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- Russian populism;
- Latin American populism;
- Italian populism.

Populism will reflect on the sociology of democratic processes and investigate the evolution of political consensus in contemporary political systems. This book will appeal to academics and postgraduate students working in the field of sociology, political sociology and politics.

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Populism: An Introduction
Manuel Anselmi
POPULISM
An Introduction

Manuel Anselmi

TRANSLATED BY LAURA FANO MORRISEY
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After the Brexit vote, which decreed the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union; after the American presidential elections, which brought Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States of America, 2016 will be remembered as the year of populism. The word populism seems to be one of the most widely used by international political commentators. However, global public opinion seems to have become accustomed to political surprises such as sudden changes that are legitimized from the bottom up and are directed against the so-called establishment.

Populism is no longer an extreme hypothesis in the democratic game; no longer a deviation, an anomaly, a degeneration or a pathology of democracy, as it was often defined in the past. Populism today is, to all intents and purposes, a highly probable option of democracy, not only related to social movements but also institutionalized and ruling entities.

A reflection on contemporary democracy cannot be detached from a reflection on populism. Maybe, for this reason, it would be more appropriate to talk about a populist phase of democracies, but this is a judgement that we will leave to future political historians. Certainly, we can say that we are witnessing a social and political dynamic which started some decades ago, that appears periodically and is of a global nature, as it manifests itself in very different geographical contexts. Given its geographical and social variety, populism always needs to be contextualized: the complexity of populism must be read and analyzed in conjunction
2 Introduction

with the respective social processes of democratization. Populism is deeply linked to the structural transformations of western democracies, which are increasingly exposed to plebiscitarian swerves and are under constant attack from private interests. In the attempt to understand this degeneration of democracies, Colin Crouch has talked of “post-democracy” (Crouch, 2004), and more recently, Nadia Urbinati has used the term “disfigured democracy” (Urbinati, 2014).

As I will try and explain, populism must be considered as a complex phenomenon deeply connected with democracy, while reductionist interpretations must be avoided. Populism is a modality of social expression of popular sovereignty, which acquires different forms but has some very specific traits that are determined by the social conditions of the context where it manifests itself. It is a demand for more democracy on the part of citizens; however, once it has taken hold, it can even generate an involution of democratic institutions. Therefore, I do not agree with those who describe populism as a mere phenomenon of protest or a reaction to the crisis of democracy. Although the word is the object of much polemic and criticism, it refers to a complexity of phenomena which are key to democracy and which need to be investigated.

In this book, I aim to introduce and guide the reader through this complexity, illustrating the main theories and the most significant hermeneutic approaches. The volume is aimed at undergraduate students who are willing to approach the understanding of this problem in an analytical and value-free manner. At the same time, it can also be a useful instrument for all those who are interested in forming an initial idea on the subject.

There is much confusion around this concept, owing to the heated discussions around it and for the deep variety of cases, which often seem difficult to compare. Populism is a complex, consolidated and manifold configuration of political power based on popular sovereignty, which has changed over time along with changes in politics, and which now represents an independent field of scientific analysis. At the same time, it is multidisciplinary, encompassing political science, political sociology, communication theory and social psychology.
In the last few years, there has been an explosion of studies on populism. As Marco D’Eramo has noted, books and articles dedicated to populism have increased dramatically: suffice to say that in the decade between 1950 and 1960 about 160 new publications were produced, while between 1990 and 2000 alone, the number surpassed 1500 publications (D’Eramo, 2013).

This quantitative increase has been matched by a qualitative increase. Today we count several new forms of populism such as media populism, webpopulism or telepopulism. This is the result of the social dynamics underpinning democracies being impacted by globalization processes, new communication systems and the creation of new social spaces for politics and new forms of consensus in postmodern society.

In the field of populism studies, a specific subfield has developed which is linked to the definition of the problem. Several authors have tried to circumscribe populism under a very specific label. Some have labelled it as an ideology, others as a strategy and others as a communication style, for example (Merker, 2009; Müller, 2016; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Even though they have not provided a definite answer to the problem, each of them has shed light on an interesting and well-founded aspect of the social problem.

In this book, I will reflect on the need for a minimum definition of populism. I will illustrate the doctrines of the most important theorists and the contemporary scientific debate. I will attempt to show the main cases of populism (from the Russian to the Latin American and Italian ones); finally, I will explain other typologies and problems, such as how to study populism and its relationship to democracy.

The general idea that underpins the whole book is that populism should be seen as a special social configuration of political power, based on a direct social expression of popular sovereignty. The problem of the crisis of political intermediation is, in my opinion, one of the main reasons behind the rise of populism. This also implies another general assumption: populism should never be analyzed and studied in an isolated way, but always in relation to the preceding phase or, in general, to the system that it is attacking.
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To fully understand the evolution and the profound social reasons behind populism, we need to analyze the social and institutional crisis that preceded it. In this framework, populism is often a reaction to the decline of an élite. Populism and elitism reveal fundamental phases of the democratic dynamic of a specific regime.

This text is partly a re-elaboration of earlier texts and partly a reproduction of material used in various university courses that I held on the subject in different universities.

References

1

PRELIMINARY ELEMENTS OF THE CONCEPT OF POPULISM

A meaningful ambiguity

Populism is a highly polysemous concept, which is prone to many descriptions and is highly ambiguous. Its conceptual definition is the main epistemological difficulty, as trying to restrict it into a rigorous and univocal semantic limitation is not an easy task. It is exactly for these reasons that, in the field of social and political studies, many researchers are still deeply sceptical of the phenomenon’s very own existence. Some even consider it an epiphenomenon, or an uncertain manifestation of something endowed with a bigger social ontological consistency. To complicate things further, there is wide journalistic abuse of the term, which is often used in a very imprecise and contradictory way, leading people to think that populism is everything and nothing.

The aim of this book, although limited by its being only an introduction, is to show that behind the irrefutable ambiguity of this difficult word there is a wide array of themes that are deeply linked to the democratic processes, to forms of political participation and to the social dynamics of political regimes. This is far from being a false problem: investigating it deeply means understanding contemporary democracies’ very own destiny.

Recent scientific literature has dedicated a specific field of analysis to the difficulties of defining populism (Weyland 2001; Deegan-Krause 2009). It has now become a rhetorical topos to talk about populism admitting its own imprecision, its vagueness and elusiveness at a theoretical level. Paul Taggart (2000) has
6 Concept of populism: preliminary elements

defined it as a slippery concept; Taguieff (2006) has argued that it is characterized by ‘constitutional ambiguity’. However, as Moffitt and Tormey (2014) have stated, it is possible to identify some common defining traits.

As we will see, in the tradition of studies on populism, three strands can be identified which have tried to overcome this difficulty and attempt a conceptualization.

The first strand consists in giving an articulate explanation of populism through a theory of the social dynamics related to the phenomena that were being examined, in the case of Germani and Laclau for example. On the other hand, as we will see later, recent debates have focused on trying to lock populism into a definition: strategy, ideology or communication style.

The work of Margaret Canovan (1981) is particularly original in this aspect, as it proposes to untie the polysemous problem of the concept of populism through Ludwig Wittgenstein’s (2009) theory of family resemblance. This way, populism is no longer a closed concept, rather a family of concepts or, even better, an open concept, similar to democracy and ideology. Populism indicates a family of concepts that are very similar, while at the same time possessing a specific spatial and temporal characterization. Starting from this premise, Canovan then attempted a first taxonomy of populist forms.

Social expression of sovereignty

As Margaret Canovan stressed many times, a deep correlation exists between populist phenomena and popular sovereignty; therefore, populism can be seen as a shadow of democracy. This correlation is better explained by Mény and Surel, who presented constitutionalism and populism as two opposing forms of popular sovereignty (Mény and Surel, 2001). While in the former it acquires institutionalized and mediating modalities, in the latter it finds a direct expression through a powerful capacity to delegitimization the *status quo*.

It is therefore possible to provide a first general definition of populism: it is the social expression of popular sovereignty
through unmediated modalities. The weakening of the mechanisms of social mediation of power that are established between rulers and ruled, together with the prospect of collective action based on a community-people, are the basic factors of a first form of populism. This definition actually precedes the conceptual opposition between populism and democratic regime.

This happened in Russian populism, which was the first historical form of this type of phenomena. Russian populism developed in the Tsarist authoritarian context, where there was no democratic institutional reference framework, and was able to elaborate a prospect of overturning the authoritarian sovereignty, the same prospect that was reinterpreted in a Marxist vein by the Bolshevik revolutionary movement.

Populism is therefore a social possibility of radical overturn—or at least contrast—of the absolute prevalence of the rulers’ supremacy on the part of the ruled. Popular sovereignty opens the possibility of delegitimizing existing power relations and creating new ones.

**A minimum definition of the concept**

When a populist phenomenon manifests itself in a non-authoritarian republican and democratic context, it can be defined as fully fledged political populism. Theories abound on political populism. We will examine them in detail, as each one of them allows for a specific in-depth analysis.

In the case of the concept of democracy, of which infinite theories have been elaborated and many definitions have been put forward, political science later turned to the search for a minimum definition, in order to allow for an empirical valuation of different phenomena, which in different ways are all ascribable to the concept of democracy. In the same way, a minimum definition of populism must be attempted.

To do that, populism needs to be considered as a specific configuration of political power with specific socio-political determinations. I use the term configuration, or figuration, as elaborated by Norbert Elias (Quintaneiro, 2006), who by this word meant
8 Concept of populism: preliminary elements

‘a network of interdependences formed between human beings and linked with each other: a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people’.

The basic analytical traits of this configuration are:

- An interclass homogenous community-people who perceives itself as the absolute holder of popular sovereignty. The community-people expresses an anti-establishment attitude. The community-people asserts itself as an alternative to pre-existing elites, which are accused of exclusion and the decadence of the political system.
- A leader in direct connection with the community-people – with the exception of penal populism.
- A discursive, argumentative and communication style which is always Manichean, where ‘us’ means the community-people and ‘them’ means all that is external to it. The discursive style is aimed at creating political polarization.

Once a minimum definition is established, it will be easier to value, analyze and classify the various forms of populism.

References

PART I
Theorists
GINO GERMANI

National-populism and modernization

Gino Germani (1911–1979) was one of the first social scientists who studied the phenomenon of populism in a systematic way. He was an Italian sociologist who, having escaped the fascist police, moved to Argentina where he started collaborating with the Buenos Aires Institute of Social Sciences. He witnessed the rise of Peronism and studied American sociology in depth. Once his work became renowned, he moved to Harvard, where he taught, and then returned to Italy, where he spent the rest of his life.

His analysis was profoundly conditioned by his direct experience of both fascism and Peronism. Never falling into the trap of preconceived categories, and always starting from a rigorous empirical close examination, Germani elaborated an articulate theory of populist consensus’ social dynamic, as a result of the deep transformations in the social classes involved in the process. His work is considered an important contribution to the study of the social dynamics of democratization processes and their respective crises (Quiroz, 2015; Germani, 2004).

Germani borrowed from the theories of mass and crowd produced by scholars like Le Bon and Tarde; however, his aim was to identify their distorting effect on democratic systems and understand their authoritarian deviations. In particular, Germani focused on social modernization processes and their consequences in terms of social mobilization.

According to Germani, those countries that experienced authoritarian involution phenomena such as fascism and populism also witnessed profound social transformations from a pre-modern
National-populism and modernization
to a more modern structure. The modernization process is at the
d base of the rise of populist phenomena. Germani used a long-
term approach to grasp the social meaning of these phenomena.
In Germani’s opinion, modernization itself is the result of a
much bigger dynamic: secularization. Secularization is the main
cause of modernity in twentieth-century societies, where the
individual enjoys wider freedom, no longer limited by traditional
and religious frameworks. This freedom is the basic condition of
social mobility, which necessarily generates a conflict as it breaks
traditional social equilibriums and generates new power balances.
Germani argued that in modern society the institutionalization
of change replaces the institutionalization of tradition (Germani,
1978, p. 6). Secularization is therefore the distinguishing criterion
between old authoritarianisms based on a hierarchical and tradi-
tionalist social system and new authoritarianisms based on social
mobilization of social classes and sectors. Germani refused both the
interpretation of authoritarianisms as residual forms of the ancient
absolutism, and the Marxist interpretation by which authoritari-
nisms were exclusively products of advanced capitalism.

Through the social mobilization dynamics linked to moderni-
zation, Germani also explained the very modern phenomenon of
ideological conditioning of citizens who, thanks to mobilization,
enjoy freedom of movement across society and the possibility of
transforming it. It is exactly this new condition that, according
to Germani, is the basis for the ideologization of citizens who,
in order to orient society’s transformation, develop and adopt
doctrines whose application coincides with an alternative society.
Thanks to social mobilization, and therefore to secularization,
can citizens become militant.

These are the general traits that Germani identified in both fas-
cism and Peron’s Argentine national-populism, with a fundamental
difference, however: while in fascism, the middle class promoted a
top-down mobilization to control subaltern classes, in the Peronist
national-populism this dynamic is played up by a populist social
block made up of the Latin-American middle class integrated with
subaltern classes. This populist block does not promote a hierar-
chical structured movement, rather a multiclass, more progressive
National-populism and modernization

and democratic movement. Its interclass nature also explains the non-involvement of the national-populist movement with the ideological distinction between right and left (Celarent, 2013).

If, in Italian fascism, upper and aristocratic classes found an ally in the middle class in order to control the lower classes, also in an attempt to contrast a Bolshevik mobilization, in national-populism the middle class and the lower classes allied against the upper classes, who were the expression of a pre-modernization composite system of power. In his investigation, Germani displayed an extraordinary work of historical sociology that supported the empirical analysis of the present, and also provided a genealogy of this establishment, retracing the social evolution of the Argentine state. With the birth of the state, which coincided with independence from the colonial power, an “oligarchic populism” emerged, based on a patriarchal-landholding support from the lower classes, which was not based on social mobilization but rather on mere deference towards the upper class and the established social order. The participation of lower classes in military enterprises and in the army’s lower tiers was central to this dynamic. This original function of social structuring and control by the national armies was a founding trait of Argentine – and Latin American in general – praetorianism. At a later stage, with the emergence of modern society, “oligarchic populism” (Pasquino and Zannino, 1974) was replaced by “liberal populism” following the rise of capitalistic bourgeois elites, which were the product of the evolution of the liberal political system. This dynamic was based on a concentrated and limited mobilization of the “centre”, which, however, contributed to the creation of a first nucleus of the middle class. Finally, mass mobilization and the crisis of the liberal regime gave way to the powerful emergence of the multitudes’ political participation. Germani defined this phase as the second cycle of mobilization, which was structured around a centre and a periphery.

In the specific case of Argentina, the second cycle of mobilization, which was at the basis of national-populism, was characterized by the urbanization of the masses. The influx of population from rural areas and the presence of numerous foreign
National-populism and modernization

communities created a new political and social subjectivity which Germani called “urban proletariat”. The urban proletariat was the main social actor that Perón would use for his rise and towards which he would develop a specific strategy of consensus, based on the production of mechanisms of institutional representation coordinated by the national-populist movement. In particular, Perón created a governmental system to control popular consensus, which was based on a widespread network of trade unions that would represent all categories of workers.

Although Germani focused on populist phenomena that are very different from contemporary neo-populisms, and the social conditions he analyzed are linked to phases that in many ways have been surpassed by the democratization of the state, his analysis still remains a very useful sociological lesson. The interpretative scheme based on the concept of modernization and mobilization can be applied in various ways to our present. One example is media populism, which emerged with mass access to new technologies and the internet. Surprisingly, as well, some concepts that today could be considered typological, such as a multiclass movement, are incredibly topical.

Germani represents an essential read among populism studies and his merits are twofold: at the historiographical and theoretical level, both for his rigorous analytical method, and for the objective interpretation of historical facts that he had experienced first-hand but nonetheless are treated with Weberian detachment.

References

Edward Shils (1910–1995) was a Jewish-American sociologist who, after studying and translating the classics of sociology such as Max Weber and Mannheim, embraced Parsons's structural-functionalist analytical approach of social action. Shils' work focused on issues like popular consensus in mass culture, tradition and populism. His contribution to the study of populism is expressed in the book *The Torment of Secrecy*, a research into the relationship between public opinion, conspiracy theories and the US political system during the Cold War period (Shils, 1996).

Shils' analysis started from macrostructural changes, especially those taking place in the institutional sphere and in public opinion, and the respective reactions by citizens. In this framework, the generalized social paranoia typical of the time when he was writing was not only the direct result of the contingency of that historical phase, which was characterized by the juxtaposition between the NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and the Soviet blocks, but rather a product of some structural characteristics typical of American society that were particularly strong in that period.

According to Shils, for a liberal democratic system to function properly, there must be a balanced relationship between privacy, secrecy and publicity, something that, for example, could not happen in the authoritarian Soviet regimes.

