

POPULISM AS A POLITICAL PHENOMENON

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Abstract

Populism is a political phenomenon that is difficult to define and therefore to measure. It is both feared and glorified. Its theorising may itself be a political statement.

Populism is extremist and anti-systemic, thus differentiating itself from what is popular and is generically accepted, but moderate in scope. It can be a political strategy, an ideology or a style easily propagated by the media, especially when defended by a charismatic leader, capable of generating emotions and galvanising the people.

Keywords

Populism, Democracy, Antisystem

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Introduction

The article is divided into three chapters. The first attempts to define populism and explains the lack of consensus around its conceptualisation.

The second chapter is concerned with assessing the phenomenon, identifying types of populism, its main targets and proposes some ways of measuring it.

The third chapter contextualises the theme, taking into account the emotions and the media that project it. It identifies ways of manipulating the masses, directly and indirectly, before advancing with the main conclusions of the investigation.

From a methodological point of view, secondary sources, books and scientific articles were consulted, some of which were available online. The translations were carried out by the author of the article.

1. Define Populism

What is populism? It is a political phenomenon.² Its definition is not consensual.³ Historical divisions,⁴ geographic and ideological factors interfere in the attempt to reconcile it.⁵ It has a chameleonic nature.⁶ It reproduces in different contexts. It is

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² "Populism, as a political phenomenon and its relation to democracy, is currently a source of lively debate..." (Ostiguy, 2001: 1).

³ "Like many of the terms of the lexicon of political science, populism is marked by a high degree of contestation... We may argue that populism is so widely used – and usually in a derogatory way to denigrate any personality we dislike – that it has lost its analytical value and its meaning." (Moffitt and Tormey, 382)

⁴ "Taking a look at the 'populist' social movements of history, the concept of populism has already been applied to the protests of American farmers, as well as to the movements of the *narodniki* of Russia from the end of the XIX century. Later the term became popular in the 1960s and 1970s when it was attributed to the allusive nature of political regimes in Third World countries ruled by charismatic leaders. It was mainly applied in the political context of Latin America. Today populism is related to a diverse group of actors and policies. Silvio Berlusconi, Hugo Chavez, Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, Geert Wilders and the Polish brothers Kaczynski are all considered populist leaders by commentators and various political agents" (Azzarello, 2011: 9).

⁵ "Ideology, political parties, populist leaders and speeches grow and spread from America to Europe and from the Middle East to East Asia. But there is no agreement on how to measure or define this phenomenon. Populism means different things for different geographic areas, historical contexts and ideologies" (Dinç, 2016: 4).

⁶ "Comparative literature broadly agrees that populism is confrontational, chameleon, cultural and context-dependent" (Arter, 2010: 490).



difficult to find a common denominator for all its expressions.⁷ But it is important to mark out the scope of analysis, to fuel a constructive debate.⁸

In the 1960s, one of the earliest essays on the subject recognised the importance of populism and the difficulty of explaining it.⁹ In the next two decades, the phenomenon was associated with structural Marxism and the theory of modernisation and derived from the political and historical consequences of peripheral or developing countries. In the 1990's came the concept of neopopulism, which adapted to a changing world in the post-Cold War period. After this, its value was reduced to an analytical instrument.¹⁰ However, it recovered force in the second decade of the XXI century.

Within political parties, populism is studied at three levels: classification, description and admonition. It limits the scope of study, to distinguish the populist agents from the others. Adjective is the question. The following perspective is normative, for populism, for some, translates the "true will of the majority" and, for others, "endangers democracy".¹¹

In developed countries, populism often has a pejorative connotation, and candidates for public office repudiate it, even when they use it as a tool and professional projection.

In asymmetric societies, where the privileged are few and the middle class is a minority, populism can be understood as an act of courage, in favour of "integrity", against the corruption of the rich.¹² Is populism good or bad? It depends on perspective.

Populist parties are supposed to revolt against the abuse of power, by the strong over the weak in an unjust community. They defend a radical notion of political equality. They fight for the supremacy of the people.

If they want to win elections, they are not integrated into the society they criticise and thus win the loyalty of the electorate that is considered excluded. They organise themselves outside the system and fight against pressure groups and lobbies. They claim to be more democratic than any other. They make diffuse speeches that can please the majority and elevate the population to a homogeneous cultural group capable of the ambition of power.¹³

If they want to hold office, the enemy is external and agents claim to be victims of coup attempts by the opposition. The information provided may be dubious and the means

⁷ "Over the past two decades, the term 'populism' has been increasingly used in Western Europe – both in academic and vernacular language. The concept has been applied to a wide range of political parties such as *Front National* in France, *Die Linke* in Germany, the British National Party of Great Britain and the *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* of the Netherlands. As a result of this wide application, there is great disagreement over how populism should be defined" (Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2010: 2).

⁸ "Since populism does not tend to disappear in contemporary democracies... as the most diverse studies on the topic proliferate, it is particularly important that researchers be explicit and precise about a possible definition of populism. It is not only for proper operationalisation of the phenomenon, but it is also a necessary prerequisite for a constructive debate that brings together results from multiple cases and time periods". (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013: 31)

⁹ "At present, there is no doubt about the *importance* of populism. But no one knows exactly what *it is*. As a doctrine or movement is elusive and changeable. It springs from all sides, but in many contradictory formats" (Ionescu & Gellner, 1969: 4).

