed, I believe that the European reactions to the formation of the coalition government between the ÖVP and the FPÖ represent the very definition of the wrong strategy. We witnessed an explosion of moral indignation, which led France and Belgium – worried by the possibility of similar alliances at home – to a series of bilateral measures against the new Austrian government. In the name of the defence of European values and the struggle against racism and xenophobia – of course always easier to denounce in others than to fight in your own country – the other fourteen European governments ostracised the new coalition before it had even done anything that could be deemed reprehensible. All the good democrats saw it as their duty to condemn the coming to power of a supposedly 'nazi' party and raised the alarm against a return of the 'brown plague'.

I do not want to deny that there was some cause for concern, or that precautionary measures were legitimate. But this does not justify the near-hysterical outcry that took place. The fourteen could easily have issued a strong warning to the new coalition, announcing that they were going to be under serious observation, and threatened them with sanctions in case of any deviation from democratic norms. However, moral condemnation replaced political analysis. No serious attempt was made to scrutinise the nature of the FPÖ, nor the reasons for its success. It was enough to point to the past history of Austria, and to declare that the problem was that it was never properly 'denazified'. People

overlooked the fact that, far from being a specific Austrian phenomenon, right-wing populist parties were already on the rise in many other European countries: Belgium, France, Italy, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and Switzerland. Led by a militant press, only too happy to have found a new devil to fight, an incredible campaign of demonisation was launched, which quickly came to focus on all of the Austrians, perceived as being collectively responsible for the rebirth of the 'fascist danger'.[16]

What we witnessed during this episode was a typical case of 'self-idealisation' – that is, the condemnation of the 'bad Austrians' served to construct the 'us' of the good democrats, morally beyond reproach. We are here dealing with a very perverse mechanism, since it allows people to assert their virtuous nature through an act of rejection. It is also a very powerful way of mobilising passions and creating unity among people who feel that their conscience is bolstered by the very act of excluding others. This is no doubt one of the reasons for the seductiveness of the moralistic approach, and its increasing role in politics.

A few months later the fourteen European governments realised that the 'sanctions' were counterproductive, and that they had to find a way out of the impasse without losing face. Again unable to envisage a political approach, they acted this time on the juridical terrain, deciding to ask three 'wise men' to scrutinise the nature of the Freedom Party. When their report concluded that the party, 'despite the presence of extremist elements', was not 'neo-nazi' but 'right-wing populist', and that it did not contravene democratic norms, the bilateral sanctions were lifted.[17] Of course, both sides claimed victory. The FPÖ announced that its legitimacy had been vindicated, while the fourteen declared that, thanks to their reaction, the new coalition had been kept in check.

Clearly the whole episode had negative consequences for the EU. For instance, it antagonised small nations like the Danes, who felt that such treatment would not have been used in the case of a more important country. And, as was demonstrated by the lack of European reaction to the much more dangerous coalition established by Berlusconi in Italy with Bossi's Lega Norte and Fini's Allianza Nationale, they were

right. Moreover, this strategy of moral denunciation did not have the intended effect of arresting the growth of right-wing populist parties. Witness the good results of the Progress Party in Norway in September 2000 (14.6 per cent of the vote), the People's Party in Denmark in November 2001 (12 per cent), the Pim Fortuyn List in Netherlands in May 2002 (26 per cent), not to mention the 18 per cent gained by Le Pen in the second round of the French presidential elections on 5 May 2002.

Particularly interesting for my argument is the case of the Vlaams Blok (VB) whose strong performance in the national Belgian elections of October 2000 should also bring about some rethinking of the effects of the cordon sanitaire. By the way, doubts in this regard had been expressed by Patrick Janssens, the president of the Flemish Socialist Party, one of the very few Belgian politicians to have criticised the measures against the Austrian government. In an interview published in the Belgian daily Le Soir on 7 February 2000, he affirmed that in his view the best way to fight the VB was not to establish a 'sacred union' among all the good democrats from right to left, but on the contrary to revive the opposition between left and right, in order to offer the voters real alternatives, instead of leaving to the populist right a monopoly of the opposition to the existing order.

It is important to note the obvious similarities between the Belgian and Austrian cases. As in Austria, where the grand coalition between the SPÖ and the ÖVP allowed the FPÖ to appear as the only real alternative to the 'system', so in Antwerp the centre of VB power (where it reached 33 per cent of the vote in the last elections), a coalition between Socialists and Christian-democrats has monopolised political power for several decades. The effect of the cordon sanitaire was of course to reinforce the image of 'outsider', and therefore the appeal of the VB.[18]

However, the best argument against the strategy of 'Ausgrenzung' is provided by what has been happening in Austria since the establishment of the ÖVP/FPÖ coalition. In the elections that took place in November 2002 the FPÖ's share of the votes was reduced to 10 per cent, after having reached 27 per cent in November 1999. This proves

their participation in the Austrian government was fateful for the party. When in opposition it could manage -- thanks to a skilful rhetoric combining neoliberal themes with xenophobic ones -- to attract groups with opposed interests, but once in power that was no longer possible. As a result it began to lose ground in all local elections: Styria in October 2000, Burgenland in December 2000 and Vienna in March 2001. When Jörg Haider realised that the situation was becoming critical, he attempted to regain the initiative by openly opposing several policies of the government. But his *coup de force* backfired, provoking a split in his party and the resignation of several FPÖ ministers. The outcome was the dissolution of the coalition government and the organisation of elections, which saw the resounding victory of the ÖVP, which with 42.3 per cent of the vote managed to overtake the SPÖ, which lost the leading position that it had long occupied. Reduced to third place and having lost two-thirds of its electorate, the FPÖ was in deep crisis, and its apparently irresistible rise had been stopped. The ÖVP-FPÖ coalition was re-established after the elections of 2002, and the decline of the FPÖ continued. In the European elections of June 2004 they only received 6.3 per cent of the vote, and the very survival of the party is now at stake.

A similar conclusion can be drawn from what happened in the Netherlands, where the centre-right coalition established with the Pim Fortuyn List collapsed after less than 100 days in power because of an internecine power struggle in the party of the murdered politician. Since then the party's popularity has drastically declined. To be sure, this is in part due to the disappearance of their leader, which created disarray in the party, but it is very likely that bringing it into the government – instead of allowing its populist rhetoric to flourish in opposition – accelerated the crisis.

Back to politics!

Let's recall the main points of my thesis. First I want to emphasise that my aim has not been to propose an exhaustive explanation of the phenomenon of right-wing populism, but only to put the accent on one

aspect that is generally overlooked in the literature on this topic. It is my contention that a crucial dimension of the recent success of right-wing populist parties in Europe is usually omitted. This is due to the fact that most studies are informed by a rationalistic theoretical framework that prevents them understanding the specificity of the political. They tend to adopt an approach inspired by either an economic or a moral framework, which prevents them from realising the ineradicability of antagonism, as well as the central role played by passions, in the formation of collective political identities. Although this evasion of the political in its antagonistic dimension has always been one of the main shortcomings of the liberal approach, in recent years theories about the end of the adversarial model of politics have amplified this problem. In a political conjuncture in which the move towards the centre by formerly socialist parties has led to the blurring of the frontiers between left and right, this has created a situation in which the cleavage between 'us' and 'them' constitutive of democratic politics can no longer take place within the context of the traditional democratic parties. As I have tried to show, this has created a void which is currently occupied by right-wing populist demagogues who, by articulating a diversity of fears and resentments, have been able to constitute a new form of us/them opposition through a populist discourse in which 'the people' is constituted on the basis of a chain of equivalences between all those who are, in one way or another, presented as being oppressed by the 'power bloc' constituted by the political elites, the bureaucracy and the intelligentsia.

What is problematic is not the reference to 'the people'. Indeed, I have argued that it is necessary to reassert the democratic side of liberal democracy, and this implies reactivating the notion of popular sovereignty. The problem lies in the way in which this 'people' is constructed. What makes this populist discourse right-wing is its strongly xenophobic character, and the fact that in all cases immigrants are presented as a threat to the identity of the people, while multiculturalism is perceived as being imposed by the elites against the popular will. In most cases this populism also contains a strong anti-EU element, European integration being identified with the authoritarian strategy of the elites.[19]

To be able to offer a counter-strategy, it is necessary to acknowledge that, for several decades, important changes have taken place in European countries without real popular consultation and discussion of possible alternatives. It is therefore not surprising that a sense of frustration exists among all those who have not profited from those changes, or who feel that they are jeopardising their present conditions or future prospects. As long as traditional parties refuse to engage with those issues, with the argument that this evolution is a necessary one and that there is no alternative to the neoliberal model of globalisation, it is likely that right-wing populist parties will continue to grow. And it is certainly not moral condemnation that will make them disappear; it might even have the contrary effect.