The comparison between the British and the North American social model clearly illustrates the populist problem. According to Shils, the United Kingdom – where publicity was however quite
Public sphere and populism in the US prevalent – represented the most balanced model, as a widespread deference of the lower classes towards institutions and authorities, an acceptance of hierarchies and, especially, where a healthy respect for privacy coexisted in a non-conflicting way. A strong culture of privacy and a less unrestrained dimension of publicity contributed to lessening excesses in secrecy, and therefore excessive fears of it. In this sense, Great Britain was the most balanced and constitutively anti-populist political system.

The situation in the US political system was completely the opposite. From its origins, the American system was characterized by a prevalence of the public dimension. Shils attributed this tendency to the original American distrust of aristocracy and hierarchical forms. American culture, according to Shils, was essentially populist, being an individualist society where the sense of institutional identity was weak, and where public dimension was central and very strong. This generated three common social attitudes: fear of secrecy, obsession about secrets and dependency on publicity. The last two aspects also explain the conspiratorial tendency of the American period examined by Shils.

Shils’ analysis of populism emerged out of this chain of reasoning, inaugurating a totally new and original approach, which did not examine this phenomenon in purely political terms but rather as a social and cultural problem of the public dimension in relation to the institutional one and to the widespread mentality.

According to Shils,

Populism proclaims that the will of the people as such is supreme over every other standard, over the standard traditional institutions, over the autonomy of institutions and over the will of other strata. Populism identifies the will of the people with justice and morality.

(Shils, 1996, p. 98)

Therefore, populism is a delegitimizing tendency of any established institutional social order, of any hierarchical order
and, most of all, of any logic that relies on a pyramid structure of society, state powers and functions. Populism thus generates an adverse attitude towards both the elites and the intellectuals. Furthermore, populism is adverse to any form of checks-and-balances and prone to maximalist visions and actions. It is also persistently averse to the separation of powers and to pluralistic manifestations in society.

Shils’ critical analysis ends with a true apology of political and social pluralism. He considered the culture of pluralism an antidote to any apocalyptic, extremist and Manichean deviation of our democracies. In Shils’ axiological consideration, pluralism was the result of a healthy balance between publicity, privacy and the need for secrecy, which would not generate fear and merely meet the normal needs of the state.

Recent theoretical proposals on contemporary populism have resorted again to the juxtaposition between populism and pluralism, although in different contexts where globalization processes and views of cosmopolitan political cultures are a fundamental factor (De La Torre, 2014; Moffitt, 2016).

References
One book deserves a place among the founding texts on populism: the volume *Populism, Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, edited by Ghița Ionescu and Ernst Gellner and published by Weidenfeld and Nicolson in 1969. Many later theories would refer to this work, either to confirm some of its ideas or to question them (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969).

This publication originated as a collection of lectures held at a conference organized by the journal *Government and Opposition* at the London School of Economics and Political Science two years earlier.

Its scientific novelty can also be found in the structure of the text. In the first part, essays relating to different geographical macro-areas (North America, Latin America, Africa, etc.) are collected, suggesting a comparative approach to the phenomenon, something that appears incredibly topical today in the context of global studies.

Richard Hofstadter’s study, for example, explains the populism of North American farmers, focusing on the logic of survival which led them to oppose the financial and monopolistic dynamics and which can be summarized as follows: ‘His farm was his home, and if he lost one, he lost the other’ (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969, pp. 9–28).

Alistair Hennessy explains Latin American populisms through their non-class nature, which he describes as ‘trans-class populism’, and through the resistance of the peasant mentality in the new urban dimension. In particular, Hennessy identifies some
key elements: a lack of development of a middle class with its own culture and social role; the hegemony of the landowners, also expressed in the assimilation of the new rich into this class; the inability of the urban working class to develop autonomous organizations and cultures; an accumulation of huge marginalized masses due to quick flows of internal migration and urbanization; and the presence of strong dependency and social conditioning networks in the rural social fabric, then extended to the urban one, which made independent social organizing difficult, especially for the peasants (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969, pp. 28–62).

Andrzej Walicki, in his essay on Russian populism, identifies some defining traits: this phenomenon was a reaction to capitalism, not only in Russia but in the world in general; the polemical juxtaposition of Russian culture against western culture was fundamental; it did not engage one social class only, like the small farmers in the case of American populism; instead, it had a wider appeal among different social sectors, starting from the intelligentsia, as it proposed an ideological perspective in response to the backward conditions and the challenges of western modernization. Ghița Ionescu clarifies the differences between Russian populism and the peasant populism in Eastern Europe, which he defines as ‘peasantism’ and which was represented by parties such as the Serbian Agrarian Party, the Croat Peasant Party and the Bulgarian Agrarian Union. In these cases, the peasant ideology acquired clearer and more absolute forms, suggesting the agrarian social class was the only possible leadership in the country, its culture in total opposition to any other internal and external cultural ideas (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969, pp. 62–96).

In an attempt to describe African populisms, John S. Saul stresses how difficult it is to adapt categories and elements useful to understanding populism in other geographical areas to this context, especially considering its huge variety. The very concept of mass in an often tribal and uneven social fabric risks losing its semantic relevance. On the other hand, it is exactly in these contexts that populism acquires a form more similar to an archetypal ideology, linked to pre-democratic and tribal power relations. Another factor that can activate populist dynamics,
The foundation of studies on populism later to become extremely important, is the decolonization process taking place in these contexts, generating nationalistic social movements, opposed to internal and external dominant elites and giving rise to social resentment (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969, pp. 122–153).

In the second part of the volume, the theoretical issues of the conceptualization of the problem are presented. This theoretical section is the one that would be most quoted in later years, especially in relation to the debate on conceptualizing and defining populism.

Donald MacRae analyzes the relationship between ideology and populism, stressing how populism aims at the creation of a consensual and uniformed society (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969, pp. 153–166).

Peter Wiles elaborates one of the theories that would later be discussed and criticized the most, especially by Laclau. Wiles’ contribution can be summarized by the idea that populism is a political syndrome characterized by some basic traits. Some of the traits are listed here in a concise way:

- populism is more moralistic than programmatic;
- the leaders’ appearances, their gestures, their lifestyles are fundamental in their relationship with supporters;
- the relationship between the leader and the masses is almost of a mystical nature, as it is based on powerful aspects of identification;
- populism is undisciplined and badly organized;
- its ideology is weak and loose, and any attempt at defining it is useless;
- it is anti-intellectual;
- it is always anti-establishment and against the ruling elite;
- it is prone to conspiracy theories and short-lived inefficient forms of violence;
- it disregards the class struggle in a Marxist sense;
- as with any other movement, it is subjected to corruption and bourgeoisification processes. However, lacking a strong ideological reference framework, this process is particularly quick;
The foundation of studies on populism

- from an economic point of view, small cooperatives are its ideal type;
- small cooperatives can be set up by people with very little capital;
- financiers, especially foreigners, are often demonized in the populist imagination;
- it can be urban;
- it opposes social and economic inequalities produced by institutions, but it accepts those related to tradition and lifestyle;
- it can be opposed to institutionalized religion, however, it remains religious due to its traditionalist character;
- it stands against science and technocracy;
- it is nostalgic.

(Ionescu and Gellner, 1969, pp. 166–180)

Angus Stewart’s essay is also of great interest, proposing a fascinating analytical perspective of grounded-based populisms as opposed to systemic or historicist research approaches. Stewart focuses on the issue of unitarity of populism, explaining that this unity cannot be found in programmes, contents or details, but rather in an entirety of situations and social relations. He focuses in particular on what he defines the ‘coalitional character’ of populist movements and the important role played in their genesis by social crises. The analytical horizon proposed by Stewart proves very useful in the development of a sociology of populist phenomena, as it anchors the explanation of populism to a context’s social conditions, setting the foundations for the empirical analysis of those very conditions (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969, pp. 180–197).

If, on the one hand, Kenneth Minogue insists on the analogy between populism and political movement (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969, pp. 197–212), on the other hand Peter Worsley focuses on the nature of the concept of populism, at that time already being accused of not being epistemologically substantial enough or of not existing at all.

According to Worsley, although populism is an apparently vague category, it refers to a specific power dynamic, which, in
The foundation of studies on populism order to be understood from a sociological point of view, needs to be analyzed not only for its direct relationship between the people and the leadership but above all for the popular character of political participation in the context where it originates (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969, pp. 212–251).

The book promoted and edited by Ionescu and Gellner still represents a point of reference for populism studies because, on the one hand, it contains many theoretical intuitions, which remain valid in contemporary contexts; on the other, it attempts to deal with the problem in all its facets and through different approaches, never falling into the trap of a reductionist solution.

Reference

5

MARGARET CANOVAN
AND THE SHADOW OF DEMOCRACY

Margaret Canovan became renowned for her definition of populism as ‘the shadow of democracy’ (Canovan, 1999), a powerful metaphor which she used to refer to the deep mechanisms of democratic systems.

Beyond this powerful definition, Canovan developed an articulate analysis, which remains one the most coherent and complex close examinations of the problem.

A political philosopher and scholar of Hanna Arendt’s work, her research focused on very similar phenomena, like nationalism and the construction of the people in the dynamics of democratic power (Canovan, 1992).

Her 1980 volume on populism still represents an essential point of reference, both for its novelty and completeness.

Aware of the complexity of the concept of populism, Canovan refused to reduce the plurality of historical populist phenomena to only one category, although acknowledged the extreme theoretical ambiguity of this concept.

Rather than reducing populism to a pre-fixed label or locking it into a category, Canovan preferred to adopt a multiple approach to the understanding of populisms. In her opinion, the temptation to overcome the intrinsic polysemy of this concept by attempting unitary and overly general definitions needed to be resisted.

On the contrary, it is necessary to respect the open and varied character of this category and investigate it in a phenomenological
way. More precisely, Canovan resorted to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s theory of “family resemblance”, arguing that there exists a family of populisms, each of them possessing different traits according to the social and historical context (Wittgenstein, 2009). According to Canovan, understanding the historical specificity of populism, even more its social dynamics, was of fundamental importance. She called for a systematic study of populisms of a sociological nature, so that ‘Populism becomes a sociological category rather an historical one’.

Starting from these historical premises, Canovan proposed a first typology of populism, in the awareness that real phenomena often present mixed traits of one or more categories.

Canovan identified two macrocategories: she defined the first one as Agrarian populisms, in which she included the American People’s Party and Russian populism; she defined the second one as Political populisms, which included Populist dictatorship, Populist democracy, Reactionary populism and Politicians’ populism (Canovan, 1981, p. 13).

In the Agrarian populism category, Canovan included both the US Farmers’ radicalism and the Eastern European Peasant movements, especially Russian populism. The former was made up of those protest movements of agricultural producers, who in the second half of the nineteenth century, in the most rural American states, organized several actions aimed at obtaining economic autonomy in setting the prices for their own produce. The aim of this movement was to defeat the role of the federal monopolists who, holding the products’ means of distribution, were making a profit to the disadvantage of the producers themselves. Since the first protest actions, these producers proved to be an extended community of resistance, and in the space of a few years, they managed to found the People’s party, which made use of a powerful rhetoric based on the “plain people” formula. Canovan stressed how this was not only a socioeconomic phenomenon based on the revindications of agrarian producers but also a sociopolitical phenomenon, a rebellion against the dominant plutocratic elites and national politicians, which for the first
time in the history of the US was able to express a form of “radical democracy” (Canovan, 1981, p. 58).

The case of narodnichestvo, or Russian populism, is profoundly different. While American populism was born inside society and in response to the deep needs of representation, both financial and political, of the social base, Russian populism was the result of the elaboration of an intellectual elite. It was a populism of the intelligentsia aimed at rural social classes, whose doctrine was based on the glorification of the rural lifestyle in an anti-modern, proto-socialist vein, founded on the rediscovery of its Slavic origins. If, on the one hand, American populism was born out of the people as a new self-awareness prompted by a rebellion, the Russian form, on the other hand, was initiated by young intellectuals who had abandoned their bourgeois and urban lives to join the peasants in an effort to discover their traditional and orthodox roots. The elaboration of an ideology, which contributed to the development of the fight against the tsarist autocracy, developed in the context of this movement, often translating into terrorist attacks against the autocratic regime. The end of this movement coincided with the establishment of the Bolshevik regime: if, at a theoretical level, Leninism rejected the populists’ naïf socialism in favour of a strictly Marxist scientific socialism, at a practical level it assimilated the populist movement, thus leading to the acknowledgment, on the part of the Bolshevik leaders, of the rural class as a revolutionary actor.

In the case of political populisms, the focus is political rather than agrarian, but an agrarian populism can be political at the same time, or a political populism can contain elements of agrarian populism. In political populism, elements such as the urban dimension, the presence of a charismatic leadership and structured parties are prevalent.

The first type of political populism identified by Canovan is Populist dictatorship (Canovan, 1981, pp. 136–172), of which she provided two paradigmatic examples: the Argentine Juan Domingo Perón (1895–1974) and the American Huey P. Long (1893–1935).
As for Peronism, Canovan resorted to Gino Germani’s work, which identified the process of modernization and urbanization of Latin American peasant masses as the main cause of this new form of political power. As for Long, the interpreting lens was the individual crisis and distrust of the citizens of Louisiana during the Great Depression. In both cases, Canovan stressed the widespread condition of the peasants’ social uprooting as the main factor that favoured populism: a widespread individual disorientation which the rhetoric of redemption proposed by the leader appealed to, and allowed for a positive outlet of social resentment. These are interclass, highly anti-elitist phenomena, which are characterized by an extraordinary mass mobilization stimulated by an equally extraordinarily charismatic ability of the leader. This type of populism has a weakening effect on democratic institutions to the benefit of the personalization of the political dimension. Exactly because of this dynamic of mass consensus, these are the populisms that have most in common with fascism and nazism.

A critical consideration is, however, necessary as regards this typology. As much as it still represents a valid analysis applicable to many recent cases of populism, there is a certain difficulty in accepting its denomination, as the term dictatorship today has become in political science an increasingly ambiguous and imprecise term. Expressions like authoritarianism or totalitarianism are therefore preferable, keeping in mind the profound differences that Linz identified between the two (Linz, 2000). It would be more pertinent to call them “populist authoritarianism” or “popular authoritarianism”, as Canovan herself defined them more than once in her work.

*Populist democracy* is the second type of political populism. With this term, we refer to all forms of populism that aim at a significant increase in political participation and a people’s government. Populist democracy is therefore a radical democracy where the elements of people’s representation and intermediation between the rulers and the ruled are reduced to the limit. All those movements that demand more direct democracy in strong opposition to representative democracy and its dysfunctions are
part of this sub-type. Canovan also inserted McCarthyism in this framework of analysis, which was studied by Shils in his famous book *The Torment of Secrecy*, to which I will devote a full chapter. McCarthyism was perceived as a populist social reaction in a political context of democratic elitism: the spread of a popular mentality which simplified the terms of political issues adopting uncivil and violent positions. Another example is Switzerland, which represents a case of actual, or institutionalized, populist democracy. The ruling procedures contained in the Swiss constitution are a rare example of an accomplished radical democracy. People can intervene in many crucial issues of political life through referendums and participative forms. The reason for this political regime, which can almost be considered a *unicum*, is the peculiarity of the formation process of the Swiss state. Unlike other states that were formed through a top-down process, Switzerland was formed through a bottom-up federal process between the various cantons. Canovan also described the limits of populist democracy, often mentioned by neo-elitist critics: for example, the risk of the tyranny of the majority, where minorities are not properly represented; the tendency of public opinion to influence government’s choices in a non-objective and distorted way, as it is based on oversimplification and overdramatization of political issues; the loss of authority and legitimization of the elected government due to social dynamics that glorify the popular point of view; but also a loss of authority and the prestige of skills, on the basis of absolute egalitarianism (Canovan, 1981, pp. 172–225).

Reactionary populism is characterized by an anti-progressive, nationalist, xenophobic and traditionalist ideological content (Canovan, 1981, pp. 225–231). The return of the people is conceived as a return to the roots and as a rejection of all elements of progress. In this form of populism, there is a juxtaposition between a popular base which identifies with its most backward and reactionary cultural forms and an elite and its progressive and cosmopolitan culture. This type of populism is often very polemical towards intellectuals and any kind of artistic vanguard. Canovan identified a typical example in the politician George
Wallace (1919–1998), governor of Alabama, who was famous for his positions in favour of blacks’ racial segregation (Lesher, 1985). Politicians’ populism is the last of the political populisms in Canovan’s classification. It is mainly a political style expressed by politicians’ actions and political practices. The “catch-all people’s parties” are part of this sub-group, as well as all those examples that remain in the realm of democratic dimension, without necessarily wishing a radical structural change, while at the same time finding their strength in a direct popular consensus. The actual political forms where this populist style can be found range from what is called anti-politics, to personalistic parties, to radical coalitions. Canovan cited the example of Jimmy Carter for the US, who defined himself as a populist; or the Partido de la Revolución Mexicana P.R.I. The structural trait of the Politicians’ populism is the tactical nature of populism, which consists of a call to the people as a way to renew consensus and social legitimation, to constantly align political action with the needs of the context. In this case, the paradoxical nature of the concept of “people” is particularly clear: if, on one hand, it is ambiguous, vague and poorly defined, on the other hand, exactly because of this vagueness, it allows forms of political inclusion at the social level, albeit short-lived and circumscribed, that renew politicians’ power.

