Populism: Ideology, Political Style, Mentality?*

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Abstract

The difficulties of defining the essence of populism and of circumscribing the range of application of this concept have determined a long-lasting controversy in the academic field. Among the main subjects under discussion, one question has arisen most frequently: can populism be considered as an ideology (a 'thin' ideology, in Freeden's sense) or must it be reduced to a political style which can be attached to any ideological background? Referring to the notion elaborated by Juan Linz in order to distinguish authoritarianism from totalitarianism, and on the basis of the empirical evidence, we suggest that populism must be seen neither as an ideology nor only as a style, but as a mentality, connected to a vision of the social order that is based on a belief in the innate virtues of the people, whose primacy is claimed as the source of legitimacy for the government.

Keywords: populism; ideology; political theory; democracy

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1. Still the Cinderella complex?

The various faces of the phenomena to which the label of populism has been applied have created confusion among both those who have aimed to analyze its empirical manifestations and those who have attempted to extract a unified theoretical substance from these case studies. The populism's wide geographical coverage[1] and its chronological breadth[2] have emphasized the heterogeneity of the phenomenon rather than its common matrices. It was stressed that populism occurred from time to time in various guises, expressed through movements, regimes, discursive styles and rhetorical strategies, states of mind and psychological behaviours; as such, the literature stressed its chameleon-like ability (Taggart 2000) to adapt to a wide variety of contexts, overstepping the usual dividing line between left and right. In reaction to the various exhortations to redefine the boundaries of the concept, attention was switched to the admonitions to discard populism as a solid conceptual frame-

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work; hence it was argued, that 'populism' was a fictitious entity and that it would be futile to try to capture it (Taguieff 2002: 78). Moreover, it has been said that because definitions were only 'happy formulas that students treasure, but other experts are quick to disqualify', populism could certainly be better understood 'in the confused light of the cumulative forms that it coated in time and in space, rather than through an intellectual synthesis which inevitably tended to be simplistic' (Hermet 2001: 53).

The extremist character of these statements is already evident in the fact that these quotations are linked to scholars who, in the search for this Phoenix genre, have devoted and continue to devote a substantial amount of intellectual energy. One can therefore consider them as provocations dictated by a dissatisfaction linked to mass-media's tendency to inflate the use of a concept to the point of deforming its meaning; but one must not take them to the letter. Populism has not been historically identified as a homogeneous type of political regime, it did not exhibit the same content in all movements that have been the vehicles of its message and it cannot be connected either to an articulate vision of the world, understood according to the canons of the classical *Weltanschauungen*, or to a political program that is fully shared by all of its members. Still, this complex situation does not make it impossible to grasp the phenomenon's unitary essence. Indeed, the belief that populism possesses many of the attributes of an ideology, although not all of them (Taggart 2000), can be turned upside down and used to demonstrate that populism has its own visible nucleus, a soul, a heart made of 'elements, recurrent in time and space, that make it similar to an ideology' (Zanatta 2002: 263–264); characteristics that can be detected even when some of its style or content elements are absorbed, in a purely instrumental aim, by subjects that are insensitive to its credo and, as such, mixed with practices or programs that are, in substance, alien to its core being. As has already happened to many of the doctrines that compete in the democratic arena, e.g. liberalism or socialism, populism has been subject to contradictory formulations and been made up of discordant tendencies; this does not exclude it from the category of political trends that have exerted significant influence in our contemporary societies.

It is precisely this ability to influence our contemporary societies that has regularly led the scientific community to engage in an attempt to frame a definition of the phenomenon that is able to account for both the unity and the polysemy that distinguish it.

The first efforts in this direction were made collectively by the participants at the symposium organized by the Journal *Government and Opposition* at the London School of Economics in May 1967. For a long time, the word 'populism' was used in the jargon of the social sciences, so as to be applied to both the analysis of the Third World experiences of political integration of the masses that had been under way for several decades, almost always in the context of authoritarian regimes, and to the identification of trends typical to pluralist systems, starting with the United States of America. Ironically, note should be taken that, despite its 'elusive and protean' form, populism had replaced communism in performing the role of the spectre that obsessed the world. The organizers of the 1967 meeting wondered if there really was a unique phenomenon corresponding to that name and, in case of an affirmative answer, whether one could categorize it as an ideology, a movement, or a mentality resulting from a particular social situation or a psychological predisposition (Ionescu, Gellner 1969). The opinions received on the basis of a 1960s survey which extended over four continents were divergent: Donald MacRae believed that one could talk