It is no doubt encouraging to see that the appeal of those parties diminishes once they become part of the government, and that they seem able to strive only when in opposition. This reveals their structural limits. However, without a profound change in the workings of democratic politics, the problems which have led to the emergence of right-wing populism will not disappear. If a serious attempt is not made to address the democratic deficit that characterises the 'post-political' age that neoliberal hegemony has brought about, and to challenge the growing inequalities that it has created, the diverse forms of resentment are bound to persist; and there is even the danger that they will take more violent modes of expression.

But let's not be too pessimistic. At the moment right-wing populism might be on the rise, but there are also some positive signs that things are beginning to change on the left. The recent evolution of the 'anti-globalisation' movement shows that, after a 'negative' phase limited to the critique of institutions like the IMF and the WTO, serious attempts are now being made to construct a positive alternative to the neoliberal order, and this is very promising. The success of the Social Forums reveals that what is at stake in this emerging movement is not, as some would have it, a somewhat futile rejection of a supposedly 'neutral' process of globalisation, but the critique of its neoliberal mode and the struggle for another globalisation, informed by a different political

project; a globalisation aiming at a different world order, where inequalities would be drastically reduced, and where the concerns of the most exposed groups would be addressed – instead of an exclusive focus on the welfare of the middle classes. It is by engaging fully with such a project that we will be able to offer an effective political answer to the challenge of right-wing populism.

3

Populism as an Internal Periphery of Democratic Politics

BENJAMIN ARDITI

The verbal smoke surrounding populism

Neopopulism and neocorporatism are regular entities in our political lexicon, yet the meaning assigned to the prefix 'neo' is not as clear in the former as it is in the latter. The rather unambiguous meaning of neocorporatism derives from the conceptual stability of its classical referent in the mainstream literature of political science. In the case of neopopulism, the prefix has not fared so well, partly due to the contested status of populism as such.

One only needs to look at the cluster of meanings associated with the term. The account offered by the sociology of modernisation prevailed throughout the 1960s, at least in the developing world. A classic exponent of this approach is Germani, who sees populist mobilisation as a deviation in the standard path from traditional to modern society.[1] Di Tella proposes a modified yet equally functionalist interpretation. He conceives of populism as the result of the convergence of two anti-status quo forces, the dispossessed masses available for mobilisation and an educated yet impoverished elite that resents its status incongruence — the gap between rising expectations and job satisfaction — and broods on ways of changing the current state of things.[2] Other theoretical interpretations move away from this view of populism as an alternative road to the modernisation of class-divided, traditional societies. Lasch sees it as

a response to the crisis of modernity; Laclau, at least in his initial neo-Gramscian approach to populism, conceives of it as a dimension of the popular–democratic imaginary, and argues that its class nature varies in accordance with contending discursive articulations of the concept; Cammack opts for the revival of a Marxist standpoint that associates the phenomenon with resistance to neoliberal capitalism, although he adds a functionalist touch by linking the changing status of neopopulism to the requirements of capitalist reproduction.[3]

Moreover, as Worsley maintains, the term is wide enough to encompass right- and left-wing variants, to appear in advanced countries and in developing ones, in towns and in the countryside, and amongst workers and the middle classes as well as peasants.[4] It includes political phenomena ranging from the Russian *narodnichestvo* of the nineteenth century to William Jennings Bryan and small farmer movements in the US during the 1930s, and Latin American populism of the 1940s and 1950s. The latter, exemplified by Argentina under Perón and Brazil under Getúlio Vargas, had trademark characteristics usually seen as something of a general matrix of classic urban and industrial populism. Among them, strong nationalism; the perception of the state as both a political bounty and the prime mover of economic activity; economic programmes based on subsidies and price controls, import substitution and the protection of local industry; a cavalier allocation of government resources to reward followers and punish opponents, and the use of public spending to build networks of patronage disregarding criteria of fiscal or monetary responsibility; the enfranchisement of the urban underclass of *descamisados* (shirtless) or *cabecitas negras* (dark heads), and their mobilisation against the oligarchy; the creation of mass political parties; the growth of trade union militancy, shadowed by governmental control of organised labour and its use as a reserve army for mass demonstrations in support of the party or the leader; the cult of personality that aggrandises the stature of the leader and turns him or her into a quasi-messianic figure; and the role of leaders as political brokers who bypass formal mechanisms of representation whenever it suits them.

On the political side of the disagreement around populism, those who have focused on the more worrisome traits, like the messianic nature of its leaders or the submission of trade unions to the government, see it as a purely negative phenomenon. Others find it hard to reject many of its avowed goals when these are taken at face value, as they read like a wish-list for a socialist and radical-democratic agenda. For example, the emphasis on welfare policies and employment; the continual appeal to the people, the claim to empower the 'common man' and the capacity to motivate largely un-political individuals to participate; or the professed aim of restoring some dignity to politics, which, instead of representing the aspirations of society, often functions as a pork-barrel business run by corrupt and cynical political impresarios. This, together with the anti-liberal bias that I will discuss below, helps to clarify why in the 1960s and 1970s parts of the Third World intelligentsia – among them, socialist intellectuals who championed nationalist and anti-imperialist demands – saw populism as a positive phenomenon.

Things have changed quite radically in recent years, without dispelling the polemic around the meaning of the term. Populism today seems to have very little in common with its classical urban-industrial referent, except, perhaps, for the self-perception of the leader as a saviour of the nation and the standard – albeit often demagogic – observance of the premise that '*virtue resides in the simple people, who are the overwhelming majority, and in their collective traditions*'.[5] This begs the inevitable questions of who 'the people' are and how the meaning of the term varies from one case to another.[6] Nationalism and economic protectionism are virtually gone, and popular mobilisation tends to be minimised; in its wake, we are left with what some describe as a marriage of convenience between neoliberal economics and neopopulist politics.[7] To talk of a marriage does not settle the question either, for despite the general advocacy of market liberalisation, the differences in the policies they follow once in office remain far too large to allow us to identify this as a common denominator that could function as the genus of the more recent incarnations of the populist experience.

To complicate matters further, the populist drive seems to be virtually indistinguishable from the 'politics of faith' – as Oakeshott calls it – that has characterised a wide range of reform movements throughout modernity.[8] For example, the will to renew politics, the exaltation of the people, and the presumed immediacy of their link with the leader or the party are present in political movements that are not usually branded populist. Besides, one cannot fail to notice that the terms we have been using – populism, modern politics, democracy and reform – do not cease to overdetermine or contaminate one another; and as a result, the conceptual frontiers between them become rather unstable. This puts a limit to any pretension to disambiguate fully the 'as such' of populism vis-à-vis politics. The conceptual contours of the term remain fuzzy, and its theoretically contested status unabated, to the extent that we might want to describe populism as an 'anexact' object. I take this paradoxical expression from Deleuze and Guattari, who in turn borrow it from Husserl's writings on protogeometry or science that studies vagabond or nomadic morphological essences. 'Protogeometry', they say, 'is neither inexact like sensible things nor exact like ideal essences, but *anexact yet rigorous* ("essentially and not accidentally inexact"). The circle is an organic, ideal, fixed essence, but roundness is a vague and fluent essence, distinct both from the circle and things that are round (a vase, a wheel, the sun) ... At the limit, all that counts is the constantly shifting borderline'.[9] The interesting thing about this notion is that it falls outside the binary opposition between exact and inexact, for the vagueness of the contours of anexact objects is a requisite condition and cannot be formalised as a clear truth-value. Considering the range of interpretations and positions mentioned above, populism could well be an anexact object, and therefore any precise description faces a real and perhaps insurmountable limit.

This does not mean that the phenomenon is intractable. Worsley puts it quite fittingly when he says that 'since the word *has* been used, the existence of verbal smoke might well indicate a fire somewhere'.[10] Is this fire sufficiently distinct to beget an acceptable descriptive concept? I have some reservations about how precise one can get, although there is a growing awareness that populism might be less of a stand-alone

phenomenon than one that intertwines with contemporary politics. Heywood sees it as a response to the failures of elitist democracy in the European polity, whereas for Canovan it emerges in the ever-present gap between the pragmatic and the redemptive faces of democracy.[11] Laclau has taken this idea further, suggesting that we should regard *all* politics as populist to some extent. 'If populism consists in postulating a radical alternative within the communitarian space, a choice in the crossroads on which the future of a given society hinges, does not populism become synonymous with politics?' The answer can only be affirmative.[12] There is some truth to this view, but one needs to say something more in order to avoid a simple and direct conceptual overlap between politics and populism, as well as to account for non-radical instances of the populist appeal.