Canovan’s later work focused on people themselves, as an abstract political concept, but also as a widespread social representation that conditions citizens’ action. Populism is set in a wider framework that refers to the nature of the western state. It is therefore impossible to understand populism as a trait of contemporary democracies if the progressive central role of the people is not reconstructed in genealogical terms, as well as that of popular sovereignty in constitutional forms, political theory and culture. The English Revolution, the American Revolution and the French Revolution represent the fundamental stages of this historical horizon. “The people” is therefore a social concept widespread among citizens which not only legitimizes political authority but can also change it, according to what Canovan called sovereign people in reserve.
A more irrational, albeit equally important, dimension must be added to this rational logic of legitimization that underpins modern constitutionalism. Canovan called them ‘Myths of sovereign People’ (Tudor, 1972). The concept of people, once it translates into social representation, becomes a political myth, according to the famous definition by Henry Tudor. Mythicization of the people allows for its legitimizing functions to be accepted in an absolute and amplified way, as well as many of its constitutive traits such as equality, social and economic redistribution, and transparency. The myth of the sovereign people feeds a constant social trend against the elite, political representation and any form of intermediation. This trend becomes stronger in moments of social and institutional crisis. Canovan, through an analysis of the concept of the “people”, went back to the founding traits of populism, portraying it as a characteristic which is innate in any democracy, as intrinsic to the social interpretation of one of its pillars: popular sovereignty.

References

Laclau, an Argentine historian by background, author of important works on political philosophy, always divided between political commitment and academic activity – has dominated the progressive arena since the 1980s, especially in Latin America. His theoretical production has always been partly a historical-social analysis of power dynamics and partly a rethinking of Marxist categories aimed at a more suitable interpretation of contemporary societies. His world vision was influenced by the historical experience of Peronism, which he witnessed as a young man, and the parabola of the twentieth-century Latin American and European workers’ movements. Together with Margaret Canovan, Ernesto Laclau is the scholar who in the last few years has contributed more than anybody else to a re-conceptualization of populism. He must be credited for many intuitions, as well as for a new general concept, which does not relegate populism to a necessarily negative phenomenon (Laclau, 2007).

Laclau’s work is characterized by an original epistemological and writing style due to the use of categories and arguments which refer to psychoanalysis, structuralism and, obviously, Marxism. In particular, the authors whom Laclau is most indebted to are Lacan, Althusser and Gramsci. From Lacan, he borrowed an elaborated interpretative structure; from Althusser, he inherited the vocation to link structuralism and socialist theory (Lacan, 1998); finally, from Gramsci, he explicitly borrowed the concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 2014).

Starting from Ferdinand de Saussure’s assumption, according to which language is a social fact (Saussure, 2013), Laclau assigned
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an important role to language in the study of social phenomena. In his last years, he went as far as proposing a critical theory of society, conceived of as an interpretation of society’s rhetoric.

Laclau defined his own thought as “post-Marxism” which consisted of a revisitation of some of Marxism’s theoretical assumptions. In line with Marx’s tradition, he conceived political antagonism as a fundamental principle: each society is interpretable and transformable towards progress in light of the conflict between the people and the ruling class. However, Laclau strictly applied Gramsci’s principle of non-determinist historicist materialism, which considered each political phenomenon in its contingency and according to the specific categories of its time. This implies that scientific categories of social analysis must also be adapted to the historical moment. Therefore, from Laclau’s point of view, using classical Marxist categories in an unhistorical way is a mistake. According to him, in light of the profound changes in contemporary societies and the complexity of global power dynamics, it is necessary to acknowledge the inadequacy of some concepts of original Marxism from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as proletariat and class. Progressive thought instead needs to elaborate new categories that correspond to the new social subjectivities typical of contemporary economic contexts. It is probably because of these elements of innovation that Laclau’s post-Marxism has been so successful, not only as an analytical perspective but also as an ideological hypothesis for many recent neo-populist movements. His doctrine was at the basis of the action of the so-called Left Turn Latin American populism and, most recently, of European left-wing populisms such as Podemos in Spain.

In this wide and articulate horizon of critical reasoning aimed at a revision of Marxist thought, Laclau discovered the centrality of the concept of populism, conceived of as an original form of the political. A first formulation of this theory of populism was contained in his first works; however, it is in On Populist Reason that he expressed it in a more accomplished form.

According to Laclau, populism is, first of all, a neutral concept: neither negative nor positive. He explained that the negativity
Laclau: The construction of the political

usually associated with this term derives from a critical scientific literature of a neoliberal nature, which has always discredited masses and multitudes. This attitude is particularly evident in thinkers like Le Bon. On the contrary, if we study historians of the French Revolution like Taine, it is clear that the true protagonist of the French Revolution was exactly that populace that neoliberal critics have constantly denigrated, denying them any role as a political and social actor.

Once he acknowledged the neutrality of the concept of “populism”, Laclau explored the high degree of semantic ambiguity of this concept, often dismissed by other scholars as a mere problem of epistemological vagueness. According to Laclau, this apparent vagueness should instead be clarified, acknowledging that the term populism is an “empty signifier”. Unlike what this expression might suggest, he meant a phenomenon, both linguistic and social, which is not devoid of significance but rather a symbolic dimension which, thanks to its emptiness, can accommodate and give unity and coherence to a high heterogeneity of elements which otherwise would stick together with difficulty. The emptiness of the “populism” signifier allows this phenomenon to maintain many different things together, unifying them in a collective macro-identity, which we call people. Laclau explained this almost paradoxical logic borrowing from Lacan’s thought, according to which naming is a linguistic, psychological and social phenomenon, capable of generating identity and concrete unities: the name is the foundation of the social phenomenon as the signifier is the foundation of the thing, and not the other way around. This is the defining trait of populism: it is a type of empty signifier that manages to build an articulate social identity, joining multiple and diverse elements, sometimes contradictory, in a unique entity called people.

At this point, it is perhaps time to ask a question in a more direct way: what is populism according to Laclau? He answered by going back to Worsley’s theories, who thought populism was only a modality of the political dimension. It was a way of building the “political”, a modality through which the political power
Laclau: The construction of the political shapes collective identities. According to Laclau, the construction of the people subject is a necessary step of any political power; however, it can be expressed in many different ways. Populism is one of the most efficient, quick and powerful ways to do so.

According to Laclau, populism does not have a precise ideological connotation and it can therefore be either left-wing or right-wing, both progressive and reactionary. In this framework, both fascism and Maoism can be considered populist. For the Argentine thinker, this evaluative aspect is not important; what is important is the phenomenology of populism: the way it originates and develops, and on which social logics it is based.

In order to understand this phenomenology, Laclau identified two antagonistic social logics that can manifest themselves in any society. He called one of them the logic of equivalence, which produces social mobilization and leads to the construction of a collective identity first and then a popular identity – and in successful cases to mass mobilization. The opposite logic is the logic of difference, which reacts to social demand by individualizing it. It consists of a penetration of the political power in the sphere of those who demand. While in the first case a social group – more or less extended – is generated, which expresses a democratic demand and constitutes a collective counter-power to the political power, in the other case the political power extends and there is an individual adjustment to it.

The “social demand” is the starting point of any populism. With this expression, we refer to the fact that a group of people, at a certain point, in a specific place of society, starts to express a social need, a demand. Laclau cited the example of some peasant migrants who raise the issue of housing needs. If this social demand is unattended, a political exclusion of those actors takes place. When a response is not forthcoming, a process of acknowledgement of their common condition is activated among the people involved, which is at the basis of the logic of equivalence. If that demand, although shared, remains isolated, it can be defined as “democratic demand”. If there is an accumulation of demands and therefore the creation of a social prospect of
Laclau: The construction of the political
a more articulate collective action, it can be defined as popular demand. Although in an embryonic form, this example shows the evolution of a “populist configuration”.

This is not the place to include all the multiple interpretations of Laclau’s theories. It suffices to say that, as of today, it represents the starting point of many ideological proposals in the progressive field. In many interviews, he expressed his approval of a left-wing populism, especially in Latin America. For this reason, at the beginning of the 2000s, he sided with the Latin American populisms of Morales, Chávez and especially Kirchner.

In conclusion, we can agree or disagree with Laclau’s theories and decide to follow them as militants or only use them as scientific incentives. We can agree or disagree with his style, be fascinated by it or reject it as arduous. However, he must be credited with enriching the debate on this subject. First, because after Canovan’s classification effort, as he himself admitted, he tried to push forward the investigation on the underlying social logics. Second, by recognizing analytical neutrality within the concept of populism, he widened the field of research, facilitating a less prejudiced understanding. Third, through exploring the profound link between populism and the creation of political identity, he opened a horizon of studies which will have to be carried forward, especially at the empirical level.

References
The theory elaborated by political scientists Yves Mény and Yves Surel emerged as an attempt to understand the neo-populist wave that they witnessed in Europe in the 1990s (Mény and Surel, 2001). The result was an analytical perspective, which became an essential read and for the first time gave an explanation of this phenomenon in light of globalization processes, updating the category of populism itself.

Mény and Surel started from the central role played by the concept of popular sovereignty in the populist phenomenon. Popular sovereignty is, in their analysis, the source of democratic power, the element that strengthens and reinforces institutional authority and the established order, but also the social foundation of social criticism, public control of powers and their own limitation. Like others, they acknowledged the intrinsic ambiguity of the concept of populism; however, they linked it to the equally ambivalent role that popular sovereignty can acquire in democratic regimes, both as a source of legitimacy for the institutional structure and as a delegitimizing force. The former represents an architectural and structuring tendency, while the latter represents a dynamic and de-structuring tendency (Mény and Surel, 2002).

Based on this functional distinction of popular sovereignty, Mény and Surel elaborated a conceptual juxtaposition between constitutionalism and populism as political orientations, both in terms of culture and action, opposed and present in any democracy. According to this theory, populism is conceived of in a dialectic complementarity with constitutionalism.
Constitutionalism is the dimension of protection and limitations to any discretionality of power, and is based on the defence of the rule of law and checks and balances.

Populism, on the other hand, is characterized by the call to the power of the people in search of direct, top-down and leader-focused modalities of consensus and legitimization. It simplifies and erodes mediation systems, delegitimizes the rule of law, produces radical and maximalist perspectives based on overpromising.

Populism can play both a delegitimizing role of the existing institutional apparatus, and a legitimizing one for more direct forms of consensus and government. By finding its source in popular sovereignty, populism refutes the validity of institutional representation mechanisms and attacks elected politicians as traitors of that very same sovereignty. It proposes a dualist and Manichean vision but rejects any other form of division. However, the two writers made a fundamental analytical consideration on populist representation. For as much as populism expresses a radical critique of representation, it also expresses a peculiar form of representation in its own way. They borrowed from Pitkin’s distinction between “acting for” and “standing for” forms of representation, where the former “imply clarifications on the content of each action”, while the latter are based on narrow dynamics of affinity between representatives and represented, who “are there for somebody or something”. According to Mény and Surel, this reasoning would explain the prevalence of the “standing for” in populist movements, as opposed to the “acting for” in representative systems (Pitkin, 1972).

This would produce a loyalty, a deep mirroring and total delegation which would not be possible with the “acting for”, as they would be subjected to a constant evaluation of each action. In this respect, Mény and Surel stressed how populism also produces forms of disintermediation, which are internal to the very own social dynamics of political participation.

Mény and Surel are also credited for highlighting the relationship between contemporary neo-populism and the profound changes of the nation states produced by globalization processes. Prolonged economic crises and the weakening of national sovereignty by political glocalization produce social and ideological fragmentation, as well as institutional disintermediation, which contribute to the creation of a
populist social fabric. Populist action aims at a process of institutional disintegration and at a reconfiguration of power that is unitary and binding in terms of objectives, but Manichean in terms of general juxtaposition. Economic crises accentuate citizens’ distrust towards the elites and the temptation to take refuge in an imagined community that protects them. The perception of the dematerialization of the economy due to globalization processes generates anxiety among citizens, which leads them to take refuge in an imagined community that coincides with the community-people.

From a functional-social point of view, the imagined community contributes to two dynamic factors that determine the functioning of populism: ‘a) the appreciation of the people leads to a sole idea of the imagined community; b) populism, exactly because it aims at defending the people, has a reactive character’.

Mény and Surel identified three typologies of imagined community ‘as three analytically isolatable universes that however often merge in practice’: the people-sovereign at a purely political level, the people-class in a purely economic sense and the people-nation from a more cultural perspective. This is a classification that identifies three ideal types in the Weberian sense, isolated in abstract terms, yet overlapping and mixed in social reality, and, most of all, in the social function that they play. These distinctions open the possibility to a classification of populisms on a functional basis, using the imagined community as a matrix that defines the populist movement and action.

1 The people-sovereign refers to the imagined community as a legitimate actor and founder of the political order. It is based on the historical role that the people have acquired in the legal systems of western states and possesses a legitimizing capacity, but also a de-legitimizing one, as it aims at re-legitimizing the whole political power. The ideal aim of this imagined community is the government of the people for the people.

2 The people-class is strictly economical and for this reason is the kind of imagined community that generates most confusion with socialism, as it has many similar traits. The people-class presents itself as an absolute antagonist to any form of economic elitism, to whom it feels constantly subordinated. A
Sovereignty, constitution and the people

typical trait of this type is the contrariety towards financial
dynamics that go beyond the citizens’ local dimension, espe-
cially globalization. The people-class is made up of a multitude
of small powers against big economic powers. The concept of
people-class is therefore very close to the proletariat.

The people-nation recalls an imagined community based on
the “ethnos”, which is conceived as something founded on a
nation or a territorial portion that acquires a specific cultural
value, based on an ethnic, geographical or linguistic fracture.
The logic of defence and protection inside the borders of
the imagined community finds in this type a very specific
concrete and historical reference that exacerbates its sense of

By analyzing European neo-populisms, Mény and Surel underlined
the deep relationship between populist dynamics and party transfor-
mations. European neo-populisms show how the classic configu-
ration of parties in the last few decades has undergone profound
changes, which can be understood only in the light of socio-political
divisions. While throughout the twentieth century a strong structur-
ing of parties was in place, which reflected a “frozen” social division
of the electorate, the situation changed completely with the geopo-
litical and social upheavals that took place at the end of the century.
In particular, two elements favoured the emergence of populist par-
ties: the electoral volatility and the spread of new values in relation
to twentieth-century ideologies. On the one hand, the possibility of
swinging one’s own electorate, and on the other, a new horizon of
post-materialistic values, which make the distinction between right
and left obsolete, is at the basis of maximalist populist parties such as
Le Pen’s in France or tele-populistic ones like Forza Italia.

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California Press.
The recent debate on populism has generated interesting proposals in relation to the historiographical classification and the identification of specific historical typologies.

A first, interesting, general distinction that has emerged in the last few decades is between classical—or old—populisms and new populisms.

The classic populism category includes those that took place in the twentieth century in different parts of the world: Russian populism, American populism, Perón and all those Latin American populisms that can be linked to Peronism due to their morphological and social traits.

The neo-populism category, on the other hand, includes those populisms that emerged at the end of the twentieth century as a result of political dynamics of profound transformations in contemporary democracies, especially due to globalization processes.

This distinction is based on the juxtaposition of two general conditions: classical populisms emerged in contexts of state-building and formation of democratic political systems, where the most fundamental infrastructures of democratic states were taking shape or were not formed yet; however, neo-populisms emerged in contexts where the democratic political system was already formed and, in most cases, was undergoing a crisis (Taggart, 1997).

There is also a difference of a geopolitical nature. Most neo-populisms are part of a global context where the impacts of
The recent debate on globalization represent a fundamental factor in their formation and where the sovereignty of the nation-state is gradually being eroded, due to both globalization itself and to new external geopolitical equilibriums. On the other hand, in classical populisms, the dynamics were all internal to a solid and classical state-nation scheme.

Another attempt at a diachronic systematization of populist phenomena aims at identifying populist waves, rather than establishing juxtapositions between old – or classical – and new ones. In this respect, Dwayne Woods identified three waves of populisms: the agrarian populism in Russia and Eastern Europe, the Latin American populism in the 1940s and 1950s, and a third wave including conservative-leaning European populisms in the 1990s. Although well-founded, Woods’ categorization by waves remains incomplete, as it does not include many recent progressive Latin American populisms or progressive European populist forces like Podemos. It therefore appears necessary to integrate Woods’ third wave with contemporary populist phenomena still in place (Woods and Wejnert, 2014).