about a populist ideology, Peter Wiles retorted that it was more a kind of syndrome and not a proper doctrine, while Kenneth Minogue gave priority to its dimension as a political movement and Angus Stewart pointed out the identification of the social connotations that gave populism a specific identity (Ionescu, Gellner 1969). And, Isaiah Berlin (Berlin et al. 1968) summed up the debates, pointing out that with their claim of identifying a pure type of populism, scholars were running the risk of developing a 'Cinderella complex', that is, to the frustration that comes from not being able to find objects in the real world that are perfectly compliant to the requirements of the theory.

The reasonableness of this warning and the authority of the scholar who made it have contributed to dispelling the various attempts to enclose populism in a comprehensive definition, but the hope of reaching an agreement on the identification of populism's essential characteristics has not been extinguished and has provided a fertile ground for a particularly vivid debate with cornerstones that are, for the most part, those set up in the '60s and even earlier. Indeed, one can trace these characteristics back to Edward Shils, who when he wrote on the topic in the mid-50s articulated the original belief that populism was expressed in an ideology that proclaimed that 'the will of the people as such is supreme over every other standard, over the standards of 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 1956: 98). Since then, it has become common belief that this appeal to the people is the cornerstone of a fair and legitimate order, and is potentially at the centre of every political demonstration of this phenomenon; still, it is on these grounds that various dissonant proposals flourished and integrated additional elements to that undisputed core.

During the conference in London, MacRae found himself isolated in supporting the need, if one is interested in understanding the meaning of populism, to treat it as, although not only as, an ideology, a special form of primitivism that idealized, according to the cases in view, the agrarian community or the good old days, which occurred before the dark phase of colonialism. The underlining of the importance given by populists to a sense of belonging to a specific local context and their propensity to refer to the plots of outsiders – Jews, foreigners, bankers, heretics, etc. – when explaining the difficulties faced by ordinary and honest people in their everyday life, however, allowed MacRae to develop his notion of ideology into a theory of personality that chose as its model a man that has 'evaded all the consequences of Adam's fall' who could fully develop his freedom only in relation to social uniformity and within the identity of character with its fellows (MacRae 1969: 154–160). Wiles, after having expressed his belief that 'any creed or movement based on the following major premise: virtue resides in the simple people who are the overwhelming majority, and in their collective traditions' can be defined as populist, argued that this premise 'causes a political syndrome of surprising constancy' composed of a variety of symptoms, including moralism, the refusal of party bureaucracies, the reliance on leaders with quality out of the ordinary ('in mystical contact' with the masses), the lack of trust in intellectuals, financial strength and any other arenas of the establishment, a conciliatory social conscience, the opposition to socio-economic inequities, and an isolationism hostile to militarism and racism (Wiles 1969). Worsley explicitly excluded the possibility of matching populism to a particular type of ideological system or organization and spoke, referring to Shils, of 'a dimension of political culture in general' which implies the allegiance to two cardinal principles: 1) the supremacy of the will

of the people upon every institutional prescription and 2) the institutional desire for a direct relationship between the people and the leadership (Worsley 1969: 245). These principles were translated, according to Worsley, into a quasi-religious belief in the virtues of the uncorrupted ordinary people, in a homogeneous and anti-class representation of society, in an emphasis on the conflict between the common human being and the surrounding world and into resentment against the order imposed by the ruling class. Many Third World regimes, born in the wake of decolonization, implemented these beliefs through a dominant party focused on the communitarian integration of the nation's masses (Worsley 1969).

Following this exchange of ideas, it was once again Isaiah Berlin who tried to synthesize the issues that emerged from the discussion, by arguing that on the basis of the studies conducted until then on the subject, six basic characteristics of populism could be identified: (1) the idea of a cohesive society closely related to the organic community described by Tönnies in the famous *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*; (2) a trust related more to the society than to the State; (3) the interest in bringing the people back into the lost harmony with the natural order, (4) a tendency towards a nostalgic emphasis on the values linked to ancient times, (5) the conviction that populism speaks in the name of the majority of the population; (6) the tendency to occur in social contexts in which a process of modernization was already in progress, or in an advanced stage of incubation (Berlin et al. 1968). Echoes of this communitarian image can be traced in many of the subsequent studies, which have, however, left the issue of the profound nature of populism unresolved: an ideology for some, a mentality or a political style for others.

