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# Populism: A Controversial Historiographical Category

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**Abstract:** The note stems from the need to carry out a survey on recent international literature dedicated to populism, starting above all from the considerations contained in *The Populist Temptation* by Eichengreen, and in *From Fascism to Populism in History* by Finchelstein, as well as the results from the *Oxford Handbook of Populism*, edited by Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo and Ostiguy. The contrasting reflections recorded around a phenomenon so debated allow to delineate the elements, that justify the introduction of a historiographical category in its own right and to project some definitions on the entire history of the Italian political system. The intention of this overview is to construct a catalog of the various interpretations of populism that have emerged in recent years. It is noteworthy that in the years following World War II until the present day, publications on populism have been produced in a discontinuous fashion, thus rendering the subject even more elusive and unclassifiable.

**Keywords:** populism, historiography, political parties, political system, democracy, crisis.

## 1. A Fertile Field of Research

An analysis on the of studies published in academic journals reveals that the use of the term “populism” has increased nearly tenfold in the period from 2014 to 2017. In fact, “populism” was declared the “word of the year” by *Cambridge Dictionary* in 2017.<sup>1</sup> The increasing diffusion of this lemma necessitates an overview of the recent international publications dedicated to the phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> The intention of this overview is to construct a catalog of the various interpretations of populism that have emerged in recent years. It is noteworthy that in the years following World War II until the present day, publications on populism have been

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<sup>1</sup> The data is confirmed by a survey on the *Timestamped JSI web corpus*, which examines a wide range of paper and online journals, not limited to widespread and quality papers. The analysis is limited to two languages (English and Italian) during the time span 2014-2017. The occurrences of the word *populism*, and its variants, in the English articles rose from 2.773 (2014) to 26.992 (2017); while in Italian newspapers rose from 904 (2014) to 7,724 (2017). This is a small increase in purely quantitative terms, but a very substantial one in relative terms.

<sup>2</sup> P. Worsley, *The Concept of Populism*, in *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, by G. Ionescu, E. Gellner, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969, pp. 212-50, cit. a p. 247.

produced in a discontinuous fashion, thus rendering the subject even more elusive and unclassifiable.<sup>3</sup>

In particular, through a study of articles that include “populist/populism” in their titles, the interest in the subject increased notably beginning in the 1950s while it had been previously considered a simple variety of political cultures. In essence, it has been noted how the phenomenon in its different forms, was frequently studied due to the policies enacted in Latin American countries to deal with widespread social problems. In the same period, however, populism was largely neglected by scholars in more consolidated democratic contexts such as the United States and Western Europe.<sup>4</sup> After a period of stasis, comprised of the 1970s and 1980s, the number of articles on populism soared in the 1990s as political scientists sought to describe changes in the political systems of Eastern European countries on the path toward democratization.<sup>5</sup>

During the last decade, studies on populism have flourished due to the space gained in public opinion through new means of mass communication. The more recent contributions to the field have combined the traditional conceptual approach, typical of social science and historical research, with a methodology associated with the cognitive and linguistic disciplines. This combination has had the effect of creating a stronger tie to factuality and represents a major turning point.<sup>6</sup> In short, while populism has been acknowledged as a polysemous term, a transition, or liberation, has occurred from the long-held acceptance of the phenomenon’s significance in terms of its negative valence aimed at delegitimizing the political sphere.<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, it is not surprising that even those who shared this long-held acceptance agree that the term requires a reformulation and a different contextualization. Despite the abundance of publications concerning the classification of different populisms, there lacks a timely analysis of the contexts and the requirements that effectively establish the presence of a movement which can be labeled as populist. This problem has been tackled recently by Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo, and Ostiguy in the recent publication *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* which contains the contributions of more than 40 social scientists united in the objective of updating the state of the art of the phenomenon, given the pro-

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3 M. Roodujn, *State of field: How to study populism and adjacent topics? A plea for both more and less focus*, in «European Journal of Political Research», 58 (1) 2018, pp. 362-72.