One possible step in this direction would be to explore the pertinence of situating the phenomenon in its relation to both modern politics and democracy. The evidence for this link is mixed. In the more intuitive use of the term, populism, old and new, is a label applied to crowd-pleasing politicians who are hard to distinguish from demagogues, who will make any kind of promise, no matter how unattainable, as long as it advances their cause, and who will tweak legal procedures and institutional arrangements shamelessly to adjust them to their needs. This, of course, applies to other political movements too. The common-sense use of the term also describes an ambiguous observance of democratic practices and a general dislike of liberal institutional settings. Whether they are in government or in opposition, the populists' impatience with formalised decision-making processes leads them to invoke their trademark distrust of elites as a sweeping device to override institutional constraints on their actions. Perhaps one can attribute this to their inexperience with the intricacies of the legislative and judicial process, for they see themselves, legitimately or not, as political outsiders. Whatever the reason, their disdain for the procedural channels and for the checks and balances of the democratic process reflects a strong anti-establishment ethos that might explain why liberals are not particularly keen on populism. They see populism, especially the urban-industrial one, as a variant of old

Caesarism with a democratic dressing. Yet, even when latter-day populists warp the operational mechanisms of a liberal-democratic framework of politics – representation, partisan competition, accountability and due process of law – they invest considerable energy in defending their democratic credentials and reassuring critics of their observance of that framework. Either as mere posturing or as an actual practice, the democratic vindication is part of the populist imaginary, although the persistence of authoritarian variants is a reminder that one must keep a level head when thinking of its relation to democracy.

Following this lead, I will suggest that populism is a recurrent feature of modern politics, one that iterates itself within both democratic and undemocratic settings, and examine three possible modes of the phenomenon. If one looks at it from the standpoint of the political subsystem, populism appears to be a fellow traveller of contemporary, media-enhanced modes of representation at work in both emerging and well-established democracies. This mode would be fully compatible with the institutional regime form of liberal-democratic politics. A second possibility shifts the focus to the more turbulent modes of participation and political exchange lurking behind the normality of democratic procedures. In this case, the populist mobilisation would be a symptom or paradoxical element capable of both disturbing and renewing the operation of democratic politics: it would function as a mirror where the latter can look at the rougher, less palatable edges that remain veiled by the gentrifying veneer of its liberal format. These two modalities of populism can thrive in a democratic setting, but the third one works as an underside that endangers this setting. It also emerges from within democratic politics, but as a 'misfire' whereby populism can morph all too easily into authoritarianism. This is a reminder that the phenomenon can be something more dangerous than a mode of representation or a disturbance of democracy, as it can also signal an actual interruption of democracy. Taken together, these three possibilities of populism – as a mode of representation, as a politics at the more turbulent edges, and as a threatening underside – will enable us to recast the populist experience as an *internal periphery* of liberal-democratic politics.

Populism as a mode of political representation

The first mode positions the discussion at the level of the political regime: we can regard populism as a mode of representation that has become part of mainstream democratic politics. In specifying this link, it will become clear that the reciprocal applies too. Macpherson's work on liberalism and democracy illustrates this double link very well. He claims that while the expansion of suffrage rights in the second half of the nineteenth century led to the democratisation of liberalism, the permanence of market society and representative government contributed to the liberalisation of democracy.[13] This gave birth to the syntagm 'liberal democracy'. Similarly, the presence of a populist mode of representation in liberal democracies is not just an arithmetic addition to that setting; it also brings about a geometric dislocation insofar as it permeates the practice of democratic politics itself. Put differently, if populism is a mode of representation compatible with liberal-democratic politics, the latter is not left untouched, as it also incorporates some of the traits of populist representation.

How do we describe a populist mode of representation – warts and all – as part of the territory of democratic politics? One way of approaching this is to draw from authors who have referred to a populist style or mode of persuasion. Knight conceives it as a set of features – rapport with the people, a confrontational mentality, personalism, and nominalism of his definition of the populist style,[15] it evokes, at least implicitly, the problems associated with a correspondence theory of truth. However, if one leaves this issue aside, the features Knight mentions, and his emphasis on the relevance of a more flexible view based on the idea of style, open up a productive line of inquiry. It tacitly accepts the impossibility of establishing a Cartesian-style definition of the populist phenomenon, which in turn confirms Oakeshott's well-known claim that the political vocabulary of modernity cannot extricate itself from some degree of ambiguity.[16]

Canovan also speaks of style, which she describes as the ability to communicate in tabloid-like language, offer political analyses that are as simple and direct as the solutions they propose, and a general knack for appearing to be the embodiment of transparency.[17] Similarly, Kazin's study of populism in the US refers to it as a style of political rhetoric or as a mode of persuasion, one whereby speakers use everyday 'expressions, tropes, themes, and images to convince large numbers of Americans to join their side or to endorse their views on particular issues'.[18] In the US, he says, this language has undergone many transformations. The nineteenth-century heritage of *Americanism* and its virtues – the producer ethic constituting 'the people', and an elite that opposes and exploits 'the people' – has drifted into a more conservative territory in the late twentieth century, with the appearance of the moral majority, the criticism of 'Big Government', the scorn for the cultural elite, and so on.[19]

Once again, this seems quite correct. My hesitation here is that a populist persuasion built on the strength of a simple and direct language, which entails a reduction of the complexity of the issues presented to the electorate, also seems to be characteristic of contemporary politics generally. Likewise, the appeal to the people or the interpellation of the common people against the status quo is also a distinctive trait of democracy, or at least of those who mobilize the redemptive side of politics. Perhaps the distinction is a matter of *degree*, in the sense that populism radicalises the appeal to the people, but then there is the problem of measuring the intensity of the appeal. Schmitt faces a similar problem when he invokes the criterion of intensity to define a political opposition. He wants to differentiate friend-enemy oppositions – according to him, the political opposition par excellence – from all others according to the criterion of intensity: political oppositions are the most intense because they are the only ones that can lead to the extreme or decisive case of war.[20] Yet as Derrida has shown, this presupposes a *telos* of intensity. If an opposition becomes more political because it has the possibility of reaching the extreme case of war, then, contrary to what Schmitt claimed, war would become not the limit case

but the quintessence of the political.[21] I suppose that a similar problem would plague a distinction between populism and democracy based on the appeal to the people, or the use of a certain rhetoric or mode of persuasion.

I am not saying that we should abandon this argument, as it seems to me that it is quite relevant for the study of populist discourse. I suggest instead that we shift the focus to the field of representation, for this has the double advantage of maintaining a family resemblance with both style and rhetoric, and of connecting populism with mainstream politics. The usual way of dealing with this link is to say that populism arises as the result of a crisis of representation, as a response to either the incapacity or the refusal of elites to respond to people's concerns. There is some evidence to support this view. The populist right often exploits xenophobia to swell its ranks and disqualify (other) professional politicians. For example, they blame establishment politicians for the rise in unemployment among domestic labourers, because they are lax on immigration controls, thus encouraging the influx of foreign workers. A crisis of representation would then constitute a fertile terrain for the emergence of populism. However, the reference to 'crisis' also narrows down the scope of the populist experience to moments when politics fails to address participatory, distributive or other demands. Here we could build on Panizza's advice to distinguish 'populism in the streets' from 'populism in power',[22] and argue that the emphasis on the exception does not allow us to differentiate populist politics in opposition, when the motif of the breakdown of representation is more likely to be salient, from populism in government, when the possibility of such a crisis tends to be dismissed, though a populist mode of representation might remain in place all the same.