¹⁰ Ding, 2016: 6.

¹¹ Sikk, 2009: 2-5.

¹² "When voters fear that politicians can be influenced or corrupted by the rich elite, they value signs of integrity. As a result, an honest politician seeking re-election chooses 'populist' policies – that is, left-wing for medium voters – to prove that they have not been taken over by the interests of the right. Politicians who are influenced by the special interests of the right respond with moderate or center-left policies" (Acemoglu, Egorov & Sonin, 2013: 771).

¹³ Corduwener, 2014: 433.



justify the ends. The rhetoric uses simple and direct messages, easily digested by ordinary people, tailored to the needs of the moment.¹⁴ In this sense, populism is a paradox of representative democracy.¹⁵

Populism is prolific in marshy grounds – that is when traditional political parties lose credibility because they are in crisis, buried in bureaucracies, internal struggles or obsolete structures. It fights cartel-parties that do not take care of the interests of the common citizen and do not take responsibility for the confusions they generate.¹⁶

Populist parties claim to fight tirelessly for the people against the privileged of the system. It weakens existing institutions, implementing alternative programs of wealth redistribution.¹⁷ But they rarely give power to the masses.

As a general rule, in the aftermath of elections, populism replaces the elite defeated by a new clientelistic elite, thus rewarded for its support.¹⁸ But when one elite replaces another, does it no longer have popular bases? Can populists be against populism as soon as they join the (new) system?

There are countries where political discourse constantly invokes democratic virtues. But when the protest of the populations becomes uncomfortable, the elite try to reduce it to insignificance and the state domesticates it to its measure. The nation sometimes forgets its revolutionary past¹⁹ and abuses technical and bureaucratic rhetoric to overturn popular uprisings that are supposed to jeopardise democracy. Decades earlier, similar or more radical movements overcame previous regimes, undermining one model to implement another. In this case, a movement is democratic when it pleases the parliamentary and populist majority and goes against interests.

An election boycott²⁰ or street demonstration may be localised phenomena, but they are identitarian, non-market or community forces.²¹ When they are regular, they are the

¹⁴ "The categorisation of 'people' is created by leaders who claim to represent it. This authoritarian appropriation of the population and its values has contradictory meanings. On the one hand, populism restores and values the cultural value of the common man. On the other hand, leaders take ownership of the meaning of what is popular and try to impose versions on its authenticity... based on the identity of a unitary people, with one voice and interest, with a leader representing national and democratic values" (Torre, 2007: 394).

¹⁵ "At least two factors indicate that, in politics, elements of populism will continue to exist and increase. First, representative democracy almost inevitably accompanies populism, due to a paradox of democracy. Hence, it will scarcely diminish the opportunities of the populists to restore the power of the 'people'. Second, the mediatisation of politics will also not fade. This gives the populists opportunities to gather and gain support to convey simple messages and to present themselves as charismatic leaders and real representatives of the 'people'" (Deiwiks, 2009: 8).

¹⁶ Martinelli, 2016: 20-21.

¹⁷ Acemoglu, Egorov, Sonin, 2013: 802.

¹⁸ Barr, 2009: 42.

¹⁹ In Portugal, only in the XX century, there were several military coups, including the Revolution of April 25. "All the rhetoric of a modern and European Portugal participates in a constant work of constructing a selective memory and forgetting a recent revolutionary past by abandoning slowly and systematically the ideals of equality and popular participation" (Mendes, 2005: 182).

²⁰ In Portugal: "The professionalisation and specialisation of political life reinforces the internal and self-centred logic of the political field... This is the only way to understand the extreme reactions of national political authorities and political agents, for example, in the face of electoral boycotts. The latter allows the irruption in the political space and in the public sphere of the ordinary people who, often outside of partisan logics, affirm their actions as acts of claiming citizenship, of participation, as voices and bodies that disturb the myth of a democracy without dissent or conflict" (*Id. Ibid*)

²¹ In Portugal: "A non-market and community logic prevailed in the festivities. It was a ludic and liminal way of reworking identities, of affirming community and the equality of all, forgetting rivalries and enmities, also bringing to life those who were critical of the movement or the restoration of the county. It was a work of memory, which affirmed the self-esteem of a population, the recognition of its value and existence, the



clear expression of popular will and may be more genuinely democratic than a parliamentary agreement of parties that govern by default the will of the majority, passing laws contrary to the dominant values in society without resorting to referendums on divisive issues. Not least because not all citizens vote, especially when they no longer believe in politicians who, opportunistically, demand statistical victories and forget deep dramas experienced by the population, who, one day, in despair of cause, may consider that the situation can only be resolved with a new revolution.