4 B. Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism. Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2016, pp. 12-7.

5 *Populism. An Overview of the Concept and the State of the Art*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Ed. C. R. Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, P. Ostiguy, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 9-14.

6 See B. Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism. Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, cit., pp. 70-94; G. Mazzoleni, *Media e populismo: un ambiguo connubio*, «Comunicazione politica», 2003 (2), pp. 134-5.

7 L. Zanatta, *Il populismo: una moda o un concetto?*, «Ricerche di Storia Politica», VII (3) 2004, pp. 329-33.

found evolution confirmed by the consistent case studies of the past twenty years. This wide-reaching investigation succeeds in demonstrating the crisis of long-held elements considered emblematic of populism such as popular sovereignty, the principle of majority rule, the refusal of constitutional order, and the idea of the “people”. The key to the volume’s success, however, is the linking of abstract conceptualization to the following elements: a diachronic analysis of the cyclical manifestations of the phenomenon, the contextualization with the present issues in the political order in which it manifests, and, finally, a comparison with the ideological currents held to be similar (fascism and nationalism).<sup>8</sup> From the research presented in the Oxford Handbook, a dominant interpretation emerges in which populism is perceived as an ideology even though it does not possess the classic traits as its heritage of values largely springs forth from the organization of society based on two categorical antagonists: the establishment, understood as the elite, and the collective, identified as the expression of the general will of the people.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, it is paradoxical that in the United States, the fatherland of the social sciences, the possible contamination of political debate by populism was vastly underestimated. It is sufficient to note that from 1990 to 2015 the 14 major American journals of political science traced the genesis of the populisms present in Western Europe through a reductive analysis of the crisis of political party organizations with a strong ideological imprint and the traditional majority/minority dynamic of parliamentary systems. Therefore, the rise of Donald Trump surprised an entire gamut of intellectuals who had confined populist apparitions overseas, classifying them as a repeat of the authoritarianism of the 1930s which had been brought on by the effects of a severe economic crisis. It is for this reason that Barry Eichengreen in, *The Populist Temptation*, traces the causes of the lingering populist protest, disorganized and antidemocratic, in the combination among the crisis of social welfare systems and the effects of globalization.<sup>10</sup>

Eichengreen’s understanding allows for an easier comparison between the destinies of the United States and Europe and obligates Americans to seriously reflect on the durability of their own democratic institutions due to the possible populist contagion. After all, even the recent studies that prioritize the analysis of political language and the ideological content of populist movements underline the frequent convergences that have yielded a growing assimilation between the American and European political and social systems. It is in the strategies of communication

<sup>8</sup> C. Mudde, *Populism. An Ideational Approach*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, cit., pp. 27-47.

<sup>9</sup> F. Panizza, *Populism and Identification*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, pp. 407-425.

<sup>10</sup> B. Eichengreen, *The Populist Temptation. Economic Grievance and Political Reaction in the Modern Era*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 131.

that the closest ties have been observed, dating back to the moment that the phenomenon of disintermediation spread in Europe as well as the rise of strong political leadership capable of gathering widespread, though mostly disorganized, support.<sup>11</sup> This trend, which combines the construction of a direct link between the leader and the crowd with the gradual substitution of the traditional representative filter of political parties, associations and intermediate bodies, which came to be known as a traditional element of American politics during the Cold War parties serves largely as “electoral vehicles”. According to Weyland, it is possible to identify the progressive “heterogeneity and apathy” of civil society that becomes increasingly identified with the teleological gifts of the charismatic leader as one of the prerequisites for the emergence of populism.<sup>12</sup> This interpretation returns frequently in the Oxford volume although the consideration of a strong leadership does not consent the inclusion of totalitarian dictatorships among the populisms. Rigid and inflexible ideological fervor prevails in the former group while populism is based on opportunism and ductility in addition to the secondary adoption of characteristics and strategies of other ideologies. The extreme right parties and movements rigorously examined in Jens Rydgren’s *Handbook of The Radical Right* can thus be excluded from the populist category. Consequently, it is possible to widen the cross-sector study by shifting from a theoretical investigation to empirical research as a means of valorizing the convergences that have emerged in trans-continental politics and by comparing the similarities between the notion of populism of European origin and that which has traditionally emerged from the Latin-American model.<sup>13</sup>