Instead of focusing on the moments of crisis, then, we could look at the very idea of representation and see how populism takes it on. Representation means rendering present, bringing into presence through a substitute, 'the making present of something that is nevertheless absent', or, more in tone with the specifically political sense of 'acting for others', representation 'means acting in the interest of the represented,

in a manner responsive to them'.[23] This acting for others does not mean that the 'others' are left completely at the mercy of their representatives, for they also act upon them, if only because of their participation in public debates and their capacity to punish or reward elected officials by exercising their suffrage rights. However, 'representation' does have at least three elementary yet important presuppositions. First, the existence of two levels of playing field, that of the represented and that of those who act for them as their representatives. Second, that there is a gap between these levels, which prevents collapsing one into the other and therefore distinguishes representation from self-government. Finally, if the 're-' of representation involves a repetition whereby the people return through a substitute,[24] then that which returns cannot be reduced to an unaltered sameness, to a mere expression of pre-constituted identities and interests. Like any return, which is governed by what Derrida calls the law of iterability or the paradox of a repetition whose sameness incorporates something other,[25] the task of 'rendering present' introduces a differential element that modifies the absent presence of the people, for otherwise, instead of representation we would have the simultaneous presence of the people and their delegates. The main point here is that the presence of 'the people' is at once indirect and constitutively impure. Its presence is at least in part an effect of representation, insofar as the latter involves a drive to configure the identity and interests of the represented by addressing the classical political questions of 'who we are' and 'what we want'.

Populists are notoriously ambiguous about this. On the one hand, they have always claimed to speak in the name of the people and to use their language, to be the voice of those who have no voice and the agency that summons their presence to the political stage. This is often more the expression of a desire than a reality, for, among other things, De Ipola's reminder that the gap between the conditions of production and the conditions of reception of appeals to the people does not guarantee the success of those appeals.[26] On the other hand, populism has also been rather hazy about who the people are, conceiving them variously as the dispossessed, the hard-working middle classes, the

burdened tax-payers, the 'common man', the moral majority, and so on. One might say that this is not a relevant point, for the populist rendering-present of the people is still committed to distinguishing between a certain 'us' and 'them' characteristic of political oppositions. That is, populism must make an effort to configure the identity of the people and to specify the disagreement that pitches them against named adversaries – the elites, the oligarchy, Big Government, or what have you. This is correct, but even then, the populist 'us' remains conveniently vague. It is a deliberate vagueness, for it enables it to blur the contours of 'the people' sufficiently to encompass anyone with a grievance structured around a perceived exclusion from a public domain of interaction and decision hegemonised by economic, political or cultural elites.

A similar ambiguity surrounds the gap between the absent presence of the people and the action of representing them. The gap is bridged by a 'presentation' that forgets the iterability at work in the 're-' of representation. First, because of the presumed immediacy of the relation between the people and the leader or his movement, in which case there is no absence but only a joint presence without representation. Second, because populism claims that the trusted leader is a vehicle for the expression of the popular will, which once again dissolves the gap between the represented and the representatives, except that in this case we are only left with the latter by fiat of tacit authorisation. What we have here is a mirror game, an alleged double and simultaneous full presence, of the people and of those who act for them. A representation that pretends not to be such reflects a clear bias for presence. Like Rousseau, populists distrust representation as a corruption of the general will, and see themselves less as representatives than as simple placeholders or spokespeople for the common man, but unlike Rousseau they also distrust autonomous initiatives that empower citizens and encourage them to act by themselves. This ambivalent oscillation between the glorification of the independent action of the people (they are merely their placeholders) and the instrumental appropriation of that action (they incarnate the people and speak in their

name) furnishes populist representation with a convenient permanent alibi. Indeed, just as Barthes observed that myth always appears to have an 'elsewhere' at its disposal that allows it to avoid admitting its condition as a second-order semiological system,[27] populism seems to have one too, which it uses to put the spin on its position vis-à-vis representation, participation and mobilisation. This ambivalence explains why some say that populism releases the unadulterated energies of the people, while others claim that it is little more than the shackle that condemns people to a position of subservience to a movement or to its leader. Yet in both readings the leader appears to be a symbolic device. As the presumed incarnation of the popular will, or as a trustee of the people, his (or her) role is to simplify the issues and to disambiguate the identity of the populist camp.

What does this tell us about the populist mode of representation? We have noticed that it revolves around a series of themes: the promise of inclusion and intervention in the public sphere, the ambivalence concerning the 'immediacy' of the relationship of representation, and the role of the leader as a symbolic condensation of the movement. Why is this different from the conventional take on political representation? In order to respond to this question we have to go back to Pitkin's argument. When she discusses political representation, she discards Hobbesian authorisation, for it entails a complete disappearance of the represented: the authorisation that they grant to their representatives is so exhaustive that all the actions and judgments of the latter are valid and binding.[28] She also discards the 'standing for' that defines symbolic representation – when a symbol takes the place of an absent object, as in the case of a flag that stands for the unity of the nation – because this tells us nothing about the action of representation proper.[29] Instead, she settles for 'acting for others', for she believes that this formulation deals with the substance of the activity of political representation itself instead of the formal arrangements surrounding the action. Populist representation departs somewhat from this view. This is not because it cancels Pitkin's 'acting for others', but because it is a mode of representation arising from a crossover between the standard 'acting for others' of political representation in

liberal democracies, the re-entry of a Hobbesian authorisation of sorts under the guise of *trust* for the leader, and a strong symbolic dimension. The latter presents the element that articulates diversity and that seeks to produce an effect of virtual immediacy; that is, an imaginary identification that suspends the distance between the people and their representatives. My contention is that today the crossover that characterises populist representation is prevalent within liberal democracy itself.

The work of Manin can provide some clues to construe this relationship between populism and contemporary forms of representative democracy. Despite the widespread belief in a crisis of representation, he says, what we are experiencing today is a metamorphosis of representation.[30] He identifies three consecutive forms of political representation in the West. These are classic English *parliamentarianism*, from 1832 to the introduction of male universal suffrage in 1867; *party democracy*, an effect of the entry of the underclass into the political system and the emergence of mass political parties, which prevailed in Europe and elsewhere since then and throughout most of the twentieth century; and *audience democracy*, which started to emerge in the 1970s with the decline of mass parties, the impact of the mass media on electoral campaigns, and the formation of a veritable 'stage' for politics. They all share the same principles – the election of representatives, the autonomy of the representatives, the role of public opinion, and trial by discussion – although these appear differently in each of these forms of representative government. We are familiar with the second form, which Kelsen described as *Parteienstaat* or party government,[31] whose demise many continue to mourn as a loss of the *gravitas* of politics. The old hegemony of fiery leaders and disciplined party apparatuses is eclipsed in the wake of audience democracy, with its media-enhanced candidates basking in the cool glow of technopolitical expertise. The democracy of 'audience', says Manin, is akin to a supply-side politics that aims to identify the relevant cleavages within the electorate in order to differentiate the candidate from its adversaries. Media experts replace party bureaucrats and activists, or at least put an end to their earlier prominence, and electoral discipline weakens due to the volatility of party loyalties from one election to the next.[32]

For its critics, audience democracy transforms politics into a spectacle run by media and marketing professionals. Former US president Gerald Ford refers to this type of politics in a caustic remark about the dangers of pointless manipulation when he speaks of 'candidates without ideas hiring consultants without convictions to run campaigns without content'.[33] There is some truth to this claim, but it might also be a somewhat unfair rendering of audience democracy. Opinion polls and electoral marketing might replace the serious pondering of party manifestos and electoral promises, says Manin, but they also help voters by reducing the complexity of the issues and lowering the cost of access to information on those issues.[34] More importantly, at least for the purpose of our inquiry, in audience democracy there is a personalisation of the link between candidates and voters. For Manin, today people tend to vote for a person instead of an electoral platform or a party, and while parties do not lose their central role as electoral machines, they tend to become instruments in the service of the leader. He gives two reasons for this, both of which support our claim that populist representation has gone mainstream.

One is that the channels of political communication, mainly radio and television, affect the nature of the representative relationship; candidates can now communicate directly with their constituents without the mediation of party networks.[35] In a way, he says, this entails a return to the face-to-face character of representation in the parliamentarianism of the nineteenth century. This is true, but also imprecise, since mediations have been reconstituted rather than disappeared. We can provide a more rigorous depiction of the phenomenon by arguing that the mass media enable a semblance of immediacy or, better still, that they give rise to a mode of political representation characterised by the 'as if' of *virtual immediacy*. This 'as if' sublimates the representative link by veiling the gap between the people and those who act for them. This virtual immediacy coincides with the populist presumption of enjoying a direct relation with the people. The second reason Manin gives for the personalisation of political options is that the scope of governmental activity has expanded substantially, and elected officials must make decisions on a wide variety

of issues that a party platform can neither foresee nor specify in advance. In fact, he says, governmentality requires something analogous to what Locke called 'prerogative' power; that is, a certain discretionary margin whereby elected leaders can 'take decisions in the absence of pre-existing laws', which means that the personal *trust* in the candidate becomes an adequate basis of selection.[36] Manin concludes that 'representatives are thus no longer spokesmen; the personalisation of electoral choice has, to some extent, made them trustees'.[37] Once again, we can see a clear analogy between prerogative power based on trust and the role of populist leaders as trustees of the people and as political brokers.