In Latin America, for example, populism has grown in cities. The beginning of the 20th century was associated with social change, under the impulse of urban workers against rural and conservative rigidity, landlords and classicists, who avoided sharing resources with the majority of the population.²² In this sense, it pleased the proletariat and informal, anti-systemic and revolutionary. In some cases, their leaders have come to power because they are charismatic and have high popularity ratings. But they lost it in a tragic way ²³ as soon as the expectations of supporters were exhausted. Later, populism revolted against the economic crisis, corruption, hyperinflation and poor distribution of incomes. It was reborn from the traumas of military regimes, replaced by supposedly more democratic, but chaotic, regimes that were fragile.²⁴

Populism feeds on the traumas of the people, the majority. If the phenomenon is a leftist force, it is in favour of the "poor". The rival group is the rich right-wing elite that rules in a supposedly corrupt way and must be fought due to the suffering that it inflicts on the masses.²⁵ It spreads in developing countries, where the priority is to take the population out of misery.

"The people, after meeting their basic needs for food and clothing, want to express their opinion" (Weili and Toomey, 2017: 11). China is a paradigmatic example of a changing society. After the reforms of Deng Xiaoping and the Tiananmen Square trauma, communist ideology gave way to a nationalist propaganda against US imperialism, which was dichotomous but "empty of content", so was only instrumental in the justification of party policies. In recent years, the Chinese have perhaps shifted their attention from social conflicts to fracture issues (such as Taiwan) or foreign policy (relationships with Japan or Korea). But government rhetoric seems to have less influence on public opinion in these matters. Advertising, therefore, has difficulty in asserting itself, and populations at this level find a way of escaping from the grip of the state.

possibility of developing and fixing future generations and believing in the feasibility of fixing in the interior of the country" (*Id. Ibid.*: 171).

²² "The politics of Latin America underwent enormous transformations in the 1920s and 1930s due to the emergence of a large process of urbanisation. After a long history of an elitist political system based on landowners, a new wave of urban-based political leaders emerged, supported by a multiclassist scheme that includes the urban proletariat, the employees of a growing public sector and the marginalised urban population" (Sachs 1990: 12).

²³ "The populist episodes we have examined have resulted in failures, sometimes even tragedies. Perón was forced to exile, leaving behind a weakened economy and a society at the same time politicised and deeply divided; Allende died in a military coup that destroyed democracy in Chile for the next fifteen years; Sarneu and García now preside over failed regimes, both facing the real threat of hyperinflation and economic collapse" (Sachs, 1990: 24-25).

²⁴ "We suggest that the push to adopt populist measures is due to several factors, including: an environment of deep economic conflict, associated with the highly unequal distribution of income; political instability, leading to short-termism governments; deep and visible splits between sectoral interests – urban workers in open confrontation with exporters of primary commodities" (*Id. Ibid.*: 24)

²⁵ "The motivating force of populist politicians in Latin America is the weakening of democratic institutions, which makes voters believe that politicians, despite their rhetoric, may have a right-wing agenda, be corrupt or influenced by rich pressure groups. Populist policies therefore emerge as a way for speakers to choose future policies in line with the interests of the average voter". (Acemoglu, Egorov, Sonin, 2013: 802)



Eurosceptics may still be attracted to Russian-born populism. Far-right European parties are perhaps under the influence of Putin's propaganda, because it is a "victorious expression of imperialist neo-conservatism". The far-left still reveres the communist heritage of the former USSR and seems seduced by Putin's "anti-capitalism".²⁶

In Europe, they spread criticism of globalisation.²⁷ A right-wing movement gives voice to the "silence majority",²⁸ which "defends fiscal austerity and capitalism"²⁹ and cannot affirm its own culture due to external threats (strong migratory movements, multiculturalism, invasion of another country, etc.). It appeals to a dominant and influential middle class, which seeks to recover or reaffirm values related to the country and/or nation, identity, need for recognition and the role of a particular people in the world; and that revolts against the ruling elite that supposedly sells itself abroad.

In any case, populism is always against the ruling elite. It is invigorated by the majority, be it impoverished or already influential and middle class. It serves as a counterpoint to the direction the country takes. It no longer accommodates the system and does not measure efforts to achieve objectives that its agents have already lost hope of achieving.

Therefore, populism is extremist and anti-systemic. To this extent it differs from what is simply popular and generally accepted by the population. A popular agent is moderate. A populist is a fundamentalist and capable of everything to achieve the objectives outlined – emphasis is on the excesses that are practiced.

There are leaders who seem to be permanently on the campaign trail. In a republic, where elections succeed one another, there is great pressure to please voters. It is easier for candidates to keep their plans down to the bare minimum, since most people do not vote for unpopular measures, no matter how necessary they are. Therefore, the difference between the popular and populist becomes porous.

Where is the border? The popular leader is a realist. Voter loyalty through systemic behaviour is guaranteed, which ensures social welfare and democratic order, based on moderate programs and speeches on concrete and achievable measures. Criticism of opponents is more constructive than destructive. Play it safe. The system is not called

²⁶ "The connection between Putin's Russia and the populist parties is becoming a concern for European foreign policy circles. The membership of the European right-wing parties to the Kremlin is, naturally, the most pronounced, but there is also a pattern of association with the positions of the radical left in Europe and foreign policy tendencies through Moscow" (Nestoras, 2016: 1).