The essential features of populism proposed by one of the first scholars who wrote on the subject after the conference in London, Ludovico Incisa di Camerana, are related to the requirements of an ideology.[3] Although the scholar admits that 'a theoretical and systematic elaboration' does not fit the phenomenon of populism and he prefers to refer to political formulas (plural) 'for which the chief source of inspiration and a constant term of reference is the people, considered as a socially homogenous aggregate and as the exclusive depositary for positive, specific and permanent values', people who are not rationalized by the populists but are rather 'intuited and apodictically postulated' – in other words, one feels himself/herself to be a part of the people, regardless of their social-professional role or their place on the social ladder – to the point that it becomes a myth. And, as an ideology, according to Incisa di Camerana, populism plays a typical function whenever it emerges as a result of a political and/or social crisis, using an anti-class appeal, in a synthetic and healing manner, with the aim of erasing all traces of the social conflicts that have dismantled the connective tissues of the community and returning it to its original homogeneity (di Camerana 2000: 351–352, 359). This particularly occurred in some Latin American countries during the accelerated modernization phase, between the '30s and the '50s of the 20th century, when national-populism, as defined by Gino Germani, served as a basis for the political mobilization of large sectors of the population theretofore strangers to the national society, through the process of industrialisation, which explains the success that this formula knew in various Latin American countries and its constant reassertion as a source of popular support (Quattrocchi-Woisson 1997: 181).[4]

The conceptual settings of Incisa di Camerana and Germani reflect the tendency to link the emergence of populist movements to the social reconstruction of several Third World

countries and to emphasise the anti-pluralistic, organic and authoritarian characteristics of the phenomenon, which seems, at least partially, to coincide with the rise of civil-military 'developmental dictatorships'. Subsequent analyses have further broadened the geographical framework and attempted to better articulate the link between populism and its ideal referent. The 'mythical-symbolic transfiguration of the idea of people' and its 'sacralisation' as the foundation of any social and political value, underlined by the anthropologist Carlo Tullio-Altan, are often called into question in this new phase of discussion on the contents of the concept (Tullio-Altan 1989: 42–43).

A substantial turn occurred in this field when, in 1981, Margaret Canovan published her book *Populism*. Pointing out that the difficulty of finding an univocal definition of this phenomenon was not unique – when dealing with their empirical manifestations, socialism, liberalism, or conservatism suffer from the same heterogeneity – Canovan argues that the notion of populism 'provides a pointer however shaky, to an interesting and largely unexplored area of political and social experience' (Canovan 1981: 6). Even if the scholar underlies that none of the movements usually labelled as populist assembles all the features related to this concept, she notices that they all show two main characteristics: an exaltation of the people and an anti-elitist stance, that fosters their distrust of professional politicians and of competitive politics and pushes them to feed 'the pathos of the 'little man', his struggles and his virtues' (Canovan 1981: 296–297) and to put their trust in a leader who has nothing to do with parties and institutions. Trying to relate these features to a definite ideology, shared by all forms of populism, to force them into one category, or to label populism as either Right or Left, 'is a lost cause' (Canovan 1981: 294). According to Canovan, the label 'populist' can be applied 'to certain *styles* of politics that draw on the ambiguous resonances of 'the people", especially 'to politicians who claim to speak for the whole people rather than for any faction' (Canovan 1981: 260).

Canovan's influential work served as a cornerstone for studies in the field and pushed other scholars to abandon the search for an ideal-type definition, for the benefit of different approaches. Among them, Nicola Matteucci identifies an apocalyptic psychological orientation within the idea of society praised by populists that is 'dominated by the need for a reunion with the people, according to a sentimental image, if not stereotyped, […] by a rough and Manichean conception of social conflicts' encompassed as 'eternal struggles between predators and prey, and by the desire to definitively eradicate Evil from the community within which it has been installed' (Matteucci 1976: 75–76). Marc Lazar further developed the idea of populism as a syndrome, based on the exaltation of the people and on anti-elitism, by connecting it to a political style that is able to give concrete forms to symbolic data (Lazar 1997: 121–122). Alfio Mastropaolo also insisted on the crucial importance of the stylistic elements based on the rhetoric of the moral integrity of the people, understood 'as a community (national), or without distinctions of class, interests, values and without the tragic divisions generated by politics and, in particular, by the parliamentary manoeuvres and the parties'. Mastropaolo considers that, in addition to this style, the movements that appeal to populism share a specific goal: to reinstate the people, the repository of all virtues, on the legitimate throne 'by defining its manifestations of will superior to any value, as well as to any rule' and thus articulating a 'plebiscite inspiration' (Mastropaolo 2005).