In many ways, then, audience democracy intertwines with populist representation conceived as a crossover between acting for others, authorisation, and the strong role of symbolic imagery. The election of Arnold Schwarzenegger as governor of California in 2003 is a good illustration of 'trust'. Exit polls conducted on election day 'suggest that for those who voted for Schwarzenegger, his personal qualities mattered far more than the position he had on the issues'.[38] We can also see this at work in the case of Mexico. In 2000, Vicente Fox, the victorious presidential challenger who put an end to the seventy-two-year hegemony of the ruling Partido de la Revolución Institucional (PRI), obtained the nomination of his centre-right Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) not by lobbying the party hierarchy or mobilising the faithful inside the party apparatus. He obtained it thanks to an ad hoc organisation, *Amigos de Fox* ('Friends of Fox'), which mounted an impressive media campaign to present him as a no-nonsense candidate in touch with the feelings of ordinary people. The popularity of Fox rested on his communication skills and the work of the team of advisers that designed his campaign. His success hinged on the way he connected this popularity with the claim for political renewal. People *trusted* Fox and felt they had a direct rapport with him. This allowed him to acquire supra- and extra-partisan legitimacy, which the leadership of his own party did not like but could not stop either; so in the end it had little choice but to follow the lead of public opinion and anoint Fox as its candidate. The PAN and its allies benefited from the pro-Fox electoral tide; they gained more elected

positions than they would otherwise have had, although they obtained fewer votes than Fox himself.

Opinion polls and electoral studies conducted in the aftermath of the general elections of 2 July 2000 agree that those who voted for Fox did so less for what he said than for what he symbolised. People saw him as the most credible option for ousting the PRI, says Flores, to the extent that the majority of those who voted for him and his electoral coalition were betting on the idea of change regardless of the specific content of that change.[39] This is similar to what happened with Schwarzenegger in the California elections. In Manin's terminology, Fox's advisers perceived that the central cleavage within Mexican society was one between continuity and change – and not, as the centre-left PRD had calculated, between the sovereign nation and the forces of neoliberalism. If we look at this from the standpoint of discourse theory, or at least of one of its variants,[40] the virtue of Fox's campaign managers was that they correctly identified 'change' as the empty signifier needed to suture the Mexican political field in 2000. More importantly, they succeeded in presenting their candidate rather than his party as the agent capable of effecting a symbolic appropriation of that signifier. Either way, this shows that Fox built his electoral strategy around a typically populist mode of representation – one that welded 'acting for others' and the symbolic 'standing for' with authorisation based on trust – that has become intertwined with contemporary politics. He developed a virtual or media-based face-to-face relation with the electorate, presented himself as the representative of the will of the people, was graced by the trust that people invested in him regardless of the actual platform on which he campaigned, and became the torchbearer of the idea of change.

Populism as a symptom: politics on the edges of democracy

If the former mode of representation defines populism virtually as a phenomenon that coexists with mainstream politics and transforms it, the second modality moves into a different territory, which positions it together with other radical movements in the rougher edges of

democratic politics. Here the argument concerning the link between populism and democracy begins to shift from the institutional site of the political regime to the democratic imaginary of modern politics. To put it in a schematic manner, and drawing from psychoanalysis, we could interpret populism as the return of the repressed, or better still, as a symptom of democracy; that is, as an internal element of the democratic system which also reveals the limits of the system and prevents its closure in the pure and simple normality of institutional procedures.

At times Freud thinks of the symptom in the usual medical sense of a sign of illness, but this is not what he wants to highlight in his study of the psychic apparatus. He conceives it mainly as a substitutive formation that stands in for a frustrated desire, or for something amiss in our lives. It shields us from danger by masking a traumatic experience. He mentions the case of a patient with obsessive neurosis. The patient, who was living apart from her husband, was prone to running from one room to another and then calling the servant, but upon her arrival she would forget why she had summoned her, or instruct her to do something trivial. The patient eventually came to realise that her obsessive behaviour both imitated and disguised her husband's behaviour during the wedding night. Affected by impotence, he would go back and forth from his room to his wife's chambers trying – unsuccessfully – to consummate the matrimony, and worrying that the servants would put him to shame if they discovered his failure. The symptom-formation – the compulsive act of going from one room to the other and summoning the servant – was the mechanism whereby the patient's ego attempted to dispel the frustration caused by the husband's sexual failure. It aimed to remove her from a situation of danger. This turns the symptom into something akin to the formation of a compromise between repressed representations and repressing representations. The phenomena of symptom-formation are, then, an expression of the repressed or, to be more precise, they indicate the return of the repressed through more or less tortuous paths.[41]

Freud offers us an additional explanation. He says: 'Symptoms are derived from the repressed, they are, as it were, its representatives before

the ego; but the repressed is foreign territory to the ego – internal foreign territory – just as reality (if you will forgive the unusual expression) is external foreign territory'.[42] This characterisation of the repressed through the metaphor of the 'internal foreign territory' is ingenious and helpful for our inquiry. On the one hand, the sui generis status of the symptom destabilises a clear frontier between inside and outside: it opens up a play or negotiation between properly internal phenomena and phenomena that are internal yet somewhat improperly so – they are part of an internal foreign territory. On the other hand, it gives us clues for understanding the second modality of populism as an internal foreign territory or internal periphery of democratic politics, as a phenomenon that develops in its edges or more turbulent regions. I want to develop this point through Žižek's social and political reading of the symptom, as he, too, proposes this play between the proper and the improper. In his interpretation – which iterates and hence reformulates Freud's through a reading inspired by Lacan – the symptom is 'a particular element which subverts its own universal foundation, a species subverting its own genus'.[43] In this respect, Marxist critique is symptomatic, for the working of ideology, he says, requires not so much a false consciousness among those who participate in a given social reality but rather that they 'do not know what they are doing'. This misrecognition was already present in the case of the woman with obsessive neurosis mentioned by Freud, in which case a symptom could be defined as "a formation whose very consistency implies a certain non-knowledge on the part of the subject"; the subject can "enjoy his symptom" only in so far as its logic escapes him'.[44]

Žižek illustrates this through an example borrowed from Marx's theory of commodity exchange, or rather from Alfred Sohn-Rethel's reading of it. The universality of the commodity form presupposes that every exchange is always an exchange among equivalents. Yet, this universality happens to be an empty or counterfeited universality; he calls it an ideological universal insofar as the labour force is a special commodity whose use – the actual expenditure of labour – generates surplus value over and above the market value of the labour force itself.[45]

That is why the system gives rise to an equivalent exchange, but also to 'a particular paradoxical exchange – that of the labour force for its wages – which, precisely as an equivalent, functions as the very form of exploitation.'[46] Labour power, he says, is a special commodity, one 'representing the internal negation of the universal principle of equivalent exchange of commodities'. This negation of universal equivalence is internal to equivalent exchange and not merely its violation. Žižek caps this by saying that utopia consists of 'a belief in the possibility of a *universal without a symptom*,'[47] which suggests that the symptom is not an accident but rather a distinctive trait that can be found in the actual working of any system. We can add that if the misrecognition of this fact is required to maintain the semblance of equal exchange, and therefore to enable the effectiveness of commodity exchange, then any effort to unveil the special status of labour power as the site where equivalence breaks down – which is precisely what working-class and socialist movements have been doing since the nineteenth century – introduces a measure of disruption into the system, although this does not necessarily entail its implosion.

Let us connect this with the discussion about the relationship of interiority of populism and democracy. What is the status of this interiority? Earlier we described it as a mode of representation, but the symptom offers us a different angle. As a symptom of democracy, populism functions as a paradoxical element that belongs to democracy by sharing with it the standard traits of participation, mobilisation, informal expression of the popular will, and so on and, at the same, time interrupts its closure as a gentrified or domesticated political order by overlooking standing procedures, institutional relations, comforting rituals. We can illustrate this through an analogy with the discomfort caused by the arrival of a drunken guest at a dinner party. He is bound to disrupt table manners and the tacit rules of sociability by speaking loudly, interrupting the conversations of others, and perhaps flirting with the wives of other guests. The hosts might not be particularly happy with the awkward visitor, but having invited him they probably cannot get rid of

him either, so they will do their best to downplay his antics in order to make the rest feel as comfortable as possible. Populism plays the role of the awkward guest; it is a paradoxical element that functions both as an internal moment of liberal democracy and as that which can disrupt the gentrified domain in which politics is enacted. This is because representative politics generally entails the priority of institutional mediations over charisma, the presence of checks and balances to limit the discretionary powers of political leaders, the widespread practice of reaching agreements through negotiations among political elites, and so on. These are the 'table manners' governing democratic politics. Populism disrupts them by mounting its challenge to the redemptive face of democracy, at times in detriment of law and order. As a promise of redemption, the populist mobilisation exerts pressures on the presuppositions of representative democracy, and to some extent warps them through the mobilisation of the people to bypass institutional constraints. Yet even if this mobilisation can be an irritation, one cannot affirm unequivocally that it is *external* to democratic practice as such. The populist 'noise', irritating as it may be, is in fact its internal foreign territory. In principle, its challenge undermines the fullness of any democratic expression of the will of the people, including its own.