This third wave also represents a novelty from a qualitative point of view. Defining the varied typology of contemporary populisms as neo-populisms is now widely accepted, as they are characterized by consensus modalities and leadership traits that can only be possible in current state forms. The various types of media populism are a clear example of this, finding their very condition of existence in the structural novelty of contemporary social systems. Neo-populisms take place in an advanced phase of western democracies, characterized by glocalization processes, hypermediation of the public sphere and politics in general, and a legitimacy crisis of political representation systems (Kramer, 2014).

This aspect also sheds light on the profound relationship between populism and democratic systems. Transformation in the former is strictly correlated to a transformation in the latter: populism changes as democracy changes, always remaining a dimension of it, more or less developed according to the specific context and intrinsically dependent on it. Being based on an unmediated social modality of popular sovereignty, populism is structured according
to modalities of political participation and production of consensus that are typical of a specific historical context.

Recent cases in Venezuela, Russia and Turkey, however, have raised the issue of the profound relationship between populism and democratic degeneration, in the context of liberal-democratic systems in the classical sense. We have recently witnessed several examples of democratic crises of political regimes highly conditioned by populist forms, which reached soft forms of authoritarianism, also called soft-authoritarianism (Kesselman and Krieger, 2013), hybrid regimes (Terry Linn, 1995; Diamond, 2002) or delegative democracies (O’Donnell, 2009). Populism, with its ability to delegitimize institutions and popularly legitimize a political force through direct mechanisms, represents a risk factor for the proper functioning of liberal democracies.

Finally, it is necessary to stress how the spread of neo-populisms at a global level, both in most advanced western democracies and in less consolidated democratic experiences, completely contradicts the idea that this kind of phenomenon could only happen in the least advanced political contexts. Le Pen’s movement in France, the most recent case of Donald Trump and – previously – Ross Perot in the US, or the various Italian neo-populisms, from Bossi to Grillo, show how populism is not a prerogative of political contexts that figure at a lower evolutional level compared to most advanced democracies.

A second approach to the solution of the conceptual definition of populism consists of its identification with a specific theoretical social category. This epistemological trend aims at reducing the complexity of populist phenomena to a clear and rigorously univocal definition. Because of this extremely clear-cut semantic limitation, this approach generates debate and constant specifications, especially in light of new empirical cases and new structural transformations which force scientific analysis to overstep those much sought-after definitions.

In an attempt to shed some clarity, Gidron and Bonikowski have recently proposed a very exhaustive classifying framework for this defining approach (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013). The
The recent debate

Two scholars identified three different doctrinal trends: the first one considers populism as an ideology, the second one as a discursive or communicative style and the third one as a strategy.

Cas Mudde, whose work focused mainly on European right-wing parties in the 1990s, is the author who more than anybody else considered populism an ideology.

More precisely, Mudde defined populism as:

A thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people.

(Mudde 2004, p. 543)

According to Mudde, populism is part of that specific type of ideology that the theorist Michael Freeden defined as thin-centred, as it has a simple morphology based solely on the juxtaposition between people and the elite. Another type of thin-centred ideology is, according to Freeden, nationalism (Freeden, 1996), while fascism, communism and socialism are thick-centred ideologies, with a complex morphology. According to Mudde, populism’s ideological nature consists mainly of a social and political juxtaposition between the elite and the people, where the former has a negative connotation and the latter a positive one. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser also acknowledged that in the case of a thin-centred ideology, its logical oppositions are pluralism and elitism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012).

This interpretative key of populism shares many aspects with Teun van Dijk’s sociolinguistic analysis, which stressed the peculiarity of ideological rhetoric as a strategy for valuing the “us” as opposed to a devaluing of the “them”, following a typical mechanism of ingroup–outgroup. This ideological communicative structure aims at circumscribing and defending a social macro-group, within which everything appears positive, while everything that is external is inexorably negative. According to van Dijk, ideology
always underpins a clear discursive strategy aimed at devaluing the “others” as part of “them”, and at valuing all that is inherent to “us” (van Dijk, 2014). When applied to populism, the “us” coincides with the people, the “them”with the elite. If, however, people are characterized by a sense of belonging and pride, the elite are instead the target of social resentment. In this framework, a populist leader is at the same time the promoter, the guarantor, the defender and the avenger of this new community and process.

This analytical approach must be credited with shedding light on the issue of the social polarization typical of populist dynamics. However, simply reducing populism to an ideology has been criticized, especially by those who consider populism a discourse, both due to the ambiguity of Mudde’s definition of thin-centred ideology and the methodological difficulties that emerge from its empirical application.

The trend that considers populism a discursive style of a communicative nature is perhaps the most common. This group includes numerous experts, many of whom have provided their own personal interpretation. Most of them have built on Ernesto Laclau’s work, the first theorist who, as I have explained, studied the issue in light of the structuralist and psychoanalytic linguistic paradigm. Moffitt and Tormey (2014), Aslanidis (Aslandis, 2015) and Panizza (Panizza, 2005) feature among recent scholars in this group.

According to this approach, populism is a rhetorical macro-device which asserts itself and operates in an attempt to overturn the people’s subalternity to the dominant social class. As in the previous approach, the juxtaposition between people and the elite is central to this trend; however, people’s anti-establishment identity, awareness and action are the social result of a specific communicative strategy. As in Laclau, language generates a political subjectivity and its Manichean dynamics of action, allowing the social expression of a need for re-appropriation on the part of popular sovereignty. There are different variations of this theoretical approach. According to Moffitt and Tormey, more than a discursive style, we are in the presence of a proper “political style”
The recent debate which, starting from the communicative dimension, moves to concrete action implemented by political actors and their forms of collective organization. Aslanidis, however, believes that the communicative nature of populism must be dealt with in light of Erving Goffman’s “frame” theory. This interesting intuition opens up a double analytical perspective, still unexplored: on the one hand, an analysis of the communicative social mechanisms internal to social groups who are involved in the populist dynamics, making them readable through the instruments of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology; on the other hand, an analysis of communicative techniques of conditioning the public sphere, in light of Lakoff’s famous insights on the use of frames in political communication strategies (Lakoff, 1990).

The research that emerged from this approach was oriented towards a rigorous analysis of the discourse of populist leaders, both through quantitative and qualitative methodologies. In the latter case, the interesting ethnographic research on the style of the early Northern League by Lynda Dematteo is worth noting (Dematteo, 2011). She analyzed, through a participant observation methodology, the histrionic, irreverent and offensive communicative style of Umberto Bossi and his followers, underlining how functional it was in generating a new political consensus based on distancing himself from the political style of the protagonists of old national politics, which were the target of his attacks.

The main limit of this way of conceiving populism rests on the subordination of any social and political dynamics – either contingent or structural – to the communication dimension. Although very fruitful at a level of rhetorical analysis of populism’s expressive structures, the formalism of this approach implies a devaluation of the social structures and dynamics which make communication aspects and the populist phenomenon itself possible.

The idea of populism as strategy is based on diametrically opposed premises. According to this approach, populism’s socio-structural dimensions take analytical precedence, such as social crises, economic crises, social mobilization and its changes, political organization, political participation and geopolitical factors.
The recent debate is therefore prevalent. Jansen, for example, insisted on social mobilization and stressed how the populist phenomenon is the result of a social reaction by the most disadvantaged and excluded classes, both socially and politically, aimed at a re-appropriation. Social polarization and the loss of real citizenship on the part of the subaltern classes are the propeller for a demand for more sovereignty which expresses itself and structures the whole populist political organization (Jansen, 2011). Weyland, who more than anybody else expressed this hermeneutic vision, defined populism as follows:

populism is best defined as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers.

(Weyland, 2001)

Conceiving populism as a strategy means considering all its factors as a unique social dynamic of power, which asserts itself to replace the dominant elite. Social mobilization and inclusion are essential and central factors to the strengthening of the strategy. Populism is therefore a dynamic of social consensus and a social configuration of political power. This means that both the ideological and the expressive communication dimensions are important; however, they remain subordinate to the social process tout court. Weyland’s interpretation, more than any other, touches on the issue of social intermediation as a typical trait of a populist context and direct mediation by the leader as a form of grassroots aggregation of a social power, contrasting the social effects of exclusion and non-participation due to disintermediation.

To conclude, some critiques of these types of solutions to the epistemological problem of defining populism are worth mentioning. They can be regarded as reductionist solutions, both at the level of the conceptual choice and at the level of the actual phenomenon. In the first case, there is an attempt to constrict the whole populist phenomenon into one strictly defined social
category, thus removing its theoretical autonomy. The concept of populism is subsumed into another category, be it ideology, discursive dimension or strategy. In the case of ideology, the critique is even stronger as the problem is only apparently solved by populism being identified with the concept of ideology, which is equally polysemic. These approaches are reductionist solutions as they deal with the complexity of the populist empirical phenomenon from one dimension only, be it ideas, communication or social strategy, neglecting the other dimensions and reducing them to mere effects of the chosen dimension. It must be acknowledged, however, that each of these research strands has highlighted traits of the phenomenon in different contexts, thus enriching the mosaic.

Here follows a summarizing scheme of this debate, as suggested by Gidron and Bonikoskwy.

References

The recent debate


PART II

Major cases
Russian populism must be considered the first populism ever and the one that gave origin to the term. “Populist” is the translation of the Russian word *narodnik*, which derives from *narod*, the Russian term for people.

In order to understand Russian populism, it is necessary to follow the development of utopian socialism in tsarist Russia from its beginnings in the second half of the nineteenth century to its disappearance after the rising of the Bolshevik movement (Tvardovskaja, 1975; Venturi, 1975).

Thoughts elaborated by some intellectuals in the 1820s and 1830s were the foundations of the first socialist doctrines in Russia. These ideas developed in intellectual circles, made up of young aristocrats and haute bourgeois, who, with no revolutionary or subversive intent, started to reflect on the social condition of the lower classes and the slavery suffered by the multitude of serfs. Two opposing trends emerged in this cultural ferment, which would then mark the following years. The first group was made up of the so-called Slavophiles, who, linked to the establishment, theorized and advocated social reforms, as a concession made by a new imperial style. A discussion on the *obscina*, or rural property, began to emerge in this circle and would later become crucial.

In opposition to this group, the Occidentalists theorized the need for a modernization of the country in a western and liberal way, characterized by industrialization and the overcoming of feudal structures.

Some of them, also called the democrats, started to contemplate the possibility of a revolutionary road to transformation, which
Russian populism

would be anti-autocratic and anti-tsarist. A leading figure in this group was Aleksandr Herzen (1812–1870), the first to identify the 

*obscina* as the social and economic basis of the new society to be achieved through revolution. Herzen was also among the first people who introduced socialist thought, albeit not scientific in nature but rather spontaneous and utopian. His theories were based on an idealization of Russian communities as natural guarantors of equality and social harmony, and expression of a natural communism. As part of this theory, he affirmed the idea of people as fundamentally rural. These ideas were being expressed in the literary field by authors like Tolstoj, as well as espoused by the anarchist theorist Bakunin and later by many members of the Bolshevik movement.

Following the failure of the 1848 European revolutions, the emergence of the socialist debate and the dissemination of Marxist ideas, the Russian socialist front experienced a profound internal transformation, while at the same time receiving a strong incentive. However, the edict “Statute of peasants free of servitude”, which decreed the abolition of slavery and an initial land redistribution, served as a catalyst. This law emerged as a reform attempt to appease the growing subversive movements and strengthen the consensus between the tsarist rulers and the people. The initial enthusiasm was soon followed by an even stronger discontent, due to the realization that the peasants’ social condition had only formally changed, as they could not benefit from the land, while the small local landholders did.

This new scenario of collective disappointment pushed revolutionary movements towards the terroristic option. In this period, movements like the nihilists were formalized, well-depicted in novels such as *Fathers and Sons* by Turgenev or *The Demons* by Dostoevskij (Hingley, 1967).

The debate on the need for a revolutionary option implied an evaluation of the involvement of the peasant masses which, in a mainly rural and backward country, represented a multitude in relation to urban proletariat minorities. This would represent a crucial theoretical problem for the Russian socialist movement up until the rise of Bolshevism. Unlike Marxist doctrine, which theorized the advent of socialism in advanced industrial capitalist countries, they
were considering whether a socialist revolution was at all possible in an agrarian and in many respects almost completely pre-modern country. In support of the hypothesis of a Russian way to socialism in the absence of industrial evolution, Herzen’s theory of the natural communism of Russian rural communities came to help.

Amid this cultural climate, the experience, albeit brief, of the anarchic populist movement Zemlja i Volja (1861–1864) was fundamental. Inspired by Bakunin’s anarchic ideas, it attempted to deal with the issue of anarchic insurrection through the involvement of peasant masses and by planning terrorist acts such as the failed attack against the Tsar Alexander II. Internal ideological and organizational divisions, powerful tsarist repression and the inability to achieve proselytism among peasants, which had long been theorized, were responsible for the end of this experience. However, it contributed to the birth of what is considered authentic Russian populism, Narodnaja volja (the will of the people), in 1879.

A reflection on Russia’s backwards conditions matured in this movement, in a comparative approach with other European countries. It led to the realization of a Russian specificity, made up of a prevalent rural nature and feudal social structures. The narodniki, perhaps led by the urgency of the revolutionary action, radicalized Herzen’s obschina’s rural communism, on which they started mass dissemination campaigns among peasants. Many young, educated militants from the cities moved to the countryside with the aim of converting peasants to the revolution. This represented a dynamic of reconciliation with the subaltern and traditionalist aspects of society, which produced among the revolutionary youth a strengthening of traditional, pan-Slavic and anti-modernist feelings.

If, at a practical level, it manifested itself in the killing of Tsar Alexander II on 13th March 1881, alongside several other terrorist acts, Narodnaja volja elaborated a doctrinal corpus which conditioned the whole Russian revolutionary movement for decades, including the Bolsheviks. However, in less than a decade, it disappeared as a political movement. Its residual groups soon became assimilated into the emerging Marxist groups.

Their simple yet very effective ideas were the following: elimination of autocratic power; the Russian rural community as the
Russian populism

foundation of the new revolutionary society; the belief that socialism was possible wherever inequality existed, unlike Marx’s scientific socialism which identified the revolutionary option with the advanced phase of capitalist societies; a rejection of anarchy, but also of any form of constitutionalism, as expression of the bourgeoisie, the enemy of the people; resentment and aversion towards small businessmen who had benefited from land distribution at the disadvantage of peasants (this idea would then be used by Stalin for his violent repressions of the Kulaks); and the ideal of a great mother Russia who would oppose the invasion of modernist European culture, seen as the destroyer of traditional values (Stephenson, 1969).

This populist experience, so distant from neo-populisms as well as from the twentieth-century populisms which developed in democratic or democratizing contexts, provides many interesting analytical points. First, the discovery of a conceptual reference point in the “people”, as the legitimacy for dynamics of consensus capable of delegitimizing the established power, in this case an autocratic and traditionalist one. Second, a movement which develops as the expression of an elaboration of imminent transformations in society by new modernizing economic and cultural trends, confirming the importance, in macro-sociological terms, of the juxtaposition between tradition and modernity as the social background for populism. Finally, and still an unclear point in the scientific debate on populism, the fact that, even in an autocratic context and not only in a democracy, a prospect, albeit embryonic and potential, of popular sovereignty is sufficient for populism to happen, as long as this prospect is experienced as a possibility of democratization, equality and inclusion by the vanguards (Wortman, 1967).

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Peronism was one of the first international populist phenomena which defined itself as such and became a paradigmatic example for later cases, in Latin America and beyond. The impact of Peronism on international public opinion has been incredibly strong since its first appearance. It was in fact seen as a continuation of fascism after the Second World War and in another continent. Although not reaching the level of authoritarianism typical of fascism, it expressed a concentration of personal power and popular consensus never seen before. It then became a model for other forms of Latin American populism (Gambini, 1999; Zanatta, 2008).

Its traits were very different from those of contemporary neo-populisms. These differences are mainly of a historical-social nature and rely on different macro-conditions, both in terms of institutional state development and the social texture on which democracy acts. Unlike contemporary neo-populisms, Peronism took place in a society which was experiencing democracy in the midst of deep changes to its fundamental structures and, as indicated by Germani, during a historical shift from a rural condition to an urban, modern and secularized one.

In Peronism, the leader’s charisma not only was central but prevalent and extensive, and the leader’s image almost messianic and redeeming. This trait, which might seem part and parcel of populism, should not be taken for granted. It will appear again in other Latin American populisms, such as with Chavez, but not in other neo-populisms where the leader might become a mentor.
Perón and Peronism

or simply the voice, and where the central role is played by the populist community itself – one example being Grillo’s Five Star Movement in Italy.