²⁷ "In the last decade, populist parties have gained strength in Western Europe. They are defined by opposition to emigration and are concerned with protecting national and European culture, using the language of human rights and freedom. In economic policy, they are generally critical of globalisation and the effects of international capitalism on workers' rights. They combine with rhetoric and anti-systemic language. Often referred to as "extremist and populist parties" or the "new right", they do not fit easily into traditional political divisions... [with increasing weight] in the parliaments of Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, Hungary, Holland, Sweden, Latvia and Slovakia, and also in the European Parliament. In some countries they are the second or third political force and are seen as coalition partners of many conservative governments" (Bartlett, Birdwell and Littler, 2011: 15).

²⁸ "There is still room for different connotations of 'people' that can be ethnically defined, from a civic point of view or as a common citizen ('the silent majority')" (Raadt, Hollanders and Krouwel, 2004: 8).

²⁹ "All these material aspects may be elements of populism at work, but they are corollaries of underlying ideas in different social contexts. For example, low-vision economic policies emerge in populist movements in developing countries because the poor and landless constitute the vast majority of citizens; in rich countries, populism is often right-wing and defends fiscal austerity and capitalism. Most of the successful movements have charismatic leaders, primarily, due to their role in coordinating a vast network based on "people power". Many other populist movements lack this kind of leadership" (Hawkins, Riding and Mudde, 2012: 4).



into question. On the contrary, the populist leader is anti-systemic, unpredictable, paternalistic, incendiary, idealistic or dangerous.

Nor should we confuse populism with nationalism. The first is radical. The second can be moderate or exacerbated, because not all people who identify with the Nation (values, territory, language) have an imperialist project. Populism can also be an internal dichotomy (people versus the elite) and nationalism as a need for a border and outside (domestic versus foreigners) to exist.³⁰

After defining populism, it is necessary to measure it. One option is to describe it in a minimalist way,³¹ to cover its various dimensions. Because? An equation with too many variables risks not reaching any conclusion.

What to do? One hypothesis is to measure populism in stages or on the basis of partial definitions. Several social dynamics can be evaluated. The speeches of the candidates in elections or the results of the ballots are usually important. Or the parliamentary and tribune debates. Or the political comments on television. Nowadays, trends in social networks or internet blogs are also analysed.

The approach can be quantitative or qualitative. A database is built. This is handled manually (human factor) and/or with computer aid.³² Results are disseminated and interpreted in the first instance and then by other researchers. It is possible to use indexes of perceived corruption or political risk worldwide, some more accredited than others, so it is necessary to refer to the source consulted. They are only indicative, but they help explain the phenomenon under consideration.

2. Evaluating Populism

Populism can be an ideology, a type of discourse or a political strategy. Table 1 summarises these three main lines of research in vogue.

Populists can have a mobilising ability, charismatic attributes and generate a cult of personality.³³ When authoritarian,³⁴ speeches are aggressive, arrogant or stubborn. But they can also be a kind or extremely nice. It depends on the posture that works best in the context under analysis.

³⁰ "However, one cannot get populism confused with nationalism . . . Not only because there are populisms that do not ethnically build the people, but also because in ethno-nationalism (or nativism) the basic distinction is between natives and foreigners. Meanwhile, in populism this distinction occurs within the same native group, in which the people are betrayed by the elites. For this convergence to exist, the elites would have to be foreign (instead of just 'agents' of foreign interests, as they are often denounced)" (Zúquete, 2016: 18).

³¹ "Starting with a minimal definition of populism and trying to apply it to empirical cases helps determine whether we are dealing with populism or not. A minimal conceptualisation has the advantage of circumscribing the meaning of populism and theoretical discussion becomes less confused, since its concept is distinguished from other political phenomena" (Deiwiks, 2009: 8).

³² Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2010: 18.

³³ "Populism is based particularly on personality politics". (Taggart, 2000: 101)

³⁴ Hawkins, Riding and Mudde, 2012: 4.



Populism, as an ideology, separates two homogenous political groups: ³⁵ poor and rich, us and them. It distinguishes the good people from the elite who are corrupt.³⁶

Table 1: Three Main Lines of Research on Populism

	<i>Definition of Populism</i>	<i>Analysis Unit</i>	<i>Relevant Methods</i>	<i>References</i>
<i>Political Views</i>	Set of interrelated ideas on socio-political nature	Party and party leaders	Party literature. Qualitative analysis of texts	Mudde (2004, 2007) Mudde and Kaltwasser (2012)
<i>Political Style</i>	Speech with specific characteristics and political proclamations	Texts Speeches	Interpretive analysis of texts	Kazin (1995) Laclau (2005) Panizza (2005)
<i>Political Strategy</i>	A form of organisation and mobilisation	Parties (with a focus on structures), leaders and social movements	Comparative historical analysis and case studies	Roberts (2006) Weyland (2001) Jansen (2011)

Source: Based on Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013: 17

While discursive style promotes antagonism between two enemy entities (for and against the people).³⁷ It involves judging ideas against supposedly evil or immoral opposition forces.³⁸ It results in a power struggle under the law of the strongest.