These rigorous efforts to classify populism have made a frequent comparison to historical experiences such as Italian Fascism or German National Socialism which, beyond claiming the purity of the population, theorized and practiced a despotism on a vast scale that was specifically based on ideological and ethnic homogeneity.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, we find leaders and parties invariably classified among populisms, or among the group of parties of the far right, due to a few shared characteristics such as the demonization of the adversary, the palingenetic mission or

<sup>11</sup> See K. Weyland, *A Political-Strategic Approach*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, pp. 87-102, cit., p. 89; D.J. Green, *Third Party Matters: Politics, Presidents, and Third Parties in American History*, Santa Barbara, Praeger, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> K. Weyland, *A Political-Strategic Approach*, cit., pp. 90-91.

<sup>13</sup> L. Zanatta, *Il populismo in America Latina. Il volto moderno di un immaginario antico*, in «Filosofia Politica», XVIII (3) 2004, pp. 377-389, cfr. pp. 383-5; Id., *Il populismo*, Roma, Carocci, 2013, cfr. pp. 122-6.

<sup>14</sup> B. Eichengreen, *The Populist Temptation. Economic Grievance and Political Reaction in the Modern Era*, cit., pp. 117-130; K. Hawkins, *Populism and the 2016 U.S. presidential election in comparative perspective*, in *Symposium: Populism in Comparative Perspective*, by M. Golder and S. Golder, «Comparative Politics», 26 (2) 2016, pp. 91-97.

heroic political action (Eisenhower, Thatcher, Merkel).<sup>15</sup> In a few circumstances, the weak historical linkage presents the potential risk of blurring the lines between a multifaceted category like populism and forms of government such as democracy and authoritarianism, while acknowledging that the phenomenon, at its outer limits, borders the latter two. It is the study of the narrative style that brings this overly linear comparison between epochs and contexts that are largely inhomogeneous. This is the risk highlighted by Finchelstein who considers the search for a definition to be a secondary objective, above all when one attempts to compare such an elusive phenomenon to fascism. The overlapping of political trajectories leads to us to forget that the explicit objective of populism is to project upon a disintegrating collective the idea of a “non-popolo”. Of course, this is a consideration that is closely associated to the Latin-American context, given the profound knowledge of that sector by the Argentine author who has concentrated his attention on movements definable as *left-populism* (Evo Morales) or *neoclassic-populism* (Peronism and Getulism). Morales notes that these movements have not truly contaminated the democratic order in which they are situated, differently than their political opponents who have proposed a neoliberal and repressive agenda.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. A Difficult Definition: Between Ideology and Style of Communication

All of the recent studies on populism have demonstrated an awareness of having to deal with an extremely elusive definition given that the term is one of most widely debated issues today in political science. Due to this uncertainty, a few scholars have refused the essence of the concept, while others utilize it without indicating a precise connotation. Often labeled as populists are leaders, movements, strategies of communication, political speech, language and a political-narrative modality.<sup>17</sup>

The pioneering works of Ionescu and Gellner, and later, of MacRae, provide a generic classification of populism, beginning with the presupposition that it is an ideology limited to political psychology and a subcategory of nationalism and socialism. A few years later, Pasquino observed that the use of the term “popu-

<sup>15</sup> R. Eatwell, *Charisma and the Radical Right*, in *The Oxford Handbook of The Radical Right*, by J. Rydgren, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 367-75.