Born in 1895 in Buenos Aires, where he died in 1974, the young Juan Domingo Perón enrolled in the Argentine army as a cadet. At thirty, having graduated, he did some training missions in Italy, which allowed him to meet and appreciate Mussolini and fascism. After taking part in the 1943 military coup d’état carried out by a group of officials called GOU (Grupo de Oficiales Unidos), he participated in the coup government, initially as Undersecretary for War and then as Minister for Labour in Farrell’s military junta. In 1946, he was elected President of the Republic, a position to which he was confirmed in 1951. In 1955, as a result of a coup following a long period of crisis and unrest among sectors of society that had initially supported him – the main one being the Catholic Church – he was forced into exile until 1972. That year, he came back and took part in the 1973 elections, which he won with strong popular backing. He died in 1974, leaving the government in the hands of his second wife, Isabelita, who had been appointed vice-president. The unsuccessful experience of Isabelita’s government, after tumultuous events and violent clashes between left-wing Peronists, subversive Marxist movements and right-wing military repressive fringes, ended tragically in the 1976 military coup (Luna, 1986).

To gain a comprehensive understanding of Peronism, it is necessary to focus on the circumstances in which it rose to power and on Argentina’s social conditions in the 1930s and 1940s. This was a period marked by extraordinary social and economic transformations, with the shift from an almost totally agricultural economy to a national economy endowed with highly developed industrial and commercial sectors. In particular, the country experienced an increase in exports to Europe, which grew exponentially during the Second World War, when the countries involved in the conflict turned to Latin America for supplies. The influx of vast foreign capital represented a driving force in the modernization of the country and in mass urbanization, as well as a propeller for that growing political movement.
From a political point of view, before the arrival of Perón Argentina was experiencing a gradual detachment of its liberal and secular political elites from the traditionalist and deeply Catholic popular base. This implied a lack of acknowledgement of the social masses by the ruling class. The lack of representation and the resulting widespread social anger contributed to the rise of Peronism. The whole country was witnessing an ideological disorientation linked to the actual uprooting of the popular masses, which were uneven in their composition due to the significant presence of immigrants moving to the cities in search of better opportunities.

The Peronist discourse therefore found an extremely fertile ground as it promoted an identity-based rhetoric based on revamping Argentine nationality. In the face of chaos and destructuring, this discourse was advocating the need for a new social order, anchored in the national and Catholic tradition. In response to the economic, social and cultural distance between lower and upper classes, between rulers and ruled, it was promising a hypothetical multi-class society held together by social harmony. These were the main ideological tenets of Peronism, which acquired the name justicialismo, as it aimed at re-establishing an organicist and functional justice among different sectors of society. At the outset, justicialismo appeared as an alternative doctrine in opposition to all ideological tendencies of the time: anticommunist, antiliberal, antisecular, corporative and patriotic.

From the initial months of his first government (1946–1952), Perón adopted actions dictated by a strong state-driven logic and aimed at the creation of a welfare state, unprecedented in Argentina. The main objective was the structuring of the extraordinary consensus that had been expressed in the electoral phase and that was based on the leader’s remarkable charisma.

In particular, the trade unions and the Church were the two main instruments of social control and propaganda. By incentivizing numerous Peronist trade unions and offices, the president managed to create an extremely efficient governmental network aimed at establishing a direct contact with workers and all sectors of society, in full respect of the multi-class nature of his
movement, while at the same time allowing him to keep control of social consensus in each phase of his governmental action.

The relationship with the Church was more complex and went through an evolution in the period 1946–1955. By sticking to the antisecularist and antiliberal tones of his electoral campaign, Perón promoted an efficient strategy of collaboration with the Argentine Church, with the only aim of controlling it through its justicialismo. His objective was to create a Peronist Argentine Church. In this respect, the approval of compulsory teaching of the Catholic religion in schools was critical. However, when the Peronist hegemonic action in ecclesiastical contexts became explicit and when secular and Masonic components started to emerge in the president’s entourage, the relationship deteriorated beyond repair. A wide Catholic sector was in fact at the base of the social bloc that fed protests and forced him into exile.

In 1948, Perón made a constitutional reform, which represented a paradigmatic example of the dynamics of advanced institutionalization of a populist phenomenon. It marked a watershed in the history of the movement and of Argentina. Peronist hegemonic tension seemed as if it had been completely achieved: each sector had been reached, the control was absolute, all institutions had become Peronist to all intents and purposes. In particular, some articles, such as the possibility of the limitless re-election of the president, marked the beginning of the autocratic and authoritarian phase, although a much softer one than fascism. Dissent became gradually ill-tolerated and as a reaction, the opposition reorganized and found support in that unanimity of Perón’s initial consensus.

The constitutional reform was one of the reasons behind the gradual polarization between Peronists and anti-Peronists. However, geopolitical and economic factors complicated the situation. Once the Second World War was over, economic recovery in many countries that were part of development programmes such as the Marshall Plan contributed to a drastic reduction of imports from Argentina. The repercussion on national trade and the industrial sector was enormous. The decrease in foreign capital generated a U-turn in the economy and difficulties
in maintaining the Peronist welfare system. The decline of the populist parabola had started.

Perón’s charisma was characterized by a messianic image of a people-saviour, but also by his strong paternalistic traits. However, an important role in the creation of the populist communication liturgy was played by his first wife, Evita, who was perceived as the ideal mother and wife of all Argentinians, especially for her constant activity in promoting social programmes for the lower classes. Her sudden death was experienced as a kind of political secular martyrdom, which heightened the symbolic value that she had carefully built while still in life.

A judgement on the Peronist experience still proves very difficult due to the existence, at the historiographical level, of many discrediting attempts, as well as apologetic ones. In the narrow context of the development of populist phenomena, Peronism appears interesting as, although part of a different historical phase, in a nutshell and with due distinctions, it expresses traits that can be found in many other populisms, South American ones in particular. I will attempt to list some of them in an analytical and concise way: a social fabric in deep transformation which generates a socio-political uprooting of citizens; an elite which loses social legitimation and becomes the object of social resentment on the part of the popular base; a charismatic leader who proposes an organic vision and a new order as a response to the fragmentation and uprooting; a tension towards institutionalization which ends with a constitutional reform, ideologically conformed to populist tenets; the creation of a welfare state aimed at territorial control; and last but not least, a multi-class and crosscutting nature, which allows for adopting an ideological and collective action tactic, constantly alternative to a specific ideological determination.

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Latin America is perhaps the geographical macro-area that has registered the highest prevalence of populisms in contemporary history. From the rise of Perón, the populist option has remained a defining character of Latin American politics.

From a historiography and taxonomy point of view, two phases in Latin American populism can be identified: a first one was represented by the classic twentieth-century populism, which included Perón as well as Getulio Vargas in Brazil and Gaitan in Colombia, among others; and a second phase which started at the end of the 1990s with Chavez’s appearance and was linked to the spread of progressive political powers in the whole subcontinent, most of whom became institutionalized and remained in power for over ten years. This group included Lula in Brazil in 2002 and then Roussef in 2010; Kirchner in Argentina in 2003; Morales in Bolivia in 2005; and Correa in Ecuador in 2006 (Conniff, 1982; Conniff, 2012; De La Torre and Arnson, 2013; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014).

This political period has been labelled the Left Turn, due to the socialist traits of its governments after decades of exclusion (Cameron and Hershberg, 2010).

Two general factors are worth noting when analyzing the rise of the Left Turn populisms: a geopolitical one and an economic-political one.

From a geopolitical point of view, the global political context where these new left-wing forces took hold was the end of the
Cold War and Soviet socialism. The fact that new socialist forms reappeared exactly when socialism had ended in most of the world might seem paradoxical. The reason behind this is that, during the Cold War, anti-communist and anti-socialist control on the part of the US had blocked, in legitimate and not so legitimate ways, the spread of progressive forces that were not social-democratic or strongly pro-American. Furthermore, since the late 1990s but even more so after the attack at the Twin Towers in 2001, US attention has focused mainly on the Middle East and the Islamic world.

From an economic and political point of view, the Left Turn parties emerged and organized towards the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s, as a political reaction to the social difficulties created by the neoliberal policies implemented in those years by conservative governments. Privatizations, economic crises and drastic cuts in the welfare state were all factors that contributed to a reorganization of social forces, all of whom shared the political aim of posing an alternative to liberalism. As a reaction, the Left Turn neo-populisms developed a potent discourse of consensus based on social and political inclusion, which would become the main argument used by some left-wing analysts like Ernesto Laclau for an overall re-evaluation of populism, in their view the bearer of highly democratizing aspects. However, the Left Turn represented a parenthesis which is gradually coming to an end with the return to a new neoliberal phase. More than Chávez’s death in 2013, what marked the resurgence of the right was the election of a liberal candidate in Argentina in 2015, soon matched by the arrival of the Brazilian neo-president Temer following a controversial impeachment case which deposed Dilma Roussef in 2016.

I will now focus on the specific cases of Venezuela and Bolivia.

From a socio-political point of view, Venezuela represents a very interesting case of populism due to the complexity of its analysis.

The rise of Hugo Chávez marked the beginning of a turn in Latin American politics. It is both paradigmatic and *sui generis*: paradigmatic, as many of its traits will later be found in other countries, yet *sui generis*, as its institutional development and the social and political crisis turned it into one of the most
Neo-populisms in Latin America

radical cases of all. Furthermore, Chavismo, more than any other phenomenon, developed a widespread activity of promoting progressive values in a perspective of pan-South Americanism (Hawkins, 2010; Anselmi, 2013; Branding, 2013).

A full understanding of Venezuelan Chavismo must take into account the long critical phase that preceded it. From the end of the 1970s and for the whole of the 1980s, Venezuelan society experienced a gradual process of impoverishment and decadence, which manifested itself in an exponential increase in poverty, criminality and, above all, social polarization due to the squeeze of the middle class. This growing instability undermined the political and social system that had been established since the mid-1950s following the expulsion of the dictator Pérez Jiménez, and that was characterized by alternating power from two parties – centre-left and centre-right – and the exclusion of Marxist forces from parliament. This led to a series of violent social protests that culminated in the 1989 Caracazo, and a period of strong political uncertainty, exacerbated by a growing economic crisis. In 1992, a group of army officials attempted a coup, confiding in popular support, which failed, however, and ended with the rebels’ imprisonment. Colonel Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías was a leading figure among the rebels. After being released from prison, thanks to an amnesty, he started a political propaganda activity which culminated in his victory in the 1998 presidential elections. Establishing a direct link to 1950s revolutionary Bolivarianism, Chávez promoted a Creole socialism which he labelled “twenty-first-century socialism”, based on the exaltation of direct democracy, citizens’ participation, mass social investments aimed at the inclusion of disadvantaged classes and a radical anti-capitalism, linked to an explicit anti-US stand and a strong pan-South American ideal. From its first government, Chavismo represented a highly institutionalized form of populism, which was able to turn the strong social polarization into an incredibly serious political polarization. The constitutional reform that Chávez implemented in 1999 deeply transformed the liberally oriented political system in favour of a strongly plebiscitarian system. Chávez also represented one of the first cases of
Latin American telepopulism, as he made mass use of the media to cultivate his own personal consensus and spread the ideas of revolutionary Bolivarism. His TV programme *Aló Presidente*, during which he used to comment on national and international political events and directly answer citizens’ calls, was renowned.

Despite the undisputable social successes of its first years, especially in eradicating poverty and illiteracy, the Venezuelan political system started to develop a gradual instability, partly due to the growing conflicts with the opposition, which increased after the 2002 anti-Chávez coup, and partly due to ill-advised economic policies that generated an unprecedented recession. Three years after Chávez’s death, in an extraordinary situation that could be defined as post-populism, his party, led by his successor Nicolas Maduro, continues to rule despite growing consensus for the opposition, which, in addition to holding a bigger presence in parliament, are leading a permanent strategy of periodic social protests.

In this phase of crisis and decline, Venezuela represents a particularly interesting example for the evaluation of a populism in government and one that has managed to mould the state form in a populist vein. For these reasons, liberal analysts have criticized the Chavista experience as a process of democratic involution and have defined Venezuela a form of soft authoritarianism, more precisely a “hybrid regime” (Corrales and Hidalgo, 2013). This term indicates a democracy which has lost one or more basic requisites, yet cannot be considered full-blown authoritarianism as it maintains other elements of democracy. In particular, the autocratic tendencies of the presidential role; numerous cases of penal populism, both in the systematic use of impunity for the lower classes to maintain political consensus, and in influencing judges’ activity; the almost ritual use of elections to stress the direct and plebiscitarian character of his consensus and an almost absolute mandate; these are all elements that have de-intermediated the Venezuelan representative political system, dissolving its liberal structure.

Ideologically in line with Venezuela’s Chavismo, Evo Morales’ MAS (*Movimiento al Socialismo Partito democratico*) party in Bolivia represents a type of Left-Turn Latin American neo-populism.
with markedly ethnic traits. While in Chavismo the defence of Creole and indigenous identities is one component of its ideological corpus, in Morales’ socialist movement it is the main trait. The leader’s origin in the ranks of the indigenous cocaleros movement and a systematic symbolic ostentation of this identity make it a true case of ethno-populism. The party Movimiento al Socialismo – Instrumento Político por la Soberanía de los Pueblos started operating in the early 1980s, as a dissident part of the left-wing nationalist party Bolivian Socialist Regiment. In this new party, the rhetoric of indigenous identity became a structural dimension of the new political subject, which gradually, during the course of the 1990s, abandoned the traits typical of twentieth-century socialism to acquire a more post-modern and national-popular character. Evo Morales, by then a famous trade unionist, was elected to parliament in 1997, and managed to build national and international prestige thanks to his participation in the presidential electoral campaign, which he lost, gaining, however, a considerable increase in MAS votes. Morales was elected President of the Republic in 2005, in elections that were brought forward due to constant social protests against the government. Re-elected in 2009 and 2014, Morales implemented a profound transformation of Bolivian society. The constitution approved by popular referendum in 2009 is the clearest example of the institutionalization of the indigenista populism promoted by MAS. For the first time in the history of Latin America and beyond, ethnic, social, cultural and linguistic pluralism at all institutional levels is enshrined in a new charter. Bolivia has thus become a pluri-national nation, attaining civic and social inclusion of the poorest classes and the economically and politically excluded masses, achieving a political process of de-colonization (Harten, 2011).

References

Neo-populisms in Latin America


Describing the Italian political system as one of the most important reference points in the discussion on contemporary populism at the international level is not a parochial exercise. It acquired this role after the profound shift between 1992 and 1993, which marked the passage from the so-called “First Republic” to the so-called “Second Republic” (Grilli di Cortona, 2007; Urbinati and Ragazzoni, 2016). More than twenty years after that historical phase, it is safe to say that Italian society and politics have taken a markedly populist direction, to the point where Italy today is perhaps the only country in the world where several populist forces compete with each other and where a widespread political communication characterized by populist tones and styles prevails.

The end of a strongly party-based system generated a profound transformation in Italy’s main socio-political structures, as well as in public communication and debates. As Roberto Biorcio stressed, populism was ushered in by the end of a political era characterized by political hypermediation of an ideological system of limited pluralism, based on locally rooted political and social organizations, like trade unions and parties (Biorcio, 2015). In a relatively short amount of time, which coincided with the Tangentopoli scandal period, the Italian political system moved from a situation of ‘political society’ (Farneti, 1971), dominated by mass parties and their practices for determining collective action, to a new situation, marked by anti-politics, distrust of representation mechanisms, glorification of “civil society” and
the search for a direct validation of political action. On this point, Marco Tarchi stressed how, in the case of Italy, we should talk of populism as a way of thinking (Tarchi, 2015).

The signs of the crisis in the parties were already visible by the end of the 1970s, with the progressive decline of twentieth-century ideologies, the decrease in active participation, the crisis of institutions and the growing distrust of the ruling classes, as well as the economic crisis. The corruption scandals that emerged in 1992 catalyzed a dissolution process which had been active for some time. The Northern League phenomenon can be explained in this context. The first example of neo-populism, it appeared in the last decade of the “First Republic” – the late 1980s – in Italy’s North East, the richest and most industrial area in the country (Biorcio, 2010). In response to the growing crisis of the “First Republic” parties, especially the Christian Democrats, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party, which were facing corruption charges, a decrease in consensus and lack of responsiveness, the leader of the Northern League, Umberto Bossi, managed to develop an innovative ethno-regionalist, interclass and post-ideological political message. Elaborating an original, simple and mass communicative style, strongly characterized by the use of informal language (Diamanti, 1996), Bossi represented the first Italian case of neo-populism as a reaction to the process of political and economic disintermediation that would soon engulf the whole country. In the span of a few years, the Northern League managed to supplant the traditional parties in northern Italy, creating a form of movement-party which was totally new in the country, and whose political representation was based on a regional social identity in opposition to the whole national state value system.