As a political strategy, populism promotes social cohesion and calls for the vote of a large number of supporters who rely on it in a direct, disorganised and non-institutionalised fashion.³⁹

Who are the most vulnerable to populism? The less-well educated, low-income earners as well as those who are disillusioned with life or despise the current system. The politically correct, which stifles contrary deep feelings, may be silencing less obvious, even wealthy, sectors that feel vilified, discriminated against or threatened by others (whether this is a real or illusory perspective).

³⁵ Populism is an ideology "... which considers society, lately separated between two antagonistic and homogeneous groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and argues that politics should be the expression of the general will..." (Mudde, 2004: 543)

³⁶ "Although academics do not agree on a definition of populism and multiple concepts circulate simultaneously, there is a common denominator that most people share. The populist ground is an antagonistic relationship between "the (good) people and the (corrupt) elite". (Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2010: 3-4)

³⁷ "Antagonism, as identification, relates the form (the people as signifier) and the content (the people as signified) attributed by various processes of naming – that is, establishes who are the 'enemies of the people'..." (Panizza, 2005: 3)

³⁸ "First, we understand populism as a set of ideas... It is a moralising, dualist, believing in popular sovereignty, which exalts the opinion of the majority, whilst characterising the opposition as immoral or malevolent. It opposes the approach of pluralism which emphasises the inevitable and desirable difference of opinions. Pluralism seeks institutions that value and protect the rights of the minority, whilst following the majority will; populism craves moral clarity and treats dissent with suspicion as if it were dangerous. Whilst pluralism prefers political relations based on cooperation and harmony, pluralism sees the world as naturally antagonistic". (Hawkins, Riding and Mudde, 2012: 3)

³⁹ Weyland, 2001: 14.



Populism seems to be everywhere⁴⁰ and feeds on defrauded expectations.⁴¹ It takes advantage of situations of crisis (economic, social, political, religious, etc.). It proliferates where there is no mercy and unemployment abounds, when there is uncertainty or a lack of security. It aims to give voice to those excluded from the system.⁴² It diabolises existing institutions to give way to all, or to alienate rivals – admitting doing so violently.

The symbolic character of speeches is important in this regard. Voters, when they recognise references (the type of language and the code of values), usually identify with the action plan. Believe in what you hear. It is convinced that it is possible to achieve the proposed goal. Because? Because populists are able to play with their emotions.

3. Disseminate Populism

The political sociology of emotions helps to study populism. The passionate side of politics can be considered romantic by idealists and instrumental, manipulative and dangerous by realists, who prefer more moderate behaviour in the public sphere or have more objective interpretations of national interest.

The domain of the rational paradigm distrusts what is interpretive or dependent on the perspective. Avoid being put under by the whim of the furious crowd. But resentment⁴³ is fertile ground for populism. Inherent is a vote of revolt against the system driven by anger⁴⁴ which fights against some kind of injustice and, consequently, transfers the blame to a parallel entity (to the state, elites, government, etc.).

It has been proven that emotions have an impact on elections.⁴⁵ Political propaganda sells an illusion. Business media interests are not neutral when they try to maximise audiences and sign profitable advertising contracts. On the limit, they can turn reality into a mystical experience or spread "common sense" ideology contrary to fact-based

⁴⁰ "Contemporary democracies are being challenged. Its main institutions and political parties have been in crisis for some time, for a variety of reasons, from the decline of ideologies to tension between party and citizen organisations, weakening of mediation, the spread of corruption, impact of the media, policy customisation. Populism seems to be everywhere nowadays". (Martinelli, 2016: 13)

⁴¹ "The high expectations of most people were overcome by the 'unfortunate inheritance of the past', perverse bureaucracy, excessive and obsolete laws, underdeveloped parties, stagnant or inefficient public enterprises, outdated and fragmented agriculture, weak civil society and lack of modern political culture. Social cleavages were developed as a result of inadvertent consequences of the reforms that irregularly distributed the burden of transformation (unemployment, selective impoverishment, rampant competition, illegal immigration, increased crime) in a society divided between the successful in this new system and those who experienced, objectively or subjectively, loss or failure and even idealisation of the past. This situation created a favourable social climate for the growth of populist parties..." (Martinelli, 2016: 19)

⁴² Populism is "... any political project that sustains itself on a large scale by mobilising marginalised social sectors that makes publicly visible and engenders contentious political action, whilst articulating anti-elite nationalist rhetoric that values ordinary citizens". (Jansen, 2011: 82)

⁴³ "... a policy of widespread resentment in which the uncertainties of capitalism and state supervision create individuals with a diffuse sense of powerlessness, the public expression of a praxis that is neither positive nor consolidated, but results from a hasty and dependent reaction, which, as a rule, takes the form of 'identity politics'... resentment is the feeling of the weak..." (Demertzis, 2006: 104)

⁴⁴ "Anger seems to be the great engine behind populism. This is because perceptions of injustice, moral judgments, attribution of guilt and need for control are components of this negative emotion and, at the same time, are fundamental elements of populist rhetoric... rage significantly increases populist attitudes and the probability of voting in the populist party. Anxiety has the opposite effect, only obtaining statistical significance on the voter side. Sadness has no effect". (Rico and Guinjoan and Anduiza, 2016: 1)