<sup>16</sup> F. Finchelstein, *Introduction: Thinking Fascism and Populism in Terms of the Past*, in *From Fascism to Populism in History*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2017, pp. 1-30 (*Del fascismo al populismo en la historia*, Taurus, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> L. Scuccimarra, *Democrazia e populismo. un itinerario storico-concettuale*, in *La democrazia liberale e i suoi critici*, Ed. C. Calabrò and M. Lenci, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 2017, pp. 269-70; on populism as “political discourse”, see E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London, Verso, 2005; and D. Howarth, *Populism or Popular Democracy? The UDF, Workerism and the Struggle for Radical Democracy in South Africa*, in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, by Francisco Panizza, London, Verso, 2005, 202-23; B. Moffitt, S. Tormey, *Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatization and Political Style*, in «Political Studies», 62 (2) 2014, pp. 381-97; M. Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, New York, Basic Books, 1995.



lism” alludes to a specific political style, to parties and movements with defined characteristics and even to a few political regimes. Therefore, while acknowledging populism as an ideological party, he labels it as “vague” and not amenable to a coherent doctrinal body because, like a paradigm, it is uniquely characterized by two cyclically recurring factors in contemporary political history, the supremacy of the people and the direct relationship between leader and the masses.<sup>18</sup> This conceptualization gained through reflection on the origin of the larger category of “people”, has been exploited by populists in modern times even though it does not align with the model of mass society as uniform and indistinct.<sup>19</sup> In effect, Canovan warns that the justification of popular legitimacy as the final authority is the most difficult challenge faced by democratic governments.<sup>20</sup> After all, these movements identify the innate virtues of the people as the origin of their political color and governing style although they prefer to identify themselves in contrast to their political competition. This is due to the populist ideological vision of society as divided into two homogenous and antagonist groups, “the pure people” and the “corrupt elite” and the assertion that politics must express the will of the people.<sup>21</sup> It is evident that this communicative expedient allows the populists to be accused of a demagogic use of popular legitimacy, as indicated by Tarchi, who sustains that populist rhetoric is drenched with flattering language due to the explicit desire of its practitioners to gain support through the use of misleading argumentation.<sup>22</sup>

The difficulty in summarizing the concept with a definition has permitted a few researchers to exempt themselves of the obligation to supply the coordinates in which the phenomenon can be enclosed, although this leads to the tendency of confusing populism with consolidated ideologies. According to Laclau, in order to avoid similar approximations, it is useful to deny the existence of an orthodox “populism” and accept the presence of a combination of heterogeneous situations that are rooted in the phenomenon.<sup>23</sup> Laclau’s contribution was later taken up and perfected by Taggart, who identifies the decisive ingredients for the success of

<sup>18</sup> D. MacRae, *Populism as an Ideology*, in *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, pp. 153-65; G. Pasquino, *Populismo*, in *Storia dell’America Latina*, by M. Carmagnani, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1979, cfr. pp. 285-99.

<sup>19</sup> P.P. Portinaro, *Ethnos e Demos. Per una genealogia del populismo*, in «Meridiana», 77 2013, pp. 57-65.

<sup>20</sup> M. Canovan, *Trust the People! Populism and the two faces of democracy*, in «Political Studies», 47 (1) 1999, pp. 2-16; Id., *Taking politics to the people: populism as an ideology of democracy*, in *Democracies and the populist challenge*, Eds. Y. Meny, Y. Surel, New York, Plagrave, 2002, pp. 25-44.

<sup>21</sup> See P. A. Taguieff, *L’illusione populista*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2003, p. 44 (*L’illusione populiste*, Paris, Berg International Édit., 2002); C. Mudde, *The Populist Zeitgeist*, in «Government and Opposition», 39 (4) 2004, pp. 541-63; and *Twenty-first Century Populism: the Spectre of Western European Democracy*, Eds. D. Albertazzi, D. McDonnell, London and NY, Palgrave Mac Millan, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> M. Tarchi, *L’Italia populista. Dal qualunquismo ai girotondi*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2003, pp. 47-57.