How, though, do we distinguish this symptomatic noise from other possible noises? If every disruption of systemic normality – whether it is a demonstration that ends in disturbances or any other non-electoral expression of the popular will – is a symptom of democracy, then the semantic field of the concept of symptom would be stretched so much as to lose its explanatory value. More precisely, it would become useless in accounting for populism in relation to democracy. This poses a real difficulty, but not necessarily an insurmountable one. As mentioned, Macpherson claims that the democratisation of liberalism entailed a liberalisation of democracy. This does not mean that from then on democracy and liberalism became synonymous. We regularly speak of 'democratic liberalism' and use the hyphenated expression 'liberal-democracy', which prevents the closure of democracy in its liberal format of electoral representation or, what amounts to the same thing,

is a reminder that the tension between the terms keeps their relationship open. If anything, liberalism managed to hegemonise democracy, not to suppress the alternatives that exceeded electoral representation — demonstrations, sit-ins, takeovers of buildings, and the like. Populism, like many other radical movements, can be democratic or not, but when it is, invoking the participatory supplement of institutional procedures, it puts to the test the obviousness of what passes as a normal democratic order. Following Rancière's reference to the disagreement or polemicisation as that which singularises an operator of difference — 'equality', 'freedom' or what have you — by putting it to the test in order to see in what it is a universal and in what mere power,[48] we are compelled to put the populist disturbance to the test too. That is, we must judge — and confront our judgment with those of others — whether non-electoral manifestations of the popular will are part of normal political exchanges that take place within liberal democracies, if they function as the symptoms of such orders, or if they simply fall outside their scope and become the nemesis of democracy. I must underline the reference to political judgment, first, because there can be no certitude when we speak of politics, and second, because between the norm, the symptom, and that which falls outside the system lies a grey area that prevents any Cartesian reasoning. Hence, the symptomatic character of the populist mobilisation with regard to the acceptable rules of a gentrified democratic order cannot be adjudicated outside of a disagreement.

I borrow the reference to gentrification from Žižek, who in turn uses it to recast Lefort's distinction between politics and the political.[49] In Žižek's reading, politics is the site where the contingency and negativity of the political are gentrified in a political 'normality', forgotten in an order that has the status of one sub-system among others.[50] Gentrification here stands for the domestication of the political, for what Foucault describes as a continuation of war by other means: political normality is the institutional end-result of war.[51] We can think of it either as the self-perception of liberal democracy or as the horizon towards which it aims or, to put it in Žižek-speak, as the means through

which citizens enjoy their symptom in liberal democracies. As in the presumed universality of commodity exchange that masks the special case of labour power, it creates a semblance of impersonal institutional virtue that conveniently overlooks the shadier deals concocted regularly among the political and economic elites. Populism functions as the symptom of this gentrified domain by bringing back the disruptive 'noise' of the people; it puts objectivity at stake by announcing the return of the founding negativity of the political. In short, by disrupting gentrification, the populist mobilisation, like all radical challenges, is a reminder of the contingency of political arrangements.

We can also look into this from a perspective closer to political and philosophical language, as is Rancière's conception of politics as the enactment of a disagreement. While he does not speak directly of populism, one could argue that gentrification corresponds to what he calls the order of police or partition of the sensible. These conceive the city as a distribution of parts without remainder, as a hierarchy of parts and their functions that aims to cancel out the polemic nature of politics.[52] Populism disrupts gentrification by summoning the demos, that is, what Rancière would call 'the party of the poor'. But the demos, he says, can only be an *improper* part, for the poor — or in the preferred language of populism, the common people — represent the part of those who have no real part in the polis except for the empty property of their freedom. For him, the impropriety of the demos, which is the scandal of democracy, brings into play the constitutive torsion or disagreement of politics. To the extent that populism mounts its challenge on the strength of its mobilisation of the demos, it prevents any reconciliation of the community, and therefore interrupts the closure of liberal democracy as pure elitism or as detached pragmatism.

Drawing from this discussion, we can say that populism functions in two senses as a symptom of democratic politics. As a promise of redemption and as an index of what Canovan calls the reaction against politics as usual, populism disrupts the gentrified democratic order and expands — or at least claims to expand — the scope of citizen involvement in public affairs. Perhaps it would be appropriate here to speak of

populism as a response to 'formal' democracy, as long as we agree that the adjective is not understood in the dismissive sense of a mere travesty of a 'real' or substantive democracy. Following a distinction suggested by Badiou, one could then argue that populism as a symptom recuperates the idea of mass democracy, which he labels 'romantic' and associates with 'collective general assembling, crowded gatherings, riots, and so on', in contrast with the perception of democracy as designating the configuration of the state, which he calls 'formal'.53 Yet as the awkward guest or element that 'falls out' of the gentrified system, it positions itself in the rougher edges of democratic politics, in a grey area where it is not always easy to distinguish populist mobilisation from mob rule. In this interpretation, populism might not necessarily break loose from a democratic setting, but it becomes something of an unstable and destabilising phenomenon. In the terms suggested earlier, and corroborated by the metaphor of the symptom as a 'internal foreign territory', it becomes part of the internal periphery of the democratic order.

Populism as an underside of democracy

Having said this, the very fact that it has a capacity to disrupt democratic politics compels us to inquire about the darker possibilities that can come along with populism. As a political practice that takes place at its rougher edges, populism can be conceived both as a mirror in which democracy can scrutinise its more unsavoury traits, and as an experience that can become (or not) its underside.

Here we can mention Canovan's depiction of populism as a shadow of democracy. Following Oakeshott, who distinguishes between faith and scepticism as the two styles whose interplay characterises modern politics, Canovan speaks of the two faces of democracy — redemption and pragmatism — that require one another and cohabit as two squabbling Siamese twins.54 She claims that the populist mobilisation arises in the gap between them, primarily as a way to counteract the pragmatic excesses of established democracies. By locating populism in this gap, Canovan manages to develop a conception of populism that retains a

relation of interiority with democratic politics. Populism is not the 'other' of democracy, but rather a shadow that follows it continually.

This is a very good observation, and I would like to take it as a starting point to discuss a supplementary semantic connotation of the metaphor of the shadow, one that is required if one wishes to avoid losing populism in the vastness of democratic politics. For this is the issue: to establish the connection between populism and democracy without overlooking the gap that separates them. What is missing in the metaphor is its additional meaning as a sign of danger or an underside. From horror films to mystery novels, the literary device of the shadow is a topos of something ominous; it functions as a signpost to announce the perils that may lurk ahead. It is no different in this case. Critics have warned against the allure of populism by citing the dangers it poses for democracy. The cult of personality can transform leaders into quasi-messianic figures for whom accountability is not a relevant issue, and the populist disregard for institutional checks and balances can encourage rule by decree and all sorts of authoritarian behaviour while maintaining a democratic façade. In addition, the Manichean distinction between good common people and corrupt elites can become an excuse for using strong-arm tactics against political adversaries, and the continual invocation of the unity of the people can be used as means to dispel pluralism and toleration.

Yet democracy is always exposed to the threat of an underside, populist or otherwise. If democracy, as Lefort describes it, is 'instituted and sustained by the *dissolution of the markers of certainty*', by a process of questioning implicit in social practice, and by a representation of unity dependent upon political discourse bound up with ideological debate,55 then in limit situations its very functioning may provide the conditions of possibility for the underside. This danger, he says, arises with the exacerbation of conflicts that cannot be resolved symbolically in the political sphere, and when a sense of social fragmentation pervades society. When this happens, there is a real possibility for the 'the development of the fantasy of the People-as-One, the beginnings of a quest for a substantial identity, for a social body that is welded to its head, for

an embodying power, for a state free from division'.[56] Lefort associates this with the emergence of totalitarian phenomena, but the fantasy of a unity without fissures is equally present in the populist temptation to confuse the government with the state, which amounts to a perversion of representation.[57] This confusion, of course, refers to populism in government, whose sense of possession rather than occupancy is conducive to a patrimonial use of state resources.