⁴⁵ "First, we have shown that there are clear limits to voters' competence, since the decision to vote is affected by sports results... Second, we have shown that a sub-optimal source of decision is the inability of voters to separate their emotions from their political cognition. Therefore, when voters make decisions, emotions and events play an important role in explicit political variables. In fact, the overall mood effect on voting may be significantly larger than our estimates suggest, since sport is just one of the many influences that voters suffer from and not everyone enjoys sport". (Healy and Malhotra and Mo, 2009: 24)



deliberation. We enter into the mediatisation of democratic politics or public diplomacy, or the coverage of political campaigns that involve investment in image and sophisticated styles of communication and language.⁴⁶

Populism creates a parallel reality, based on exaggerations and exacerbated emotions that infantilise and confuse the reader in order to influence their deliberation; not due to experience and logical reasoning, but to impulsiveness, instinct, pathological fear or chimera capable of reaching the impossible.

For example, populists promise to lower unemployment. Some even advocate full employment, but rarely communicate concrete measures in support of this goal, because the truth is little congruent with the plan; although the break with the model of reference may seem like an oasis in the middle of the desert that despair provides.

The media can help to monitor language errors and denounce behavioural exaggerations. They do not do it if they are sensationalists and populists.

We can perhaps subdivide the policy mediation process into phases. In the 1960s, voters seemed to be loyal to prior and definite alliances, followed dominant ideologies in political parties, in a context in which the mainstream media was the press and radio.

In the 1990s, television transmitted content across society. Political agents took advantage of this stage to entertain the crowds with their humour and skills, already with concerns of image and political marketing. The format was not suitable for great philosophical reflections but attracted charismatic people with the capacity to thrill audiences like actors in the theatre.

The first quarter of the 21st century was dominated by media globalisation, especially the internet, capable of rapidly disseminating throughout the world a distorted amalgam of contents, both credible and erroneous or easily manipulated. In the last few years, politics has turned to social networks where fake news, informative rubbish and gossip are abundant. These sources are unpredictable, unmanageable and conducive to populism, especially in a complex context⁴⁷ that mixes serious issues with entertainment, which are the same thing.

Some studies have concluded that people do not necessarily vote for parties that have media coverage or only adhere to populists when they are dissatisfied.⁴⁸ Be that as it may, humans tend to participate in group phenomena. They let themselves be dragged by the torrent, under the pressure of their friends or because they feel an affinity for a certain view of the world. Once organised, individuals form waves of discontent that, later, can turn into political tsunamis.

⁴⁶ Azzarello, 2011: 18-19.

⁴⁷ "From the communications perspective, the relevant literature has studied the connection between the media and populism, mainly through the lens of the mediatisation of politics... It takes place at the same time as the professionalisation of the publicity and campaigning techniques of political parties, the increasing commercialisation of journalism, the diversification of channels and agents open to new political demands and the radical segmentation of political audiences... It is important to observe these tendencies in a broad context of processes of social change, modernisation (fragmentation of social organisation and increased identity politics), individualisation (with a more consumer-oriented approach and political gratification), secularisation (which reduces the statute of official policies and party identifications to skepticism towards established elites), economy (journalism subordinated to market criteria) and stylisation (which encourages approximations between politics and popular culture)". (Wirth *et al* 2016: 24-25)

⁴⁸ "Only when citizens agree with the party's position does the media exposure make them more likely to vote in that party". (Bos *et al* 2014: 21)



On the internet, Europe's populist supporters seem to be in line with the following profile: above all, young men, employed and optimistic, party-affiliated or highly likely to vote for him, those who do not accept the direction the country is taking. They are critical of the European construction and its institutions that are far from national realities. They do not believe in justice and revolt against impunity, transferring trust to the police and the army. They no longer leave the home (cyber activism) and vote (for anti-systemists or right-wing nationalist parties) due to the fear of immigration and Islamic extremism and the attempt to prevent the country's cultural erosion; and they admit to demonstrating on the streets against corruption, if necessary, with violence. (Bartlett, Birdwell and Littler, 2011: 20-21).

In fact, some studies consider populist discourse as "virile", admitting that women are less likely to engage in politics and adopt more moderate behaviours – that is they depart from a traditional model that may not correspond to the truth.⁴⁹ But variables such as age or gender may not have a significant impact on the equation,⁵⁰ if we admit that both men and women may be populists and that both juniors and seniors may be defrauded to the point of adhering to extreme measures to solve problems.

On the internet there is room for moderates and extremists. The difference is that the latter is visible in social networks, unlike the day-to-day, where moderates tend to be prevalent.

Because? The internet allows more freedom of expression than the politically correct daily life advocated by EU institutions or state institutions at national, regional or local levels. When citizens fear giving their opinion in a professional environment, they stop participating in demonstrations or fail to vote, they may seem harmless and go unnoticed by traditional polls. But if the revolt is installed, it spreads among individuals with common interests on social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Badoo, Google+, LinkedIn, My Space, Twitter, Tumblr, etc.) or through themed blogs.⁵¹ It is a type of passive resistance that can break at any moment, especially when a leader emerges strong enough to open the way to what the masses want, to defend them in the open. It is then that streets fill with enthusiasts and the system suddenly changes.