<sup>23</sup> E. Laclau, *Politics and Ideologies in Marxist Theory*, London, New Left Books, 1977, p. 143.

populism in its deep contrasting valence with social and economic changes and its opposition to the power of a consolidated élite.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the populisms usually campaign against liberalism, modernization, industrialization, and social differences. This allows them, in turn, to gain popularity through the nostalgic defense of a mythological community and local identity which are threatened by globalization.

Meny and Surel on the other hand believe that populism's origin coincides above all with the widely held perception of crisis which justifies hostility toward representative systems, although this distinctive aspect is opportunistically labeled as an essentially chameleonic quality because it appears in different shades and accentuation depending on the context in which the populist movements develops.<sup>25</sup> Many political scientists and philosophers agree with this interpretation which has recently been highlighted in *Democrazia Avvelenata*, which identifies the pathological state of democratic governments as the fundamental element in the rise of populism.<sup>26</sup> These observations, while satisfying the accepted rules of their respective disciplines, are limited by their characterization of populism as an abstract phenomenon while, it must be noted, that Janssen has partially extricated himself from this category by presenting the criteria of "populist mobilization": an examination of the rhetoric and of the promises of the movements classified as populist. This approach, instead of creating a new definition, attempts to quantify the level of populism present in any "political project", as seen in the capacity of the single leader to create a lasting and widespread bond with the marginalized social sectors of the political system or in the expression of a political action based on an anti-élite and/or nationalist strategy of communication.<sup>27</sup> This opens an undefined area of research due to its use of linguistics and pragmatism but is indispensable if we concentrate on a political speech or on strategies for controlling a political narrative that are at the base of the populist message.<sup>28</sup>

Completely different is the approach which focuses its analysis on the ideas and patrimonial values of populism. In effect, this school of thought positions the research in a setting which deals with moral authority as the deciding factor in order to confer ideological fervor to any political culture, therefore encompassing populist movements. This approach is not wholly accepted as Mudde and Kaltwas-

<sup>24</sup> P. Taggart, *Populism*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 2000, p. 100.

<sup>25</sup> Y. Meny, Y. Surel, *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002, p. 6; P. Taggart, *Populism*, Philadelphia, Open University Press, 2000, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> See D. Antiseri, E. Di Nuoscio, F. Felice, *Democrazia avvelenata*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> R. Jansen, *Populist mobilization: a new theoretical approach to populism*, in «Sociological Theory», 29 (2) 2011, pp. 75-96.

<sup>28</sup> G. Antonelli, *Volgare eloquenza. Come le parole hanno paralizzato la politica*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2017, pp. 80-96.

ser utilize a subcategory and divide the ideologies in “thick” or “thin”. The “thick” is known for its generalist character capable of supplying rigid positions on any issue of social-economic or institutional nature whereas the “thin” is characterized by a leadership tied to flexible contingencies and temporal expediency.<sup>29</sup> This approach has produced a few studies that note the similarities between far right and populist parties especially when the latter accentuate an emphasis on ethnicity and nationalism. In fact, according to Rydgren, the assembly of elements such as xenophobia, monoculture, and anti-elitism tied to peculiar values of nationalist political culture such as order and family, constitute the natural synthesis between populist strategy and the claim of the so-called “radical contemporary right”.<sup>30</sup> Still, the mere contraposition is not a sufficient prerequisite for defining populism as an ideology along the lines of socialism or nationalism that respectively claim the class struggle or the idea of the nation as a means of creating a fracture between the elite and the masses. Consequently, the litmus paper which separates the people from the elite presents morality as the decisive cause of the crisis of legitimacy suffered by the institutions (including independent and/or technocratic institutions). At its core, this is the populist temptation which is capable of undermining even the most solid democratic contexts. This is why the Californian author, while starting with an analysis of the United States, shifts his attention to the European Union and to the period of time stretching from the Greek crisis to the present day, thus managing to find parallels between the economic crisis of 1929 and the effects on European financial institutions in the interwar period. In this way it is possible to notice an overlapping between the historiographical category of fascism and populism: with the past manifestations of authoritarian movements corresponding to the diffusion of populist formations today.<sup>31</sup> In fact, a worrying rise of the disadvantaged social groups and the presence of political actors who denounce the inefficiency of social welfare systems and the entire institutional structure that governs the existence of representative democracies are common factors of both populism and fascism. This analysis is primarily focused on aspects of macroeconomic character, and in some circumstances, a government’s resort to emergency social welfare programs results in the same simplifications attributed to the populist movements. Nonetheless, the diachronic interpretation offers a persuasive continuous picture of the correlation between grave crisis tied to the productive cycle and varying antagonistic manifestations.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> C. Mudde, C.R. Kaltwasser, *Populism*, in *Oxford Handbook on Political Ideologies*, by M. Freeden, M. Stears, L.T. Sargent, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 493-512.