The temptation of a substantial identity will also appear when the internal paradox of the populist mode of representation mentioned earlier is resolved on behalf of the leader – that is, when the leader no longer acts for others because he or she presumes to incarnate those others, and therefore believes him- or herself to be authorised a priori. Oakeshott refers to this as the messianic twist of the politics of faith.[58] There are plenty of examples. In the authoritarian corner one might consider the experience of Peru under Fujimori, and on the more progressive side, at least with regard to his social base and egalitarian discourse, we can illustrate it with Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, a progressive yet often troubling leader imbued with an overriding sense of purpose.[59] Here, the gap that differentiates representatives from the represented – and that sets limits to representation as '*acting for others*' – operates haphazardly. Instead of the crossover between acting for others, 'standing for' and authorisation, populist representation gradually slips into the symbolic 'standing for' and ultimately into a Hobbesian authorisation whereby the gap is dissolved de facto in favour of the representative.

Lefort also refers to the populist invocation of social justice,[60] a key element of urban-industrial populism that has sustained its appeal among the dispossessed, as well as among progressive intellectuals. He examines this when he says that populist movements often build their relation with the masses through the mediation of welfare policies, and that this relation might have a negative effect on the health of democratic practice and on the prospects for empowering individuals. While this might sound like a conservative argument against social justice, he is not trying to question equality but to criticise the vertical

relation with the people. Social justice and the redistributive policies through which it comes about certainly improve the life of people by satisfying basic needs. Yet populists see this mostly as a top-down process, as a vertical link connecting political leaders and governmental decision-making bodies with grateful masses. The problem with this type of link is that being grateful turns easily into the demand to submit to the dictates of the party, the government or the leader. In Lefort's words:

> [It] instigates what de la Boétie called 'a voluntary servitude'. Being drawn to populism and to the leader, or putting the destiny of all in the hands of the leader, merely highlights this form of servitude. ... What is the point of social justice if all the measures are decided by a government that seeks the obedience of its citizens as repayment for the rewards it offers, and if such a justice does not awaken in the people awareness of their rights, of their sense of endeavour, or of their freedom of association?[61]

What he tells us here is that servitude, voluntary or otherwise, turns citizenship into an empty shell and distributive justice into an instrument of domination. This disempowerment of citizenship – despite verbal reassurances to the contrary – is a reminder that populism can also project a darker shadow on democracy. Just as Canovan could claim that democracy – or at least, and more precisely, modern politics generally – has two faces, redemptive and pragmatic, we may contend that the populist shadow does too, for it follows democratic politics as a promise and as an underside. As a promise, it can contribute to political renewal by harnessing the participatory energy issuing from the redemptive drive of modern politics, but as an underside, populism can turn out to be dangerous. Reiterating Canovan's analogy, the promise and the underside resemble a pair of squabbling Siamese twins. The problem is that while the promise might merely disturb the more gentrified functioning of the democratic process, as in the case of populism as a politics in the rougher edges of democracy, when the underside gets the upper hand, democracy is ready to leave the political stage.

What can we say in summary about the triple characterisation of democracy described here? To begin with, that the contours of populism emerge in the shape of a double bind that describes not the democratic nature of the phenomenon – for we have seen that this cannot be decided by decree, as there can be undemocratic populism too – but the ambiguous and often tense relation of interiority it maintains with the practice of democracy. Populism can flourish as a fellow traveller of democratic reform movements *and* put democracy in jeopardy. This double bind suggests that people like Canovan, but also Worsley and Hayward, are right in proposing that any inquiry about populism is at the same time an inquiry about democratic politics. Yet it also shows that this works as a conceptual strategy only if one stipulates that it can also refer to its more turbulent aspects, to a reflection about politics played at the rougher edges of democracy. More precisely, one could speak of three modalities of populism with regard to modern democratic politics – as a mode of representation, as a symptom, and as an underside. The actual valence it adopts is undecidable, as it can go in any of these three directions. However, determining when the mode of representation and the disruptive edge cross the line and become an underside of democracy is a matter of political judgment, and cannot be settled by conceptual fiat.

That is why I refer to the phenomenon as an internal periphery or 'internal foreign territory' of democracy and of modern politics gener-ally. The expression safeguards the relation of interiority with democracy that I have developed here, but it also conveys the ideas of an edge and a possible underside, and more importantly, the undecidability associated with the term. Like any border or frontier, a periphery is always a hazy territory that indicates simultaneously the outermost limit of an inside and the beginning of the exterior of a system. Populism can remain within the bounds of democracy but also reach the point where both enter into conflict, and perhaps even go their own separate ways. I believe that this internal periphery portrays the paradoxical and contested status of the relationship between populism and democratic politics.

4

Skinhead Conservatism: A Failed Populist Project

OSCAR REYES

Between 1997 and 2001 the British Conservative Party was unable to challenge the political dominance of Tony Blair's Labour Government. The most popular account of this failure blames the Conservatives' unpopular right-wing populism. Instead of emphasising a coherent strategy that dealt with welfare issues like health and education, William Hague drove the party down a series of populist cul-de-sacs – on Europe, crime, asylum and public morality. In June 2001, the inevitable happened and Hague's right-wing bandwagon was washed away by the 'clear blue water' of electoral defeat. Like all good stories, this one works better as a description of what happened in the 1997–2001 period than as an expla-nation. For if we take seriously the emphasis it places on public service provision, we might be left baffled as to how the Thatcher government ever won while it consistently trailed Labour on these same key issues. This chapter attempts to remedy this deficiency by presenting an account of recent British Conservatism as a failed populist–hegemonic project.

I begin by revisiting Stuart Hall's interpretation of Thatcherism as authoritarian populism, defined as an attempt to forge a reactionary common-sense. Although it is now commonplace among political scien-tists to see this as a crusade that failed, the opinion poll evidence they present does not account for the distinctive unity of the populist issues

NOTES

INTRODUCTION: FRANCISCO PANIZZA

I want to thank Benjamín Arditi for his comments on this paper and Juliet Martínez for her help in editing the manuscript.

1 See, for instance, M. Mackinnon and M. A. Petrone, eds, *Populismo y Neopopulismo en América Latina: El problema de la Cenicienta*, Buenos Aires 1998; Alan Knight, 'Populism and Neo-Populism in Latin America, especially Mexico', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1998, pp. 223–48; and Kenneth Roberts, 'Neoliberalism and the Transformation of Populism in Latin America: The Peruvian Case', *World Politics*, vol. 48, no. 1, 1996, pp. 82–116.

2 The term 'populist' was originally used with reference to the People's Party in the US in the mid-1890s but since then hardly any movement or leader has acknowledged being 'populist'. In common political speak the term has a negative connotation, closely associated to terms such as demagogy and economic profligacy, indicating economic or political irresponsibility.

3 Peter Wiles, 'A Syndrome Not a Doctrine', in Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, eds, *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, London 1969, pp. 166–79.

4 The following characterisation of Latin American populism is typical of this empirical-descriptive approach:

'Populism was an expansive style of election campaigning by colourful and engaging politicians who could draw masses of new voters into their

movements and hold their loyalty indefinitely, even after their deaths. They inspired a sense of nationalism and cultural pride in their followers, and they promised to give them a better life as well'.

Michael Conniff, 'Introduction' in Michael Conniff, ed., *Populism in Latin America*, Tuscaloosa and London 1999, p. 4.

5 Peter Worsley, 'The Concept of Populism', in Ionescu and Gellner, eds, 1969, p. 243.

6 So, for instance, Paul Drake's claim that Latin America's populism has exhibited three interconnected features:

'First, it has been dominated by paternalistic, personalistic, often charismatic leadership and mobilization from the top down. Second, it has involved multi-class incorporation of the masses, especially urban workers but also middle sectors. Third, populists have emphasised integrationist, reformist, nationalist development programmes for the state to promote simultaneously redistributive measures for populist supporters and, in most cases, import-substitution-industrialization.'

Paul Drake, 'Chile's Populism Reconsidered, 1920s–1990s', in Michael Conniff, ed., *Populism in Latin America*, p. 63.

7 I am borrowing the term 'symptomatic' from the chapter by Stavrakakis in this book, to signify a non-essentialist approach based on a formal conceptualisation of populism that identifies its subject – the people – through the constitutive process of naming.