The issue is particularly important if we assume that terrorism is the most violent expression of populism, whether it be a state (French Revolution) or not. Nowadays, in an internet without rules or control, it is easy to control populations at a distance through the dissemination of false news or propaganda; money laundering, cyber-bullying and cyber-attacks on institutions.

Jihadist populism is particularly suited to virtual reality, given its globalised nature, which aims to embrace a whole community of believers (the Ummah), extendable beyond a

⁴⁹ "... feminist intellectuals have questioned the sexualisation of current culture and the relationship between sex, money and power that underlies Berlusconi's populism. The debate regarding the idea of 'women's silence', 'post-patriarchy' and non-television 'real woman'... The concept of 'post-feminism' is a valid alternative... it is able to capture the complexity of the policies of Berlusconi's governments, which constitute a setback in relation to the victories of feminism of the 1970s and 1980s". (Azzarello, 2011: 106-107).

⁵⁰ "Contrary to what some people think, although in line with more recent research, (populism) it is not consistently related to age or gender. It is important because these results are found not only in more conservative environments, but also in the country as a whole". (Hawkins, Riding and Mudde, 2012: 23).

⁵¹ "The emergence of social networks has created a new way of expressing support for a person, organisation or idea. Individuals can support or become a member of one of the thousands online groups with just one click. This raises a number of questions about the strength of this affinity and the relationship between online and offline involvement". (Bartlett, Birdwell & Littler, 2011: 33).



clearly defined territory (Bhui and Ibrahim, 2013: 217-219). Middle East Jihadism echoed in Europe is able to schedule, in the 21st century, attacks on virtual platforms, before attacking on the ground. The populations, caught unaware, are vulnerable to fear and anger. The revolt produces more populism and pushes the moderates to the margins of the system, when it becomes necessary to have a *we* it is a *they* as a matter of survival. To counter this tendency becomes increasingly difficult as the attacks multiply and the number of victims increases.

Conclusion

The definition of populism is not consensual, because its conceptualisation can be a political statement.⁵² Answer questions related to populists are and what means are employed are a matter of choice and this is hardly neutral.

It is difficult to measure the phenomenon and the "fundamental problem is not necessarily populism, but the political orientation that mobilises it" (Alvares and Dahlgren, 2016: 49). In this sense, it can be a type of discourse, an ideology or a strategy (or all three at the same time), extremist and anti-systemic. Advertising and the media are vehicles that disseminate it.

Populism has history and is against social exclusion,⁵³ so it is important to identify who controls the resources in a particular territory. From the point of view of discourse, the people are told what they want to hear. Political ideology views the people as a single and homogeneous entity.⁵⁴ It is part of the strategy to defend the plebs⁵⁵ and, in a sense, worship them.⁵⁶

Populism is a rhetoric with specific characteristics, much used in the electoral period, which generates extreme emotions and attitudes. It may have a diffuse matrix in favour of the rights and guarantees of the people in a democracy. Pleasing the masses and trying to satisfy their wants and immediate needs even when they are not feasible. He or she may have good intentions but risks being paternalistic and infantilising the receiver of the message. When one takes advantage of the needs of the plebs, the demagogue manipulates it. Hence, populism can be Machiavellian, instrumental, incendiary or dangerous.

A populist party opposes the regime. It boasts of being the mouthpiece of the majority wronged against lobbies, or privileged minority groups that hinder the happiness of the population. If it is necessary to break down barriers, it becomes radical or impinges on some kind of rupture in status quo, criticises the malfunctioning of existing representative

⁵² "Populism is often used as an analytical concept and, in the absence of clear academic consensus on its meaning, is a contested definition. The confusion about the term, however, is not only caused by an analytical problem of generalisation; it results mainly from the promiscuity with which it is used and the pejorative meaning of the word, both inside and outside the scientific debate. Any scientific definition attributed to this political concept is a political act in itself..." (Raadt, Hollanders and Krouwel, 2004: 4).

⁵³ "Populism is not a historical aberration or a deviance from the universal standards of modernisation... it has arisen historically as a response to the marginalisation of many politics. The persistence of social and economic exclusion brought about by neoliberal policies and, in particular, the difficulty of the poor in accessing their constitutional rights explains its resilience. Although the concrete manifestations of populism and levels of polarisation vary according to experience, populism continues to recur in democracies where the rights of ordinary people are not reinforced or respected". (Torre, 2007: 394-395).

⁵⁴ "Population is a unity and only one, and a reference to the people is not only a rhetorical claim, it is a consistent part of its ideology". (Raadt, Hollanders and Krouwel, 2004: 7).

⁵⁵ "Populists place 'the people' at the center of their politics". (Rooduijn and Pauwels, 2010: 4).

⁵⁶ "Populism worships the people". (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969: 1).



democracy. But it does not intend to be undemocratic. On the contrary, it defends a (more) direct democracy, capable of punishing the intermediary institutions that will face the "true and uncorrupted will of the people".⁵⁷

Populism is a form of struggle, so claim those who have little but want to earn more. Whoever is poor wants to be rich. Who has already satisfied the basic needs, wants to express their opinion. Whoever does not have freedom demands it.