<sup>30</sup> J. Rydgren, *The Radical Right. An Introduction*, in *The Oxford Handbook of The Radical Right*, cit., pp. 24-41.

<sup>31</sup> B. Eichengreen, *The populist Temptation*, cit., pp. 163-77.

<sup>32</sup> Ivi, pp. 59-87.

The most widely held view traces the success of the populisms to the growing disenchantment toward the political parties in their function as intermediary bodies between the citizen and the institutions. It is important to note that this is only a recent observation. In fact, until recently, there was a deep separation between the study of populisms and that of political organizations, even though the populist formations are comparable in all aspects to parties. In reality, the fear of challenging a paradox is the reason why this formal distinction has endured: the success of political actors considered anti-system has historically been based on their refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the representative institutions that have permitted their own rise to prominence and the disintegration of the intermediary bodies. Consequently, classifying populism as part of the “movement dimension” instead of a form of party has shifted attention to political language and tribunal rhetoric, with the subsequent risk of attributing a populist dimension to all the parties of the far right born well before the end of the twentieth century (Northern League, Forza Nuova, and Freedom Party of Austria).<sup>33</sup>

In this regard, to avert the construction of a model that indistinctly groups populism and radicalisms, it is use to apply Schumpeter’s concept of “creative destruction” to party systems. With the premise that the political space occupied by the establishment is undermined by those who believe they can better represent working class demands, one prospects the contraposition between antithetical orders: the oligarchic democracy versus the inclusive democracy of the masses. This would be, of course, a necessary condition that justifies the rise of populism in the event that the populism had not been born in an historical context comparable to the process of the consolidation of democratic structures (as in the phase of universal enfranchisement),<sup>34</sup> or in a deep systemic crisis (such as the end of the First World War in Europe) when a multitude of social groups lacking political awareness were thrown into the electoral arena.<sup>35</sup> *Mutatis mutandis*, the real political struggle, despite the apparent solidity of the international equilibrium and of mass democracy, presents the following factors: the rampant crisis of the party system which had traditionally been delegated with presenting the institutions to

<sup>33</sup> Y. Meny, Y. Surel, *Populismo e democrazia*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2004, pp. 237-58.

<sup>34</sup> On the considerations on party systems during the phases of enlargement of the electoral body, see S.M. Lipset, S. Rokkan, *Cleaveages structures, party systems, and voter alignments: an introduction*, in *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives*, Eds. S. M. Lipset, S. Rokkan, New York, Free Press, 1967, pp. 1-64; topicality, see K. Roberts, *Populism and political Parties*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, cit., pp. 404-9.