2. An ideology or a political style?

These remarks open a new chapter of the academic debate: the answers to the question 'what is populism?' tend to converge around two alternative proposals. On one side, some analysts interpret populism as 'a symbolic construction, which steers the behaviour of political subjects like parties and movements' (and of their followers; Chiapponi 2008: 34) and recognize in it the outline of an ideology. On the opposite side, other scholars reduce the phenomenon to a mere style of political action. The distinction is a clean-cut one and still weighs heavily on the debate.

As for the alleged ideological character of populism, within the wave of studies carried out during the last decades, the conviction expressed by Mény and Surel seems to prevail. Accordingly, one can only speak of a populist ideology if it refers, in line with Clifford Geertz, to a cognitive system that is 'culturally and historically determined', through which 'interests or resolved social tensions can be expressed, especially when the tested cognitive and normative structures do not seem to work' (Mény, Surel 2000: 170). Only in this sense, populism may be seen as an ideology, 'since it recurrently supplies some meaning codes which allow us to understand some critical situations' (Mény, Surel 2000: 303). Otherwise, it is preferable to assimilate populism into an 'ideological scheme' and a 'register of discourse' based on the belief that, politically speaking, the *people* are a sovereign entity entitled to the monopoly of legitimacy that the ruling classes betrayed, while still in debt with its capacity to govern and therefore it is the duty of the people to restore its primacy (Surel 2003: 114–116). Nevertheless, this point remains controversial. In the attempt to clarify the limits of their preference for the definition of populism as an ideology, many scholars refer to the work of Michael Freeden, who identifies three kinds of concepts within ideologies: central, adjacent, and peripheral. It is the case of Cas Mudde, who suggests a 'clear and new' definition of the phenomenon which describes it as 'an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people' (Mudde 2004: 543). Mudde further specifies that populism is 'only a 'thin-centred ideology', exhibiting a 'restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts" (Mudde 2004: 543–544).[5] The same opinion is expressed by Canovan, when arguing that populism 'has a characteristic core of *concepts* – democracy, popular sovereignty, the people understood as a collectivity with a common will, and majority rule' (Canovan 2002), she refers to Freeden's vision of ideologies as conceptual maps for politics, that make easier its understanding by reducing its complexity and are used by their believers as a guide for political action.[6] The weak intensity of the notion and the circumscribed range of its application also characterises the recent definition by Albertazzi and McDonnell who describe populism as 'an ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice' (Albertazzi, McDonnell 2008).[7]

Even when expressed in this 'moderate' form, the inclusion of populism within the crowded panorama of the contemporary ideologies collides with two evidences. On one side, there is the absence of written sources from which populist leaders and followers could

draw inspiration or suggestions for their actions. To be considered as such, an ideology must coagulate in a system – or at least in a set – of correlated beliefs, of ideas and values concerning the political order that steers the behaviour of the subject who subscribes to it, and this system must find an adequate and coherent expression. Populists lack any 'sacred book' or reference text of this kind, and some apologetic autobiographies of the leader or sporadic collections of his speeches cannot replace them. On another side, one cannot ignore the avowed and often reaffirmed suspicion of populists towards the same word 'ideology' and the negative sense that they attribute to this term, and see it as abstruse ideas, intellectualism, manipulation of the minds, fraud.

The most diffused alternative vision of populism refers to it as a political style, i.e. as a specific modality of the art of rhetoric and/or as a peculiar logic of construction of political discourse. A sophisticated and complex version of this approach can be found in Ernesto Laclau's work, especially when he speaks of populism as 'a social logic, whose effects cover a variety of phenomena', and as a 'way to build the political', a 'performative act' aimed at exerting a concrete influence on the reality (Laclau 2005: 5–13). Seen from this point of view, populism reveals its trans-ideological nature and presents itself, as Sergiu Miscoiu states, as 'a discursive register provided with a vocation for hegemony, based on the emphasis on the popular identification' (Mişcoiu 2012: 66).[8] Many other contributions share this perspective. That is, populism is seen as an instrument of mobilisation that can be adapted to the strategies of different political actors aiming at exploiting the frustration of the large mass of the people who feel excluded from the establishment, by appealing to the popular sovereignty and to the Manichean opposition between the virtuous common man and his high-ranking enemies (see for instance Knight 1998: 223–248; Panizza 2009: 14; Kazin 1995: 1–2; Weyland 2001: 1–22; Freidenberg 2012: 23; Freidenberg 2007).