The appearance of Silvio Berlusconi in January 1994 marked the true beginning of the Italian neo-populist phase. In terms of his communication style, from the very start, through a video message broadcast by the television channels owned by the businessman himself, Berlusconi adopted a very innovative neo-populist rhetoric, which has been described as telepopulism (Taguieff, 2006). In terms of strategy, Berlusconi managed to
create an agile, business-like, highly top-down party organization, totally unprecedented in Italian history, which was mainly made up of professional politicians of a liberal orientation, whose actions were characterized by a marked “immediacy” (Orsina, 2013). Berlusconi managed to achieve a “top-down” populism (McCarthy, 1997), which blended anti-politics and antiparty demands typical of the Second Republic with a personalistic vision and the business interests of its founder. In the long period between 1994 and 2011, the date which marks the end of the last Berlusconi government and the beginning of its progressive decline, Forza Italia changed from a movement into a lean party, almost lacking organization and highly dependent on its leader, and at the same time capable of structuring itself as a broad party, almost coinciding with the centre-right, and able to assimilate the party Alleanza Nazionale (Fella and Ruzza, 2009).

From 2005 onwards, a civic, cross-cutting movement, characterized by strong anti-politics elements and started by comedian Beppe Grillo, began to emerge. It gradually became the third pole of Italian politics and the second one in terms of electoral consensus. Initially using the blog of its leader Beppe Grillo, which later became representative of the whole movement, as strategically promoted by Gianroberto Casaleggio, a marketing expert and co-founder of the movement, the M5S represented the first case of webpopulism in Italy (Lanzone and Woods, 2015) and one of the few internationally. Even more than the Berlusconi movement, the M5S has always displayed an inter-class and non-ideological structuring, capable of attracting both radical left- and right-wing sympathizers. The populist civicism of this movement, whose tenets are direct democracy, the fight against corruption, the fight against parties and environmental issues, but above all a constant call to a direct expression of popular sovereignty in an anti-establishment vein, can be included in the “democratic populism” category identified by Canovan (1981, pp. 37–40). The M5S is a novelty, even in terms of its style of political participation. It is a citizens’ movement where the members and sympathizers are more similar to activists than to party militants in its classical meaning. The use of the meet-ups
as discussion spaces; the selection of candidates through online consultations; and the constant recourse to the internet sphere, considered more authentic than the actual one, in opposition to the traditional media system, are all elements that contribute to the novelty of this *webpopulism*. However, the M5S has been criticized for reasons similar to Berlusconi: in particular, the extremely top-down management of the movement, the lack of clear rules of internal democracy and the promotion of actions or positions that are often contradictory.

In a long-term evaluation of the Italian political context, the appearance of Matteo Renzi, current leader of the Democratic Party, represents a further development in Italian contemporary neo-populism. His national debut happened in 2010, when, as mayor of Florence, together with a group of other young PD executives, he promoted a political campaign centred on the idea of “scrapping” – a drastic change in the party’s old ruling class. After taking part in the 2012 party primaries, which were won by Bersani, he managed to come first in the 2013 primaries. He then became national secretary of the Democratic Party and on the 14th of February, the president of the Republic Napolitano tasked him with forming a government. As many experts stressed, Renzi cannot be considered a true populist; however, it is possible to identify many populist traits in his political and communication style. Renzi’s leadership, which emerged as an alternative to both Berlusconi’s and the M5S’s populism, has managed to use similar methods of consensus building, with very similar tools and modalities, skilfully using the media and being careful at not being stereotyped as old politics or the establishment. Renzi is, in fact, the institutional response to widespread populism.

The fracture which took place in the early 1990s with the end of the “First Republic” and the appearance of Silvio Berlusconi created a substantial alteration of the Italian political system in a populist direction, which still persists. The Italian peculiarity is that, unlike other cases, the initial populist phenomenon was not an isolated one; rather, it generated other antagonistic populisms and permeated the political grammar so as to condition the
70 Italian neo-populism
whole system. It is a dynamic with multiple variations. It started in a limited and circumscribed way with the Northern League; it then moved to the national level with Berlusconi; it was interpreted by the M5S in a grass-root and protest vein, and finally was reinterpreted by Renzi in an institutional way. The common trait of these Italian neo-populist phenomena is their link with civil society. Each of them claims it belongs to civil society as a positive element in opposition to “political society”.

References
PART III

Other typologies and other problems
13

PENAL POPULISM

Among the family of populisms, penal populism represents the most unusual typology, both in terms of structure and because of the problems associated with it. It is not a purely political populism, although the social conditioning that it generates and its instrumental use are political to all intents and purposes. Penal populism primarily relates to the realm of justice and the rule of law, the proper application of laws and the social conditioning that arises from improper applications.

Unlike purely political populisms, penal populism is not necessarily anchored to a leader; rather, it constitutes a dynamic that some leaders or organizations, be they social or political, can exploit to generate consensus. Penal populism arises in the sphere of the reception of the rule of law by citizens. Distorted interpretation of the functioning of the justice system on the part of public opinion produces a delegitimization of the rule of law (Anselmi and Falcinelli, 2015).

The first studies on penal populism can be traced back to Anthony Bottoms’s social criminology research. Bottoms introduced the issue of legislative modalities and those of implementation of penalties, which were not based on the merit of juridical matters but rather on populist conditioning about politicians and judgements. Bottoms called this kind of phenomenon “populist punitiveness” (Bottoms, 1995).

Based on this indication, the first studies on penal populism focused on the role of justice in specific English electoral
Penal populism campaigns. Particular attention was given to the instrumental use of juridical issues on the part of some political candidates, identifying actual strategies of manipulating information, aimed at presenting a worse picture of the criminal situation than the real one. Although statistical data showed a decrease in crime, the representation given by candidates was aimed at depicting a climate of widespread insecurity. The public debate on the issue of social security was entirely based on fear, social stereotypes and irrational aspects, rather than on actual data. The perception of crime, craftily manipulated, was generating political consensus.

Successive studies, especially by John Pratt, went beyond electoral cases and explored penal populism in its different articulations, painting it as a more complex phenomenon which arises from the irrational and non-functional juxtaposition of the justice sphere, the political one and public opinion. It is identified with a social hermeneutics which disseminates a culture of justice not coherent with the basic tenets of the rule of law, and which lends itself to a consensus that conditions public debates and politicians’ and judges’ actions, delegitimizing the whole justice system (Pratt, 2007).

Pratt identified some specificities of penal populism such as glamourization, destatisticalization and restorative and reparative penalties. These traits represent altering forms of the normal functioning of justice and manipulation of the objectives of the rule of law.

Glamourization

Based on diachronic comparisons of the representation of crime in national media between the aftermath of the First World War and the present day, Pratt stressed how, in the current media and show business society, crimes are overly spectacularized, thus contributing to the spread of a glamorized idea of the criminal dimension in general. While in the 1950s and 1960s programmes dedicated to these subjects featured experts, and whose style and contents were scientific and perhaps boring, nowadays the logic of the show has completely altered expressive modalities.
Criminality is represented firstly as a show that people should watch and enjoy, and secondly as a social fact, one that, however, is always sui generis: unpredictable, almost metaphysical and indeterminable, and for this reason, it is the object of an attention that becomes pure amazement. Crime becomes a fatal ill against which it is almost impossible to do anything; yet, it generates admiration. The dramatization of crime news, which is at the basis of television programmes like Amore Criminale in Italy or Crimewatch in England, contributes to a transfiguration of real facts into fiction and to a semiotic transformation from citizens who demand information into an audience of a show. Glamourization highly conditions public opinion, encouraging emotional attitudes and inclinations towards the event rather than critical ones.

**Destatisticalization**

Strongly connected to glamourization, as it contributes to the detachment of the social representation of crimes from their real dimension, destatisticalization is one of the typical traits of penal populism. With this expression, we refer to the tendency to discuss criminal and security issues while totally disregarding statistical data. People discuss and give public statements, not using supporting evidence but rather commonplaces and widespread social beliefs with the aim of confirming and gratifying them. Destatisticalization shows the deep rhetorical nature of penal populism, as it subordinates the arguments on juridical matters in public discourse to the needs of social and political consensus. The 2001 administrative elections for mayor of Rome, which were won by Walter Veltroni, are a typical example of destatisticalization (Bagaglini and Gonnella, 2005). On that occasion, as well as during the following elections in 2006 and 2008, the electoral debate was completely focused on the security emergency, although actual data, completely ignored by both the media and the candidates, showed a decrease in criminal events.

Destatisticalization confirms the shifting of public debate from a factual level to a symbolic and rhetorical one, typical of
Penal populism
populisms, which results in the delegitimization of any institutional attempt and in a communication which is not adherent to reality.

Restorative and reparative penalties

This aspect of penal populism relates more to the judicial sphere of the justice system, which includes all that strictly refers to punishment and penalty. With the term “restorative and reparative penalties”, we refer to a way of understanding sentences on the basis of juridical interpretations that have a reparative character and are not aimed at the reintegration and rehabilitation of the transgressor. The violation of the norm is conceived as a damage to the community, while the penalty that follows is seen as a social reparation towards the injured party, as well as to the whole community. In the words of Pratt:

rather than facilitating the reintegration of transgressors, the reparative concept is used to justify their constant penalization and the imposition of a secondary punishment.

(Pratt, 2007, p. 145)

From this point of view, restorative and reparative penalties directly impact on one of the tenets of the rule of law in western countries: the rehabilitation aim of the penalty. When transgressors are convicted, the need of the “community-people” for reparation prevails over the rehabilitation of the culprit and an us-versus-them opposition is established between those who punish and those who transgress. This way, people fully legitimate an action against the transgressor, whose humiliation must be proportional to the transgression.

Although penal populism is not a political force promoted by a populist leader, it represents a functional anomaly in the relationship between the political dimension and the public sphere, set in motion by dynamics of consensus, intentionally distorted social representations and communication stereotypes.
References

One of the most common mistakes made when analysing the populist phenomenon is to think of it simply as a political issue. Considering it an anomalous presence in the democratic system, detached from the country’s social and cultural reference framework, is a reductionist and unfruitful vision. Purely stressing the politological aspects is therefore a short-sighted and limiting exercise. Rather, it is necessary to observe the populist dynamic at play, both as a way of gaining consensus for the politicians who pursue it and as an alternative and direct political expression of citizens, deeply linked to transformations in the public sphere and the cultural processes connected to the political system. For this reason, analyzing Berlusconi’s telepopulism without taking into account the profound cultural transformations that took place in Italy in those years due to the dominant role of television in the cultural industry would not be fruitful. Similarly, it would be difficult to understand the Five Star Movement without taking into account the spread of social networks and a new culture of digital sociality. The relationship between populism and culture runs very deep, not only as an effect of social causes but also because the transformations of political structures in populist terms are often matched by deformations in populist terms of the public sphere and the cultural processes linked to it.

In order to understand cultural populism, it is necessary to shift the analytical focus to the public sphere and its dynamics. As Jim McCuigan stressed, the theoretical premises of cultural populism can be traced back to the debate that started in the twentieth
century with the advent of mass culture and the opposition to elitist culture. The issue of a culture from the bottom-up in opposition to a top-down culture, as studied by the school of Frankfurt, as well as the issue of the standardization of cultural products, their availability on a large scale and their widespread fruition, also due to their technical reproducibility, set the foundations for the processes of popularization of culture and therefore for cultural populism.

In a long-term historical analysis, cultural populism is a relatively recent phenomenon when compared to the elitist character of culture in our societies. The issue of cultural populism is therefore a result of democratization processes in the national public sphere and cultural systems.

McGuigan defines cultural populism as follows:

Cultural populism is the intellectual assumption, made by some students of popular culture, that the symbolic experience and practices of ordinary people are more important analytically and politically than culture with a capital C.

(McGuigan, 1992)

Cultural populism thus happens in the symbolic sphere of society where high culture and low culture compete with each other, but also where techniques and possibilities of either dimension blend. The social-historical reconstruction of the stages in the public sphere, as identified by Habermas in his renowned work, shows how this symbolic dimension, through the centuries and parallel to the building of the modern western state and its slow democratization, gradually opened up possibilities from the bottom up, both in terms of content and form (Habermas, 1992).

Nowadays, the juxtaposition between high and low culture is almost considered as something belonging to the past. We often witness phenomena where the two dimensions mix together, as the hierarchy itself and the pyramid that this distinction used to impose are much more blurred. We increasingly talk about cultural populism or aesthetic populism, exactly because in the cultural, symbolic and communicative dimension,
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a strong disintermediation has taken place in the public sphere of our democratic societies. Due to globalization processes, morphological changes of civil society in contemporary democracies – especially because of glocalization – the public sphere, as well as classical modern political structures, is experiencing a profound crisis in its institutionalized mechanisms of cultural mediation. Those institutional cultural infrastructures which stood in between high and low culture as intermediate dimensions are gradually giving in, generating a fluid space between the two opposing levels and facilitating their blending. These are some of the general pre-conditions that explain a higher prevalence of cultural populist phenomena.

Here follows a list of some typical traits of cultural populism.

- **Cultural polarizations.** In general and contextual terms, cultural populism can be found where cultural polarization phenomena take place at the disadvantage of a pluralist structure. In formal structural terms, this translates into strong simplifications and dichotomies in the cultural debate, inability to create an articulated debate and the lack of blurred cultural positions. Cultural polarization is mainly aimed at devaluing all that relates to high cultural production, which is considered elitist and therefore negative.

- **Delegitimization of cultural institutions.** Cultural populism is characterized by a strong delegitimizing and devaluing tendency towards traditional cultural institutions, especially the scientific and academic ones. The product of intellectual work and research carried out by the institutions in charge is perceived as an elitist manipulation and therefore adverse to a culture of the people and for the people. Institutional culture becomes the target of resentment and is always opposed by a bottom-up alternative. A very clear example of this type of phenomenon is what has happened and is still happening in Italy with the spread of feelings of delegitimization of the institutionalized health culture. I refer here to the widespread trend in opposing children’s vaccinations by parents.
who consider this practice an imposition of pharmaceutical companies in search of profit.

- **Glamourization of intellectuals.** Another example of cultural populism is the glamorization process of intellectuals. In a de-institutionalized public sphere, where pre-constituted institutional cultural mechanisms are delegitimized by society in their role of collective acknowledgement of individual cultural value, other factors contribute to determine the reputational growth of an intellectual. In particular, symbolic and communicative factors based on direct mechanisms and on demagogical consensus of the intellectual will be dominant. Rather than the control of their work through evaluation criteria set by scientific and cultural communities, it is the result of their social consensus among the audience that determines the experts’ success and authority. This dynamic has become particularly strong when television, as well as many newspapers, started to interview and give space to experts who did not come from academic and scientific institutions or had proven excellence but were favoured according to criteria of telegenic effectiveness or communicative skills. The intellectual thus becomes a sort of guru whom people should imitate, and a prototype of intellectual to be interviewed not only on their specific competency area but on any topic.

- **Infotainment.** With this term we refer to television, radio or web information programmes that are promoted as entertainment shows. This type of fusion between informative seriousness and showy playfulness is aimed at a specific strategy of maintaining the attention of the popular audience, who might stop being interested in the programme when its content becomes too complex. The careful avoidance of exclusivist modalities also implies a constant simplification of the information to be communicated, always maintaining a level of ambiguity between the serious and the funny. Many programmes and TV schedules currently follow this scheme.
Cultural populism

- **Post-truth.** Recently, the term post-truth entered the international political and cultural debate. Two global events highly characterized by populist dynamics contributed to accelerating its usage: Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as president of the US. Oxford Dictionaries nominated it the word of 2016 and defined it as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’. This concept recalls highly manipulative aspects of communication and culture in a context of populist politics. Unlike pure manipulation, post-truth shows a dimension of uncertainty and impossibility of verification and ascertainment of truth by citizens. This implies that the latter are exposed to large-scale persuasion strategies, especially during electoral campaigns, where the repetition of a false truth, acting on a widespread prejudice, generates the desired collective behaviour among the population to the advantage of those who promote this false truth. Post-truth is therefore a cultural operation that serves top-down forms of populism, which artfully use these strategies to strengthen their direct consensus among their popular base.

These are only some of the systemic and functional traits underpinning cultural populism phenomena. However, they allow us to better understand the deformations in the public sphere operated by populist phenomena, in the presence of a social disintermediation of institutional cultural mechanisms.