Public opinion in a developed country calls for rights and guarantees that may not be at the forefront of a population prone to armed conflict. That is why populism depends on geographic areas, culture and dominant ideology.

In a democracy, many leaders condemn populism, but take initiatives and utter popular speeches that are generally accepted by the population. The boundaries between what is popular and populist are porous in times of crisis.

The leader is popular if he or she pleases the people with solutions that do not ruin the rule of law. It is populist when it defends an extremist program. The first promotes democratic order. The second is the cause or consequence of democratic disorder.⁵⁸ The popular strategy is moderate, protective, constructive or secure. The populist is paternalistic, fundamentalist, destructive or dangerous. Systemic policies are realist, constructive, based on concrete measures and achievable promises; idealist models are diffuse, unpredictable or promise that which could be obtained.

The defenders of the masses invoke freedom, equality and fraternity. They seek to ensure that the sovereignty of the people is not only a facade. When its leaders are charismatic, they are milestones of history⁵⁹ and try to be agents of political transformation. For some, populists are the enemy. For others they are heroes of the population. For some, populism is undemocratic, but does not always criticise elites as a "threat to liberal democracy, as long as it maintains its individualistic and anti-statesman orientation."⁶⁰ So the trend changes when the project becomes radical.

The most basic frustration, anger, disillusionment, fear and emotions ground the populist vote. In a context of uncertainty, moderation can be a threat to survival. Cicero preferred the most unjust peace to the fairest of wars.⁶¹ But does the majority of the population still prefer the status quo?

⁵⁷ "A first element of populist ideology is found in rejecting the system. Criticism is the reason for being of any opposition party, but populist parties develop a set of arguments about the malfunctioning of representative democracy... Populism is not anti-democratic... it rebukes intermediary organisations that stand in the midst of the true and uncorrupted expression of the will of the people". (Raadt, Hollanders and Krouwel, 2004: 6).

⁵⁸ "... the hypertrophy of the democratic side, to the point of over-weakening the protections of the rights of individuals and minorities, leads to the democratic disorder known as populism". (Plattner, 2010: 87)

⁵⁹ "The charismatic populist leader fascinates, mystifies and excites. The populist leaders deeply and indelibly mark the national and global history; often colorful and sweeping, they are successful in forging a bond with their followers that rarely fails to include a moral or religious tone. They claim to speak to and with the people; beyond mere representation, claim to personalise the people and are prepared to faithfully follow something relatively similar to what Rousseau called the 'general will'. In the midst of this tumultuous identification and liaison process, institutional boundaries and conventions are often forgotten or criticised in favour of unmediated contact with citizens". (Piramo, 2009: 1-2).

⁶⁰ Plattner, 2010: 92.

⁶¹ *Equidem ad pacem hortari non desino; qua vel iniusta utili est quam iustissimum bellum cum civibus.* Cicero, *Letters to Penthouse*, VII, 14. (Winstedt, 1913: 69).



Conflicts exist all over the world as a result of the rivalry between cultural groups, identities or with unsatisfied socioeconomic demands.⁶² Therefore, we do not go to the end of the ideological evolution of humanity, nor to the uniformisation of Western liberal democracy.⁶³

Apparently, we have not changed much since the Romans. Formerly there were wax tablets. There is now tablets with internet access. But people still find it difficult to live in public space when they abuse the freedoms and guarantees and virtues of a republic, in a context that privileges and rewards entertainment.

Citizens vote for leaders who make them laugh, with the ability to mobilise emotions, who know how to dress or enthuse the bored electorate who likes to play computer games or extreme sports. Instead of choosing rulers capable of facing reality with policies that effectively contribute to what the people need, both now and in the future, they vote for animators of vain rhetoric who promise to the people what they want to hear or make life a hobby. Opinion makers cease to be specialists. The information is less scrutinised by journalists and more disseminated by social networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) or popular video bloggers. Formal education is replaced by a system of equivalences. We invest less in cohesive and secure families, preferring dysfunctional alternatives that do not give structure to societies. Teenagers do not want to be scientists, they want to be paraded. No wonder increasingly inexperienced or immature voters choose famous candidates (whom they know by television or the internet) rather than sages and statesmen. Therefore, the environment is voluble and conducive to populism.

We are not at the end of history. We are at the beginning of a new cycle, of a wave that can result in a tsunami. And it is not for lack of warning. It is that the postmodern matrix seems more and more like the bread and Circus of the ancient Romans, from where the Middle Ages succeeded. Without forgetting that jihadist terrorism has already opened the door to this path, it remains to be seen if we can counteract the trend based on the lessons already studied.

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⁶² "In the post-Cold War world, the most important changes among peoples are not ideological, political or economic, but cultural... People use politics, not only in the pursuit of their interests, but also to define their identity". (Huntington, 1996: 21).

⁶³ "What we are witnessing is not only the end of the Cold War, or the transition to a special post-war period, but to the end of history as such: that is, the end of the ideological evolution of humanity and uniformity of Western liberal democracy as a final form of human government". (Fukuyama, 1989: 4).



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