The reduction of populism to a political style was summed up in the clearest manner by Pierre-André Taguieff in successive formulations. At first, Taguieff argued that 'the only way to conceptualise populism is to designate a particular type of social and political mobilization, implying that the term can indicate only one dimension of the action or of the political discourse. It does neither embody a particular type of political regime nor defines a particular ideological content. It is a political style suitable for various ideological contexts' (Taguieff 1995: 9–43). Moreover, in order to strengthen his argumentation, Taguieff added that 'a democracy or a dictatorship may have a populist dimension or orientation, they can have a populist style'; furthermore, the scholar suggested the need to refer to populism as 'a political style susceptible to refer to various symbolic materials and to settle in different ideological places, by assuming their political colours' and as 'a set of rhetorical operations implemented through the symbolic exploration of certain social representations' (Taguieff 2002: 80). The most recent version of this interpretation goes even further; it denies populism any originality and depicts it as a revival of an old phenomenon, as 'the form that demagogy has assumed in those contemporary societies whose political culture is grounded on the values and norms of democracy, seen as absolute […], a specific form of demagogy that presupposes the people's sovereignty and its absorption within a united nation' (Taguieff 2012: 23).

The equivalence between populism and demagogy, often proposed by the scientific literature, is excessive, because, as Raphaël Logier argues, even if all populists are demagogues,

not all demagogues are populists, considering that the temptation to seduce the largest number of voters through the use of flattery and overpromising is widespread in contemporary democracies following the adoption of the most refined marketing techniques (Liogier 2013: 15). Notwithstanding, the emphasis on the stylistic aspects of populism can reveal itself useful for a comprehensive definition of populism. The populist arguments are indeed a constant feature of the political discourse, most often used by outsiders, but also present in the discourse of institutional actors with the aim of guiding public opinion towards polemic targets identified thanks to a Manichean pattern that pits the common people's generosity and common sense against the contorted reasoning and the privileges of the caste of professional politicians. Margaret Canovan, while accepting that this is not the only possible interpretation, wrote that populism consolidates into a political style especially when the rhetoric of the appeal to the people connects with the salience of charismatic leaders, electoral campaigns based on racial or ethnic prejudices, referenda' mechanisms, or proselytizing efforts that deny class differences (Canovan 1993: 45–46). Many other scholars assert the presence of this style in what they call 'media populism' (Mazzoleni et al. 2003; Hermet 1998). Furthermore, the existence of peculiar stylistic features can be easily detected through the observation of the populist spokesmen. These tribunes regularly rely on the use of a popular language, characterised by vulgarity, extreme simplifications, absence of doubts, and exaggerations; paternalistic attitudes; the frequent recourse to proverbs, stereotypes, clichés and other expressions of 'popular wisdom', in order to place themselves on the same level of their audience. These elements are the trade-mark of populism and constitute the bases of public rituals where both the distance between the everyday man and the elites, and the opposition between 'us' and 'them' help to increase the solidarity of the participants and provide unity through a strong emotional bond between the leader and his followers.