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Media populism is structured around a media technological tool which allows for the very existence of that populism. The mediatic form is therefore the *conditio sine qua non* of populism. In general terms, as far as its functional aspect is concerned, media populism is characterized by a production of consensus based on the effect that the media produces among citizens. The latter thus become users, more passive than in the case of telepopulism and more active than in the case of webpopulism (Eco, 2007). This prevalence of the meaning effect implies that media populism operates at the level of the aestheticization of politics. Citizens participate in a virtual dimension which can be
additional to or part of the real one. In that dimension, citizens can find a type of community alternative to the real one, where they can place their trust and wishes, without any link to reality. The difference with non-mediatic populisms rests in the fact that they also need to include the seductive traits in the leader’s rhetoric, while at the same time accompanying them with real actions and organizations, often of a clientelistic nature. Furthermore, media populism produces important changes in the organization of collective mobilization events. Rallies, protests and public events promoted by the populist force are not focused primarily on social mobilization but rather aim symbolically at creating a mediatic event that could strengthen the image and the communicative effect intended to be achieved. In practical terms, this means that the fact that thousands of people are present at the rally is less important than the sense of a multitude being transmitted through television coverage or images on the internet.

It is possible to identify different forms of populism for each form of media, given the high number of different forms of media, but I will only focus on the main ones: telepopulism and webpopulism.

Telepopulism was the first important form of media populism. It was particularly strong in the period between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 2000s, when television was playing a central role in the national media systems of most western countries and beyond. Its limitation, which represented only a reduction of its role and not its disappearance, coincided with the advent of the web.

One of the most emblematic cases of telepopulism, as stressed by Taguieff, was Silvio Berlusconi’s, the tycoon of Italian television channels who also governed Italy for about twenty years. The owner of three television channels, Berlusconi developed a form of social and cultural hegemony at the national level, skilfully using his own television programmes as his only medium. This trait was visible from the outset: Berlusconi gave the speech where he announced his entry into politics on all his
channels at the same time, as if he were already a prime minister or president. Even through the set details and his make-up, Berlusconi created an image of family man and normal citizen, which conquered most people, based on an ideal and sweetened social representation. Once his movement started to spread and became institutionalized, Berlusconi articulated a system of television programmes, information, entertainment and infotainment that were not only promoting his image but also referring to the general frame of his leadership. In the most advanced phase of his political experience, the television context even became a catchment area for recruiting parliamentary candidates. Many showgirls and presenters in his programmes then became parliamentarians. The potential mediatic glamour of these people, in the context of telepopulism, could be exploited also in a political environment. Berlusconism was also the promoter, at the national level and due to the widespread dissemination of the television message, of new communication and discussion modalities, characterized by speed, brevity and an immediate significance. However, it is possible for a telepopulist’s general image to wither away in the eyes of the population-audience.

We identify webpopulism with the rise and spread of the internet in contemporary societies. As Manuel Castells first explained, the internet provides extraordinary expressive opportunities for global social movements. Its structural contribution is not only of an expressive nature but also of an organizational one. As the movements of the so-called Arab Spring showed, the internet and social networks facilitated the organization and the daily mobilization of the movement itself, producing new forms of political participation.

On this front, as well, Italy provides an exemplary case of webpopulism: the Five Star Movement. This case represents perhaps the most advanced experience of populism structuring through the possibilities provided by the internet. Its beginning as a blog, its evolution as an official website for the movement, the discussion modalities through thematic groups (meet-ups)
Media populism

and the recruitment of candidates through elective selections on the web platform represent a system of digital political participation which is completely new and alternative to the classical one. The effect on citizens is also very innovative and appealing: it generates hope around the possibility of a new social expression of sovereignty, as an alternative to the usual forms dominated by the elite. The internet becomes the place where new forms of popular equality and political re-appropriation are possible; virtual communities with their participative horizontal modalities replace institutionalized communities characterized by exclusion and hierarchy.

To conclude, media populisms emerged as new social modalities for citizens, although partly intangible but nevertheless real, and represent in a new form the old scheme elaborated by Germani. According to this scheme, populism emerges in the presence of a radical process of modernization among the population.

References

16
CONSTITUTIONAL POPULISM

The term “constitutional populism” originated from an analysis of those populisms that had reached a very advanced institutionalized phase and that, once in government, had pursued a constitutional reform in a markedly populist direction (Blokker, 2013). Among neo-populisms, there are many cases that show this kind of evolution: in Latin America, for example, there are the cases of Chavez’s Venezuela and Morales’ Bolivia, while in Europe, the constitutional reform promoted and realized by the populist leader Orbán in Hungary is particularly emblematic.

As already mentioned, Yves Mény and Yves Surel have identified a conceptual opposition between populism and constitutionalism, in terms of political prospects and the concept of popular sovereignty. Based on this distinction, the term constitutional populism could therefore sound like an oxymoron, as the constitutional dimension and the populist one appear mutually exclusive. However, it is a form of populism that expresses a *sui generis* constitutionalism, in stark opposition to the forms of classical liberal constitutionalism and characterized by the basic populist scheme: the sovereign people-as-one (Claude Lefort, 1988).

Populism’s hostility towards liberal constitutionalism in penal populism manifests itself in the promotion of a delegitimizing vision of the basic principles of classical constitutionalism. As expressed by Jan Werner Muller, ‘populism is inherently hostile to the mechanisms, and ultimately, the values commonly associated with constitutionalism: constraint on the will of the
Constitutional populism

majority, checks and balances, protections for minorities, and even fundamental rights’ (Muller, 2016).

Populism refutes the basic structure of constitutionalism, which is based on the separation of powers, an articulation of the mediation of power linked to an articulation of the institutionalized forms of popular sovereignty. For this reason, constitutional populism always aims at a radical reform of the constitutional charter, towards a drastic reduction of the intermediation between the leader and the base, and between rulers and the ruled. Above all, it aims at the elimination of the mechanisms of control and mediation of institutional action, of all checks and balances, in order to establish a structure of direct links between the ruled and the populist ruler, in most cases between citizens and a populist charismatic leadership. This type of structure generated the phenomenon of Latin American hyper-presidentialism exactly in those states where a constitutional reform of a populist nature had taken place.

Constitutional populism is therefore a deformation of the principles of classical liberal democratic constitutionalism in a leader-based and plebiscitarian vein. The delegitimization of the pre-existing constitution, which from the populist point of view is part of the enemy sphere of the elite and the status quo, not only aims at the elimination of the foundations of the institutional structure of liberal democracy but also at a new foundation in a hierarchical way, highly dependent on a direct and constant consensus between the leader and the base.

Paul Blokker identified four analytical aspects which regulate constitutional populism: popular will, majoritarianism, legal resentment and constitutional instrumentalism (Blokker, 2013).

With the term “popular will”, Blokker meant an idealized, simplified and moralized idea of the people, which is used to build a constitutional architecture alternative to the liberal one. The popular will is linked to the idea of ordinary people who need to be defended against any form of elite and any form of action contrary to the collective interest. This Manichean attitude, which claims to predetermine the constitutional configuration,
Constitutional populism represents a strong limitation to any guarantee of constitutional pluralism. As Nadia Urbinati stressed (Urbinati, 2014, p. 124), the predominance of the will of the people, which dominates and controls every aspect of the institutional structure, generates a structural anomaly as it leads to a blurring between political society and civil society, a distinction that is at the basis, not only of any liberal democratic state, but also of liberal democratic society.

The second aspect is “majoritarianism”. Another consequence of the unitary people scheme typical of populism is the majoritarian idea underpinning proposals of constitutional reforms in a populist vein. According to this idea, the majority is always that part of society which agrees with the populist political programme. This vision unbalances the whole institutional system promoted by the constitutional reform, limiting the opposition’s action space in the democratic game. Majoritarianism produces a reduction of the democratic proceduralism that sustains any liberal democracy.

The expression “legal resentment” means a negative vision of liberalism and classical representative democracy. This attitude of strong opposition to its basic principles can even lead to “illiberal constitutionalism” (Thio, 2012) or “counter-constitutionalism” (Scheppelle, 2004), which manifest themselves in the refusal of the basic principles of modern constitutional liberalism such as the separation of powers. In this respect, the case of Hugo Chavez is emblematic. More than once, he went as far as theorizing the substantial elimination of the separation of powers in his political system, perceived as an obstacle to the achievement of the revolutionary process he was promoting (Corrales and Hidalgo, 2013).

Finally, the term “constitutional instrumentalism” refers to the instrumental use of the constitutional reform as part of the “occupying state” populist strategy (Muller, 2016). Through the constitutional reform promoted by populism, a hegemonic tension towards controlling all the state’s apparatuses is expressed. In this framework, the constitution becomes the main instrument that strengthens the absolute control of the state system. This
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aspect also implies a reduction in the space for pluralism in the institutional functioning of democracy.

Constitutional populism therefore represents the most institutionalized phase of populism in a democratic political system. In light of the conceptual opposition between populism and constitutionalism, constitutional populism represents a pragmatic solution in favour of the former, yet to the disadvantage of classical liberalism and the constitutional approaches inspired by it.

References


After having illustrated the main theories in the debate on populism and its main types, as well as typologies of populism other than the strictly political one, I will attempt to indicate some analytical prospects aimed at social research on populism. The objective is to provide the reader with some very general guidelines on how to study a populist phenomenon, taking into account the social dimension and following a comparative and empirical approach.

For this purpose, it is necessary to go back to the idea of populism as a strategy, as suggested by Kurt Weyland, which prioritizes the social dynamics underpinning more formal phenomena, such as the discursive and the ideological dimensions (Weyland, 2001). It is, however, necessary to complement Weyland’s suggestion with another analytical theoretical insight provided by Laclau, who described populism as a configuration, in Elias’ sense, of ‘a relationship of linked and interdependent social networks’ (Quintaneiro, 2004). Finally, it is necessary to include the most important lesson on the populist phenomenon, on which authors such as Canovan, Mény and Surel and, to a certain degree, Laclau all agree: populism is an unmediated social expression of popular sovereignty (Laclau, 2007). Based on these premises, a more exhaustive definition can therefore be provided, compared to the minimal one proposed at the beginning of the book, which is functional to the acknowledgement of the phenomenon for taxonomic purposes. This more exhaustive definition will aim at
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the social understanding of the phenomenon at a sociological and operational level and can read as follows:

a social configuration of political power, based on an unmediated social interpretation and expression of popular sovereignty; characterized by the presence of the basic scheme community–people, with an inter-class nature and ideologically non-differentiated; a strong connection between the community–people and a leader (who is often charismatic); a Manichean discourse.

Elements of this definition can offer some research guidelines. I will only focus on those that, based on my own research experience and other recent studies, I consider most important and able to provide the reader with a clearer idea. My hope is that in the next few years there will be an increase in empirical studies on populism.

These research analytical elements are social mobilization and inclusion; social disintermediation; social and political polarization; cultural backlash.

Community-people, social mobilization and inclusion

The process of creation of a community-people coincides at the social level with an extraordinary period of social mobilization and inclusion. Jansen’s studies on Latin American neo-populisms, for example, showed how linked they were to the social and political mobilization and inclusion of the lower classes (Jansen, 2011). Laclau’s theory also stressed how the activation processes of populism are linked to the need to express a social demand eluded by the normal institutional systems of representation. The mobilization power of populism is often a form of political re-socialization of actors who find themselves in a condition of apathy and discontent. Populism appears as a substitute for the usual politics, which either has been abandoned or towards which strong motivations no longer exist. Populist political participation represents the opportunity for citizens to re-engage in political life or
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an alternative extreme first choice. In the first case, it is a form of political re-socialization, often emerging at the end of militant cycles after a period of abandonment or disenchantment towards the usual forms of participation in representative democracies. In the second case, the populist alternative is something that shapes citizens’ political identity in the process of political socialization. The immediacy of the message, the simplification of the issues, the direct call to the leader and the Manichean scheme all become structural elements of the mentality of a group – usually made up of new generations – which presents itself as the alternative to the modalities of political participation of previous generations. Many young people in the M5S, for example, totally reject the practices of the “old” politics in favour of those of the new politics, where all hopes of a radical change in the system reside.

It is interesting to note how the inclusive tension and the ability to attract citizens typical of the initial phase of a populist movement are used to root and maintain the consensus among the community-people, once the movement becomes institutionalized. In Latin America, this type of dynamic lies behind the forms of clientelism that populisms have developed to keep that community-people cohesive, as it represents the base for the populist political consensus.

Direct social expression of sovereignty and social disintermediation

In order to consider populism as a form of direct social expression of sovereignty, a reflection on the social contexts where it emerges is necessary. In particular, it is necessary to analyze the social mechanisms of mediation and representation of power relations within a political regime.

One of the most interesting traits is the process of social disintermediation. Deeply linked to the mechanisms of polarization, and often their cause, social disintermediation is a deep change in the existing equilibriums between rulers and the ruled. In particular, social disintermediation is the quantitative and qualitative reduction of those social mechanisms of power, both institutional
How to study populism and non-institutional, that link the government dimension to citizens. This process is essentially a disintermediation of the mechanisms of governmentality.

As Giuseppe De Rita and Aldo Bonomi have stressed, a particularly clear case of this social dynamic associated with populism was the situation in Italy before its populist turn and the rise of Berlusconi (De Rita and Bonomi, 2014). According to the authors, the move from the First to the Second Republic was characterized by a deep social disintermediation dynamic at the national level, due to the disintegration of what they labelled the “society in the middle”. With this expression, Bonomi and De Rita refer to a society characterized by three tiers of social configurations, each one guaranteeing a form of social mediation: the middle class, the result of a process of bourgeoisification which, although not fully achieved, led to a reduction in the difference between the higher and the lower classes; representation – made up of many forms of representation, not only institutional but also social, like a developed associationism capable of promoting mediation channels, forms of guarantee and an inter-class culture; an intermediate territorial dimension accountable to the national state’s central government which, paradoxically, suffered a crisis when the regions were institutionalized and, even more, with the reform of the regional system. The institutionalization of the intermediate dimension isolated it, de facto blocking the possibility of a link and mediation between the local and the national dimension. The process of disintermediation has therefore changed the perception of state institutionality, generating a request for a direct intervention by the ruled on specific local problems. This basic dynamic is present in many populist phenomena.

Manichean discourse, social polarization and political polarization

If, at a formal and communicative level, the Manichean configuration of populism is easy to identify, recognizing the social conditions that create this peculiarity proves more difficult. Populism
almost aggravates the Schmittian nature of politics, radicalizing the friend-enemy relationship and limiting; however, the possibility of a constructive political dialogue among opponents. One of the social reasons behind this is the social and political polarization present in the context where populism emerges. From this point of view, the communicative structure is determined by the social structure. In this respect, Venezuela is an emblematic case, where a process of social polarization paved the way for the success of Chavez’s populism.

According to research carried out by Steve Ellner and Daniel Hellinger between 1989 and 1998, the year Chavez won the elections for the first time, Venezuela suffered a dramatic reduction in its middle class, from 37% to 13% (see Figure 17.1 and Figure 17.2). The reasons behind this profound transformation of the Venezuelan social fabric can be traced back to the economic crisis that started in the late 1980s and continued through the 1990s, in addition to a significant demographic increase among the lower classes (Ellner and Hellinger, 2003). The chavismo asserted itself on an existing dynamic of social opposition, creating a Manichean political discourse of exaltation of the lower classes. In this respect, the chavismo is both the expression of social polarization and an agent of transformation of that social polarization into political polarization.

FIGURE 17.1  Social classes in 1989.
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The Venezuelan case is, in this respect, an extreme yet paradigmatic example. Not all cases of populism and neo-populism emerge out of such a clear dynamic of social polarization; however, in many cases, this kind of demographic and social restructuring of the population structures can be found.

Cultural backlash, cosmopolitanism, nationalisms and racism

A recent study by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart has proposed an interesting interpreting key of contemporary neo-populisms in light of long-term socio-cultural transformations in western societies. Norris and Inglehart’s work sheds light on the potential interconnections between populism, anti-cosmopolitanism and the racist and nationalist deviations of many right-wing populisms (Norris and Inglehart, 2016).

The aim of the two scholars was to clarify whether, from a political sociological point of view, populism is a consequence of economic inequality or rather a cultural reaction against the profound cultural political transformations promoted by progressive forces and, most of all, against the multicultural and cosmopolitan vision associated with those forces.

**FIGURE 17.2** Social classes in 1999.

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**FIGURE 17.2** Social classes in 1999.
Building on the doubts already raised by Cas Mudde on the pauperistic explanation of the origin of populism and referring in particular to northern European neo-populisms in the 1990s, Norris and Inglehart stressed how the social contexts where they emerged were indeed egalitarian societies, endowed with significant welfare state systems and extremely high levels of security and education.

According to the two politologists, the thesis of the cultural reaction would better explain the emergence of populism in the contemporary world. The key to understanding the phenomenon is a long-term analysis of the value system that is proposed by a generation and the reaction this system produces in other generations and other sectors of society.