8 This definition follows Ernesto Laclau's seminal work on populism 'Towards a Theory of Populism', in Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, London 1977. For his notion of antagonism see his *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, London 1990, pp. 5–41. See also his contribution to this volume.

9 Taken from Imelda Vega Centeno, *Aprismo Popular: mito, cultura e historia*, Lima 1986, p. 80.

10 This is a modified version of Michael Kazin's definition of populism as a 'mode of persuasion' in Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, Ithaca and London, 1995.

11 The quote from Perot is from Dennis Westlind, *The Politics of Popular Identity: Understanding Recent Populist Movements in Sweden and the United States*, Lund 1996, p. 175. The quote from Chávez is from Luis Ricardo Davila, 'The Rise and Fall and Rise of Populism in Venezuela', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2000, p. 236.

12 Edward Shils, *The Torment of Secrecy: The Background and Consequences of American Security Politics*, London 1956, pp. 98–104.

13 Worsley, 1969, p. 242.

14 Margaret Canovan, 'Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy', *Political Studies*, vol. XLVII, 1999, pp. 2–16.

15 I concur with Dave Lewis that it is impossible to provide any set of positive criteria, no matter how minimal, which would remain the same in all counterfactual circumstances in the definition of identity groups. Therefore the only adequate definition for such a group is that they are those individuals and groups that have either identified themselves, or have been identified by others, as constituting such a group. Dave Lewis, 'Fantasy and Identity – the case of New Age Travellers', paper prepared for the conference *Identification and Politics Workshop II*, May 23–24 2002, University of Essex, Colchester, UK.

16 Worsley, 1969, p. 242.

17 Taken from President Bush's State of the Union address, 29 January 2002.

18 Bush presented the September 11 attack as an attack on freedom in several speeches. For instance, in his State of the Union address he said: 'History has called America and our allies to action, and it is both our responsibility and our privilege to fight freedom's fight.'

19 Although shared and disputed by both the American left and the right, the appeal to liberty and freedom against government interference is particularly prominent in right-wing populism. See Joseph Lowndes chapter in this volume and H. Kazin's *The Populist Persuasion*.

20 Kazin, 1995, pp. 2–3.

21 Worsley, 1969, p. 217.

22 So, for instance, the following excerpt from Bush's 2002 State of the Union address: 'The American people have responded magnificently, with courage and compassion, strength and resolve. As I have met the heroes, hugged the families, and looked into the tired faces of rescuers, I have stood in awe of the American people.'

23 This notion can be exemplified by the story of a woman who said that she felt that she had a number of different problems at work and at home, but that she didn't know what these problems signified until the feminist movement named (identified) them as matters of gender.

24 Alejandro Groppo, 'Representation and Subjectivity in Populist Identification. Some Remarks from a Discourse Analysis Perspective', paper

submitted to the *Conference of the European Consortium for Political Research*, 6–8 September 2001, Kent University, Canterbury, p. 8.

25. Howard Gardner, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership*, London 1966, p. 17.

26. Steve Stein, 'The Paths to Populism in Peru', in Conniff, ed., 1999, p. 104.

27. This is a modified version of Marcos Novaro's analysis of crises of representation. Marcos Novaro, *Pilotos de Tormentas: Crisis de representación y personalización de la política en Argentina (1989–1993)*, Buenos Aires 1994.

28. Francisco Panizza, 'Neopopulism and its limits in Collor's Brazil', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2000, p. 184.

29. John Crabtree, 'Populisms Old and New: The Peruvian Case', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2000, pp. 163–76.

30. Kurt Weyland, 'Neopopulism and Neoliberalism in Latin America: Unexpected Affinities', *Studies in Comparative International Development*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1996, pp. 3–31.

31. Guillermo Rochabrún, 'Deciphering the Enigmas of Alberto Fujimori' *NACLA Report on the Americas*, vol. xxx, no. 1, July/August 1996.

32. Spanish journals *El Progreso*, 31 December 1897 and *El Intransigente*, 7 April 1907, cited in José Alvarez Junco, *El Emperador del Paralelo*, Madrid 1990, p. 409.

33. This shouldn't be taken as precluding the possibility of authoritarian or military populisms, or even a populist renewal of political institutions.

34. Crabtree, 2000, p. 165.

35. Francois-Xavier Guerra, *Modernidad e Independencias*, Bilbao 1992.

36. Cited in J. Alvarez Junco, 'Magia y ética en la retórica política', in *Populismo, caudillaje y discurso demagógico*, Madrid 1987, p. 251.

37. Kazin, 1995, pp. 1–2.

38. Gino Germani, *Política y sociedad en una época de transición*, Buenos Aires 1969.

39. Quoted in Steve Stein, 'The Path to Populism in Peru', in Conniff, ed., 1999, p. 98.

40. The recent history of Argentina is an example of the different outcomes. When Argentina returned to democracy in 1983 the historical dichotomy between Peronism (as representing the people) and its left-wing, liberal and conservative adversaries gave way to a more plural political system. In 1989 Carlos Menem achieved a partial reconstitution of Peronist identity by redefining the political frontier between Peronism and its 'other' along

different lines than those of historical Peronism. However, the failure of Menem and of his successor, the Radical Party's De la Rua, to prevent the collapse of the Argentine economy in December 2001 led to the dissolution of political identities and opened up the possibility for new forms of political identification.

41. Venezuela's president Col Hugo Chávez, cited in Davila, 2000, p. 236.

42. Juan Pablo Lichtmajer, 'Taming the Desert: Nation and Heterogeneity in Nineteenth-Century Argentina', paper prepared for the *Identification and Politics Workshop II*, 23–24 May 2002.

43. Quoted in Carlos de la Torre, *Populist Seduction in Latin America: The Ecuadorian Experience*, Athens, Ohio, 2000, pp. 56–7.

44. Fifty years after the Liberal manifesto, another populist leader, Abdalá Bucaram, was also perceived by modernising intellectuals and conservative politicians as a dangerous demagogue so impervious to the rule of reason that Congress impeached him for reasons of insanity.

45. Jason Glynos, 'Sexual Identity, Identification and Difference', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 26, no. 6, 2000, pp. 85–108.

46. Cited in Frederick B. Pike, *The Politics of the Miraculous in Peru: Haya de la Torre and the Spiritualist Tradition*, Lincoln and London 1986, p. 163.

47. Gardner, 1996.

48. Quoted in Francisco Panizza, *Uruguay, Batllismo y después*, Montevideo 1990, pp. 143–45 (emphasis added).

49. D. Westlind, *The Politics of Popular Identity: Understanding Recent Populist Movements in Sweden and the United States*, Lund 1996, p. 194.

50. De la Torre, 2000.

51. Westlind, 1996, p. 177.

52. De la Torre, 2000, p. 59.

53. Pike, 1986, p. 167.

54. Gardner, p. 14.

55. Journalist Francisco Febres Cordero, 2000, p. 89.

56. De la Torre, 2000, p. 144.

57. Stein, 1999, pp. 99–100.

58. Centeno, 1986, p. 21.

59. Jorge Ferreira, *Trabalhadores do Brasil: O imaginario popular*, Rio de Janeiro 1997, p. 49.

60. Ximena Sosa Buchholz, 'The Strange Career of Populism in Ecuador', in M. Conniff, ed., 1999, p. 145.

61 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London 1989, pp. 105–6.
62 De la Torre, 2000, p. 92.
63 Oscar Reyes, 'Leaders' Personalities and Identification', paper prepared for the *Identification and Politics Workshop II*, 23–24 May 2002.
64 George Shulman, 'The Pathos of Identification and Politics', paper presented for the *Identification and Politics Workshop II*, 23–24 May 2002, The University of Essex, Colchester, UK.
65 Crabtree, 2000, p. 164.
66 Canovan, 1981, p. 9.
67 Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, London 1986, p. 279.
68 Quoted in Shulman, 'The Pathos of Identification and Politics'.
69 Worsley, 1969, p. 247.

1 ERNESTO LACLAU

1 'Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?' in *Emancipation(s)*, London 1996.

2 CHANTAL MOUFFE

I want to thank Marcus Klein, my research assistant of several years, for his invaluable help in collecting very extensive documentation about the rise of right-wing populism in Europe.

1 Charles Larmore, 'Political Liberalism', in *Political Theory*, vol. 18, no. 3, August 1990, p. 359.
2 C. B. MacPherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, Oxford 1977.
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3 BENJAMIN ARDITI

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