Although populism can also be associated also to a style, it cannot be reduced to this unique dimension. Instead, it can be better understood as a feeling, a moral attitude (Dorna 1999: 8), or as the reflection of a pre-existent psychological structure, emotional and cognitive at the same time. This interpretation dates back to the debates of the '60s and provided the background, although not always in an explicit manner, for various more recent analyses. A contribution to this approach has been provided by Canovan when she recognizes in this phenomenon, beyond the general exaltation of an idealised people, the expression of the already mentioned 'pathos of the common man' based on an appreciation for the exemplary civic virtues of ordinary citizens, as opposed to the vices of their governing leaders (Canovan 1982: 552). Hans-Georg Betz emphasizes that the 'pronounced faith in the common sense of the ordinary people' is one of the unifying characteristics of the European populist movements and leaders (Betz 1994: 4). Guy Hermet considers the dream of the final abolition of the barrier that has always separated those who are low from those who are on top (Hermet 2001: 16, 41, 45, 49, 52) as the essential psychological feature of populism. Even Taguieff, while otherwise insisting on the relevance of stylistic criteria, assigns to 'the populism of protest' the exaltation of the image of an active citizen that distrusts the mechanisms of representation from which he/she feels expropriated and conditioned, and privileges instead 'the direct communication with ordinary people, who are equal in terms of the simplicity, honesty and 'health' which each of them is believed to possess and illustrate' (Taguieff 2002: 80, 84; Taguieff 1996: 120). Paul Taggart also argues

that, in line with the idealisation of the past, the general features of the populist discourse refer to a world that embodies the collective way of life and the common sense of the people who built it (Taggart 2000: 13). Recently, a more radical version of the same approach has been proposed by Loris Zanatta. He sees populism as 'something wider and deeper than a mere political or social phenomenon', promoting it to the rank of 'a cosmology, an outlook of the world', a modern expression of an ancient *Weltanschauung* that equates human societies and natural organisms and transfigures people into an indivisible unity (Zanatta 2013: 9).

3. Populism as a distinctive mentality

If the definition of populism that presents it as a pure political and/or rhetorical style limits the comprehension of its psychological appeal and its interpretation as an ideology is contradicted by the heterogeneity and the informality of its empirical manifestations, the reference to a *Weltanschauung* can create an overlapping of populism and organicism and, thus diluting the original essence of the former. For these reasons, we have to choose another path in order to reach the nature of this phenomenon. This alternative path leads us to consider the constitutive features of populism as expressions of a *distinctive mentality*, as Ionescu and Gellner suggested, when they wrote that "populism was a sort of recurring mentality appearing in different historical and geographic contexts as the result of a special social situation" (Ionescu and Gellner 1969, 3).

As we know, this notion was introduced into the field of political science by Juan J. Linz, who borrowed it from Theodor Geiger's work (Geiger 1932: 77–79) and used it in order to define authoritarianism and to distinguish it from totalitarianism (Linz 1964). Later, he specified its difference from ideology as follows:

> In the definition of authoritarian regimes we use the term 'mentality' rather than 'ideology', from the distinction of the German sociologist Theodor Geiger […] For him, ideologies are systems of thought more or less intellectually elaborated and organized, often in written form, by intellectuals, pseudointellectuals, or with their assistance. Mentalities are ways of thinking and feeling, more emotional than rational, that provide noncodified ways of reacting to different situations […] Mentality is intellectual attitude; ideology is intellectual content. Mentality is psychic predisposition, ideology is reflection, self-interpretation; mentality is previous, ideology later; mentality is formless, fluctuating – ideology, however, is firmly formed. Ideology is a concept of the sociology of culture, mentality is a concept of the study of social character. Ideologies have a strong utopian element, mentalities are closer to the present or the past. (Linz 2000: 162)

And even if, when compared to ideologies, mentalities shows a high degree of vagueness, because they refer to generic values and pragmatically include elements derived from the present *Zeitgeist*, like ideologies they provide criteria for action to the people involved in political activities (Linz 2000: 164).

In line with the above, it would be difficult to identify a political phenomenon that suits the features of a distinctive mentality more than populism does. Populist thinking is no doubt based more on emotional inputs than on rational considerations (even if the latter are not absent); it expresses itself through attitudes rather than carefully articulated and justified stances; populism refers to generic values; it is closer to the present or the past than to any lucubration on future settings. Last but not least, the behaviour of populist leaders and followers shows the psychic predisposition that provides noncodified ways of reacting to unexpected situations – often in the form of reject and protest – well described by Linz.

Combining this and other suggestions drawn from the large literature devoted to the subject by political scientists (Tarchi 2015: 19–94), populism can be defined as a specific *forma mentis*, connected to a vision of the social order based on a belief in the innate virtues of the people whose primacy is claimed as the source of the legitimacy of any political and governmental action. This concept can be expressed in various ways: as an ideological schema of an interpretation of the social dynamics, as a style of political behaviour, as a set of beliefs and principles laying at the basis of a political culture, as a rhetorical register, as a formula of legitimacy that can act as the basis of a regime. All in all, it presents different intensities depending on the context and circumstances that accompany it, that favour or hinder its expression and diffusion.