It is an explanation perfectly in line with Inglehart’s previous work on the silent revolution (Inglehart, 1977). This term indicates the political culture brought in by the youth in the 1970s in western societies, the result of which has been a change in traditional values in a progressive direction. The slow affirmation of those movements has strengthened an axiological horizon based on post-material values and the “politically correct”, and which expresses itself as ‘social tolerance towards different lifestyles, religions, cultures, towards multiculturalism, the go, international cooperation, democratic governance, protection of fundamental liberties and human rights’. Norris and Inglehart labelled this political culture as ‘cosmopolitan liberalism’ (see Figure 17.3), which materializes in policies in defence of the environment, same-sex marriages and gender equality in the public sphere.

According to Norris and Inglehart, populism is a cultural reaction of those social sectors who perceive the promotion of these values as a threat and propose a more simplified and backward vision of the world, dominated by an anti-establishment feeling against the cosmopolitan elite, as well as the search for a leader who could incarnate the will of the people and, most of all, could express and defend traditional values and nationalism.

This interpreting key proposed by Norris and Inglehart of the axiological conflicts in those societies that experience populist
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phenomena paves the way to interesting research developments on the profound structures of political mentality and the impact of democratization processes on the social fabric, especially on different generations of citizens. Furthermore, it offers a social interpreting key in a transnational way, stressing the paradigmatic transformation in contemporary democracies in a liberal and cosmopolitan direction, stimulated by globalization processes. However, it is necessary to specify that this interpreting key seems more suitable for European neo-populisms and the Trump phenomenon in the US, but less suitable for the Latin American cases, where the progressive dimension was promoted, at least in their initial phases, by progressive populist movements.

References

How to study populism

CONCLUDING REMARKS. DEMOCRACY AND POPULISM

Which perspectives?

In this book, I have aimed to introduce the reader to the main theoretical questions on populism with the objective of providing the necessary intellectual tools to deal with this topic. In the first part, I have illustrated the doctrines of the main theorists who contributed to the development of a scientific analysis of the issue, focusing also on the most recent debate; in the second part, I have explained some of the main case studies of political populism, underlining their specific traits and the most significant theoretical questions they raise; in the third part, I have illustrated other typologies of populism apart from political populism; and finally, in the fourth part, I have suggested, albeit in a very concise way, some general and empirical research guidelines on how to study populism.

The basic idea underpinning this work is that an analysis of populism is necessarily an analysis of the forms of direct social expression of popular sovereignty in contexts where the classical structures of democracies, based on institutionalized representation and mediation, are either not strong enough or in crisis.

As a result, an analysis of populism always implies an analysis of the foundations of democratic systems and their functioning, as well as the strictly political structures. Vice versa, a study of democracies and contemporary forms of democratization cannot avoid a study of populism, especially in light of the transformations that political systems worldwide are experiencing due to processes of political globalization.

Populism always represents an analytical complexity, which needs to be interpreted and understood in light of the social
dynamics that determine it, and this analysis must be both diachronic and synchronic. For this reason, as the reader might have guessed, I am not in favour of reductionist approaches that focus on debating nominalistically whether it is an ideology, a discursive style or something else, wasting the opportunity to deeply understand the real social causes of the populist phenomenon. The only definitive proposal that goes in this direction is the one suggested by Kurt Weyland, who focused on the strategic nature of populism, paving the way to ground-based research (Weyland, 2001). For the same reason, I have excluded from the very beginning any approach based on the personality of the populist leader, as they often neglect both the political structures and the social conditions where populism emerges.

Based on these premises, I believe that the best way to conclude this book is by indicating some of the most important themes in relation to the link between populism and democracy. An introductory discourse like this cannot limit itself to stimulating the reader to further study the specific topic, but rather provides guidelines and tools to understand the wider context of which it is part. Populism, with its quantitative and qualitative variety and its epistemological complexity, raises fundamental questions on democratic theory, which can only be mentioned briefly in this book but that deserve further in-depth analysis at the theoretical level, as well as further empirical studies.

I will therefore limit myself to some concluding remarks that can, however, serve as incentives for further research: systemic crisis, popular sovereignty and the rise of populism; elite-populism, democracy and mass society; quality of democracy, populism and evaluation of democracy; and globalization, populism and change in democratic paradigms at a global scale.

**Systemic crisis, popular sovereignty and the rise of populism**

There is a complex relationship between democracy and populism, a dilemmatic and an ambiguous one in many respects. It is a link that persists and that forces us to go back to the concept
of popular sovereignty that underpins both. As we have repeatedly specified, populism – as the social expression of a direct modality of popular sovereignty, especially in contexts of political and social disintermediation and crisis of institutional representation mechanisms – is a phenomenon that is strongly linked to the most profound aspects of democratic functioning. If, on the one hand, it becomes increasingly necessary to talk of populism in plural terms, on the other hand it is crucial to bear in mind that there is a variety of democracies and that they are non-static, ever-changing realities, a result of democratization processes, therefore dynamic and never definitive.

In this respect, democracies can experience either a qualitative increase or a decrease. This is the central tenet of the debate on the quality of democracy, which has engaged the most important politologists in the last decades. Once a minimum definition of democracy has been conventionally established, it is possible to evaluate how democratic a complex political process, a political system or simply a political regime is by assessing if and how the empirical reality that is being studied satisfies the minimum requisites for it being considered democratic.

From this point of view, as recent cases of neo-populism show, populism can play a double role: it either increases the quality of democracy or diminishes and weakens it, but also, according to an only apparently paradoxical logic, it can represent a moment of great democratization in the beginning, to then become an element of democratic limitation in its institutionalized phase. There is no pre-determined dynamic or pre-determined outcome; the result of the evaluation of the democratic outcome of populism varies according to each case. For example, it is considered negative in Chavez’s Venezuela and positive in Morales’s Bolivia. However, such an evaluation is also dependent on the definition of democracy that is assumed as a positive criterion.

A judgement on the effects of populism on democracy, as well as any evaluation of democracy in general, must start from a necessary conceptual clarification: the democracy that we usually refer to in our debate on its evaluation and quality is
liberal democracy, which always presupposes functioning institutional representative mechanisms of popular sovereignty and therefore a mediation system of social power, organized around intermediate bodies. In this respect, the rise of populism is often associated with the negativity of democracies and its crisis, as it appears as an alternative to the liberal configuration of democratic representation.

The first necessary consideration on the relationship between democracy and populism is the following: a research on the rise of populism in a specific context implies an analysis of the conditions of social expression of popular sovereignty and the democratic conditions of that specific political system. The disarticulation and the disattachment of popular sovereignty from forms of institutional expressions lead to social expressions of popular sovereignty which reconfigure democratic participation in a radical and maximalist way, which is against the status quo and the elites associated with it; furthermore, they facilitate collective action aimed at the creation of a homogenous community-people, characterized by a minimum level of ideological and organizational differentiation; but, above all, they produce, among those who adhere to it, an idea of hope and a prospect of action based on the belief that they can delegitimize the whole institutional structure and the existing ruling class with the aim of founding new expressions of the community-people.

**Elite-populism, democracy and mass society**

Scholars have not devoted enough attention to the interesting analytical correlations between the populist phenomenon and elitism. These fields of research are often kept separate, while I believe that there are good reasons for them to be linked, especially for an understanding of democratic dynamics in mass society. The main reason behind this distinction is of a historical doctrinal nature. The studies on elitism and those on populism originated and developed in a separate and autonomous way, while today they should be reconfigured in an integrated, if not
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unitary, framework. The need to unify these two branches dates back to the origins of the modern political thought – specifically to Machiavelli – which continues with a tradition of political thought from Mosca to Gramsci. Machiavelli, however, was not talking about democracy, but rather about the state-ruling forms of his time: republic and principality. Machiavelli identified, in all states and societies, two social realities in relation to political power: the optimates and the mass (Machiavelli, 1984). As for much of his terminology, Machiavelli was borrowing from ancient historians and political thinkers, particularly Polibio. According to Machiavelli, the optimates were those who wanted to have power over others, while the mass were those who did not want to be ruled. This distinction is interesting as, in Machiavelli’s point of view (Sasso, 1993), a state functions and can grow, prosper and not fall prey to a civil war when these two entities find an adequate and constructive dialectic confrontation. This Machiavellian distinction is at the base of another key terminological pair: the rulers and the ruled which were common in the political philosophical thought of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, and the emerging political science of Mosca, Pareto and Gramsci. Mosca and Pareto, through their study of the elite, would mark the foundation of an autonomous analysis of the dominant social groups in each society, partly referring to the Machiavellian tradition and partly to the sociological and political debate of their times. However, in neither of these authors can a specific analysis of populism be found, only implicit references to it contained in the study of elitism (Mosca, 1982; Gramsci, 2014; Pareto, 1964).

In my opinion, it would be very fruitful and innovative, in a macro-sociological framework of comparative politics, to study populism in light of the conditions of the elites that precede it and the new elite that are being formed. It would also be very interesting to study the opposite perspective: the decline of the elite during the rise of populism, the nature of the new populist elite and the reaction of the elite in the phase of populist decline. This analysis should be based on a dynamic approach to processes of democratization, focused on the cycles elitism/populism, or
populism/elitism, within a democracy or in a specific process of democratization.

Another interesting research avenue on the dynamics between populism and democracy can be identified in light of the relationship between elite, the mass and the democratic functioning of the state. Kornhauser focused on these aspects, analyzing the elite and non-elite in liberal democracies in mass societies and identifying the limits for liberal democracies of a populist deviation. Kornhauser focused particularly on the accessibility to the elite and the availability of the non-elite, establishing an analytical opposition between pluralist liberal democracy and populist democracy. On the one hand, pluralist society (high degree of accessibility, low level of availability) defines the best conditions for the establishment and the persistence of a liberal-democratic regime: competition for government is open to the elites, while citizens are members of many autonomous organizations. On the other hand, mass society couples a high degree of accessibility of the elite to an equally high degree of availability of the non-elite, who are therefore exposed, Kornhauser argues, to the risk of manipulation and “mobilization” on the part of the former, lacking a solid net of intermediate and independent entities between the family and the state. In liberal democracy there is social pluralism, conflict between different ideologies and, most of all, a strong rule of law which is at the same time a cause and effect of pluralism, as it guarantees the expression of differences and subsists on that very conflict. However, in populist democracies based on mass society polarization, Manichean simplifications and a high level of uniformity are prevalent, neutralizing the ideological conflict and weakening the rule of law (Kornhauser, 1963).

Kornhauser’s reasoning, like Shils’s, from which he partly borrows, suggested a comparison between two opposing ideal-types of democracy that can also be considered two extreme conditions of many democracies and many democratization processes where, in different and gradual forms, populism can take hold, or, in the opposite case, pluralism and the representation of popular sovereignty through mediated forms can function.
Quality of democracy, populism and evaluation of democracy

It is possible to identify an interesting avenue for future studies in the evaluation of populism, in light of its impact on the democratic quality of the political systems where it operates. This relates to the dimensions of evaluation and measurement identified by theorists of the quality of democracy, who also outlined important dimensions of empirical analysis of the populist social phenomenon. In his most recent formulations, Morlino identified eight dimensions of the quality of democracy and therefore eight dimensions for its evaluation. Five have a procedural nature: rule of law, electoral accountability, interinstitutional accountability, participation and competition. Two have a substantive nature: the respect of rights and the achievement of higher economic and social equality. The last one relates to the outcome of the democratic process. In relation to each of them, it is possible to estimate how much populism has increased the democratic potential of a regime and a social context. I will only list and suggest them as potential questions for the development of future research:

1. **Rule of law.** Does populism increase or decrease the respect of the law? Does it strengthen the rule of law or does it delegitimize it? In many cases of institutionalized populism, like the already mentioned Venezuelan case, the rule of law has been weakened as a pillar of a liberal system that the populist force aimed to demolish.

2. **Electoral accountability.** This term indicates politicians’ capacity to respond to citizens for a decision taken, the information, the justification, the punishment and the reparation. In institutionalized populist contexts where the populist force is in government, this dimension often appears deteriorated due to the decrease in pluralism in the public sphere and to an a priori defensive approach in governmental action.

3. **Interinstitutional accountability.** This term indicates the responsibility in the relationship between institutions. Does populism...
increase this kind of responsibility? Or does it diminish it, to the point of erasing it, because of a charismatic leadership that always intervenes, altering the normal relationships between the institutional bodies of the state? In the case of Latin American neo-populisms, but also in Putin’s Russia and Erdogan’s Turkey, populist hyper-presidentialism has changed the usual restrictions and institutional relationships between the bodies of the state, due to the frequent interventions on specific issues on the part of the president.

Participation. On this aspect, the effect of polarization typical of any populism plays a fundamental role in the citizens’ political participation. In particular, political polarization transforms the political opponent in an internal enemy against whom it is necessary to act for the sake of the country’s safety. The potential victory of the opponent is perceived as a potential elimination of one’s own side; therefore, the mobilization always acquires an emergency character. Political polarization plays a decisive role in mobilization processes, accelerating them and generating a call to an extraordinary commitment, but also transforms the political competition, increasing its conflicts and eliminating possibilities for mediation and constructive dialogue. Polarization generates a widespread commitment which is sectarian and constantly aimed at demonizing the other side, something very different from constructive and responsible participation on the part of citizens.

Responsiveness. “The rulers’ capacity to respond to the demands and the needs of the ruled”. It is interesting to note its profound correlation with electoral accountability, as this is also a dimension aimed at altering a dialectic and democratic relationship between the ruled and the rulers, made up of potential critiques of specific acts and not of lack of criticism linked to a sense of belonging. The critique of an action of its own faction tends to be avoided so as not to provide the opposing front with an advantage within a head-on, non-pluralist, non-articulated and Manichean public debate.
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Although relative, susceptible to revision and contextual, the criteria of the quality of democracy show a type of analysis of populism all internal to the functioning of democratic systems, especially in light of the equilibriums between the rulers and the ruled unmediated by representative mechanisms. The dimensions indicated by the theory of the quality of democracy underline dynamic aspects of populism, mainly of a delegitimizing character towards the institutions and their normal functioning. More than for the grass-roots phase, they allow for an evaluation of the institutionalized or governing populisms.

Globalization, populism and change in democratic paradigms at a global scale

I wish to conclude with what is, in my opinion, the true challenge of the research on populism: the role played by globalization in the process of change in the paradigms in democratic political regimes.

Recently, Benjamin Moffitt talked about the “global rise of populism” in his latest book (Benjamin, 2016). It is a very interesting point, as it indicates a global phase in contemporary democracies and in the spread of populism. It is now evident that we are not only facing a local manifestation of the populist phenomenon, or one which is limited to some geographical areas. Populism is not circumscribed to developing countries, as it was understood in the 1950s and 1960s, or only to some regimes that were characterized by a non- consolidated democracy. Today, with Trump and Brexit, it has become clear that populism also happens in countries with solid democratic traditions, not only as a form of opposition and protest but also as a form of government. This trend is a signal of a global populist rise which poses a series of problems that go to the heart of the most profound changes in democracies at the global level.

It follows that the first analytical consideration is that populism is less and less a phenomenon circumscribed to the confines of the nation-state. Each populism, and its birth, development and rhetoric, are increasingly dependent on extra-national and global factors.
The elites that they attack are international elites. In this context, many recent populist phenomena often express a sovereignty claim and a will to reconquer national sovereignty. This loss of sovereignty of the nation-state at the global level leads to the social bases of democracies finding themselves in the common situation, despite obvious geographical differences, of reacting and looking for new and more direct forms of mediation and representation.

Years ago, this general condition of democracies was defined by Colin Crouch as post-democracy. Rather than indulge in the nominalistic urge to find the right label to define this historical phase, I prefer to talk about a change in the fundamental paradigms in contemporary democracy. Using the precious indications from the history of science and epistemology, we can avail ourselves of the concept of paradigm and revolutions formulated by Thomas Samuel Khun, who defines it as follows: ‘A scientific revolution is the successive transition from one paradigm to another’ (Kuhn, 1962). So, we can talk about a revolution of democratic paradigms.

The current condition, due to economic and political changes brought about by globalization, forces us, at the level of theoretical understanding, to carry out a profound revision of the paradigms of classical political science to grasp what is happening. However, we need to be aware that a state democratic institutional dimension was structured around those paradigms, which suffered a crisis with the advent of globalization, starting with its primary function: representation and mediation. The effect of detachment of sovereignty from that mediation dimension is what we have so far called populism.

While concluding this book, the temptation is strong to ask ourselves ‘how do we get out of populism?’ The obvious response should be: developing new forms of mediation and representation, and new democratic paradigms on which to build new democratic structures. However, this answer would be too generic, and the real question would still be: how? These are all issues that go beyond the scope of this book and its writer.
Concluding remarks

Certainly, this epochal challenge will strongly commit those who have the patience and courage to take it on.

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