On these bases, we can propose a definition of populism as *the distinctive mentality which identifies the people as an organic totality artfully divided by hostile agents; ascribes to it natural ethical qualities; sets up its realism, its industriousness and its honesty against the hypocrisy, the inefficiency and the corruption of the political, economic, social and intellectual oligarchies, and claims the primacy of the people as the source of legitimacy of political power, over all forms of representation and mediation.*

In this definition, the populist distrust against the mechanisms of representation is evident, but it doesn't necessarily translate into a denial of democracy. As many scholars have emphasized, the relationship between populism and democracy is highly controversial. Of course, the tendency to rely on 'strong men' that rise to the position of the exclusive spokesmen of the interests of the community that can foster latent authoritarian temptations, in particular, in contexts in which democratic institutions are fragile. Still, in institutionalised democracies, they can act as demagogic or tribunitian ventilation valves, for tension and protests dictated by a lack of trust in the efficiency of the regime or by a disillusionment fed by the promises that the political class failed to meet. As such, they can help to maintain a crisis within the limits of an ordinary conflict and even reinforce the demands for an increased democratization of the relationship between civil society and institutions. In short, 'if populism embodies an ideological corruption of democracy, it also expresses a need for participatory democracy and active citizenship that the functional well-tempered system of representative democracy is not capable of satisfying' (Taguieff 2002: 25). Rather than rejecting the principle of representation, the populists pinpoint modifying its nature; the ideal democracy that they dream of relies on an imperative mandate, but, in practice, they ask for a simplification and integration with the tools of direct democracy. If anything, their framework leads to an idealization of the availability of the common man to become active citizens, aware of the need to participate in public life and keen to bear the costs of commitment and information to regain the exercise of power theoretically owned by him/her.

From this point of view, populism is in opposition to the typical authoritarian mentality, which favours a mass apathy in order to give free rein to the rulers, and can be described as an extreme form of democracy 'because it seeks to maintain as much power as possible in the hands of the citizens [and] it is therefore hostile to the parties and intermediary organizations' (Losano 2003: 6). This has allowed the argument that it can be 'a resource, a moment of research, an electric shock for political settings under a growing crisis of representation and increasingly unable to arouse the slightest emotion or passion, ever more perceived as cold and distant in comparison with the real life of the people' and to considered as an inevitable reaction in front of 'the objective involution, in an oligarchic-bureaucratic direction, of the contemporary democratic-representative political regimes' and the lack of democratic legitimacy of most of the public institutions (Campi 2000: 29–30). Similar concerns about the risks of remoteness between public opinion and the institutions and of an isolation of the political class within an oligarchic compromise have, however, also generated an opposite interpretation which condemns populism as 'a highly regressive phenomenon, typical of a condition of economic and cultural underdevelopment […], a simple reaction to modernity' (Matteucci 1976: 5, 79).

The diversity of opinions is only apparently paradoxical, since the democratic potentialities of populism are always conditioned by the historical circumstances and the type of establishment present. As such, populism may seem to be compatible with a liberal institutional framework (when it promotes the request of better and more faithful representation) or may oppose it (when it invokes an overcoming of the representation in order to provide room for a more authentic popular power). In terms of ideal preferences, populism, however, shows a marked distrust of pluralism, which in some cases is considered 'a pathology to be healed more than a physiological condition of a modern society' (Zanatta 2002: 271) and it is usually tolerated as an inevitable imperfection of contemporary society, while attempting to circumscribe its manifestations to the political-electoral arena and to avoid its development into an overly individualistic perspective, which would undermine the foundations of the feeling of solidarity that is the glue that holds together the organic unity of the people.

The limited appeal of pluralism, institutions and bureaucracy has always made the definition of a clear dividing line between populism and democracy problematic. If Peter Worsley used to argue that populism was not, in itself, either democratic or undemocratic, but because of its propensity to encourage direct participation by citizens in the management of the community it has to be considered as at least compatible with democracy (Worsley 1969: 246–247), the following considerations expressed by the majority of scholars have emphasized the ambivalence of this issue. Mény and Surel described populism as being characterized by a 'game of rising democratic expectations' and considered it close to democracy by virtue of its ideal reference – popular sovereignty – and far from it in relation to the different meaning that it assigns. What, in their opinion, more clearly separates the populist incarnation from the modern embodiment of democratic ideals, in other words from liberal polyarchy, is its different interpretation of the principle of representation.

4. The controversial relation with democracy

In the case of populism, the principle of representation is based on the assumption of homology, similarity and proximity between representatives and the represented while the liberal perspective emphasizes the autonomy of judgment and action of the first in relation to the latter. Far from being a minor difference, this does not lead populism to a frontal clash with liberal democracy, but to being a significant critical and dissident component (Mény, Surel 2000). A similar belief is expressed by Margaret Canovan when she writes that 'populism is a shadow cast by the same democracy', that the democracy 'brings with it' (Canovan 1993: 47; Canovan 1999: 25) and therefore populism reproduces the democratic profile although with features that are distorted by its specific adopted perspective. Populism challenges democracy on its own ground, in the name of unmasking the élites' power behind the 'bluff' of 'a system in which the people are allowed to vote, but the real power is channelled away from it towards a more liberal and enlightened élite' and in which the popular sovereignty is nothing but 'a necessary lie', an 'elaborate ruse' backed by 'false promises' (Canovan 1993: 49–50).

Populism is, in this interpretation, seen as another and different projection of the ideal premises of the democratic theory, brought to bypass the institutions to reaffirm that only a respect of the effective will of the people legitimizes the power of whom has been given the task of representing the aforementioned instances. But, if populism can be seen as the shadow of democracy, it is also its spectre, a ghost who accompanies and haunts it. It is with this interpretation that Benjamin Arditi considers populism as 'a possibility included in the modern practice of democracy' (Arditi 2004: 135–143) that can manifest in three different forms: as audience democracy or as a trust given to outstanding personalities made popular by media and non-institutional mechanisms; as a form of participation in public life that does not comply with current standards; as a mistrust of the institutional procedures that can result in a purely discretionary acceptance of the laws' dispositions. Depending on the form they take, these trends can fuel new forms of mobilization and organization of public opinion with positive effects in terms of balancing the increased lack of transparency and legitimacy of the political elite (Hayward 1996: 10–32), by shaping populism into a kind of 'internal periphery of democratic politics', or by spreading authoritarian tendencies at a mass level (Arditi 2004: 140–143).

Whether it is a stimulus or a threat, it is undeniable that the populist mentality finds fertile soil for growth within democracy, confirming the hypothesis that wherever there is political representation, populism is ubiquitous as a potential movement or a system of ideas that is suitable to be advocated by political movements (Taggart 2000: 115–116). In other words, whoever is able to grasp populism's effective coordinates is able to measure the empirical extent, which is currently particularly wide, of phenomena that refer to it. The possibility of verifying the extent to which this potentially ubiquitous phenomena has currently materialized in today's democratic politics, as well as to deny the alleged (and overrated) abstract intangibility of the concept of populism, might be a first step to get out of 'the Cinderella complex', by providing points of reference that are not excessively rigid in the analysis of the manifestations of populism in the political framework without succumbing to the temptation to use the word indiscriminately.

Footnotes:

1. There is almost no country in which the populist traces have not yet been detected.
2. Most scholars tend to date its origin to the late 19th century by identifying its prototypes in the People's Party in the USA and in the Russian *narodnichestvo*. The quest for its historical roots led other scholars to even consider the medieval peasant revolts as 'proto-populist' (An example of this extensive chronologic use is provided by Worsley 1969).
3. Many of whose writings have appeared under the pseudonym of Ludovico Garruccio, until then the author has practiced the profession of diplomacy.
4. Quattrocchi-Woisson considers nationalism, anti-imperialism, a preference for social justice in relation to individual liberties, and an integration of the masses as characteristic features of Latin American populist governments.
5. Here the author refers to Freeden (1998: 750).
6. Margaret Canovan refers to Freeden (1996).
7. The same authors explain their use of the word in these terms: 'To be clear, we understand ideology as a system of beliefs, values and ideas characteristics of a particular group […]. Used in this way, the term refers to belief systems whose function is to explain why things are as they are by providing an interpretative framework through which individuals and/or organizations make sense of their own experiences, relate to the external world and plan the future' (Albertazzi, McDonnell 2008: 11, n. 1).
8. On the 'trans-doctrinarian' character of populism, see also Şandru (2013: 53–83).

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