<sup>35</sup> On the Italian case, see A. Baravelli, *Il nemico nelle campagne elettorali italiane del primo dopo guerra*, in *Il nemico in politica. La delegittimazione dell'avversario nell'Europa contemporanea*, by F. Cammarano and S. Cavazza, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2010, pp. 103-19; on the relationship between masses and politics in the phase precedes the enlargement of the electoral right, see M. Pignotti, *La moltitudine apolitica. Culture politiche e voto alle masse in età giolittiana (1904-1913)*, Firenze, Le Monnier, 2017.

the society and the emphatic deifying of popular will, the pathology of which has prompted Lazar and Diamanti to label the populism phenomenon with the neologism *popolocrazia*.<sup>36</sup>

### 3. A Privileged Observatory: the Italian Political System

If the study of a term characterized by an intrinsic multidimensionality leads us to believe that a multidisciplinary approach is the best way to reach a synthesis that favors comparison, it is likewise opportune to verify the possibility of describing “populism” as an historiographical category via a diachronic analysis of the phenomenon. The urgency of supplying a more concrete definition has become increasingly apparent due to the current public debate which makes use of certain concepts that have been consigned to the past and distorts long-established concepts such as the idea of democracy and of the nation.<sup>37</sup> Given this premise, historians such as Zanatta have felt the need to participate in the debate alongside the social sciences in order to create a category that can stand by itself, due to populism’s durability over time and its multiform manifestations.<sup>38</sup> By shelving the need to supply a formal definition, use of the historical method could bring forth a fresh perspective to the concept, instead of following the objective of creating a populist model which is deprived of many of its characteristic facets depending on the political context.<sup>39</sup> Along these lines, Galli della Loggia has tasked historians with the retrospective investigation of the initial requirements of the phenomenon given that its deeper roots are traceable in traditional parties, political systems and strategies of communication that all precede the post-ideological period. Until now, the failure to backdate the term and its scarce perception throughout the twentieth century have been justified by the electoral success of parties generically labeled as “populist” due to the particularities inevitably assigned to them: the presence of a political mobilization strategy based on the contraposition of the masses and the elite, distrust in the mechanisms that govern the relationship between citizen and representative and, finally, the absence of a solid ideological base. According to this layout, it has been possible to identify a few movements of populist origin in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War that had previously been labeled anti-systemic such as Uomo Qualunque in Italy and Poujadism in France.

<sup>36</sup> I. Diamanti, M. Lazar, *Popolocrazia. La metamorfosi delle nostre democrazie*, Bari, Laterza, 2018, pp. 7-10.

<sup>37</sup> L. Scuccimarra, *Democrazia e populismo. un itinerario storico-concettuale*, in *La democrazia liberale e i suoi critici*, cit., p. 274.

<sup>38</sup> C. Chini, S. Moroni, *Introduction*, in *Populism. A Historiographic Category?*, Eds. C. Chini and S. Moroni, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018, pp. 2-6; L. Zanatta, *Il populismo come concetto e come categoria storiografica*, in *Il mondo visto dall’Italia*, by A. Giovagnoli, G. Del Zanna, Milano, Gueriniani e Associati, 2004, pp. 195-207.

<sup>39</sup> P. Rosanvallon, *Il Politico. Storia di un concetto*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2005, p. 15.

In the 1960s, the phenomenon was reborn again in Western Europe due to the presence of protest and anti-parliamentary movements considered to be outside of the area of constitutional legitimacy. In Italy, Switzerland, Denmark, Sweden, and Belgium these apparitions proved to be sporadic and were rapidly reabsorbed by the existing party system. On the other hand, the National Front in France, born in 1972, became the only anti-system movement capable of establishing strong roots in the society. In later years, new movements of anti-systemic origin thrust themselves into the public debate by presenting the issue of Euro-scepticism as a criticism of the widespread poverty produced by the directives imposed by the European Union. The severe economic crisis has strengthened the appeal of alternative political recipes that constitute the prototype of populist recipes, although such agendas present different objectives and means of achieving them. For example, it is useful to consider nativism (ethno-populism) as a dividing element among different populist movements; while the same movements, often on opposite ends of the political spectrum, such as FPÖ, Alternative für Deutschland, Lega, Swedish Democrats, Podemos, Syriza, are linked by a shared anti-establishment nature as evidenced by their opposition to the rules enforced by the European Union.<sup>40</sup> As a means of escaping from this indistinct and tangled mess, Priester proposes to classify the populisms by subdividing them into right and left-wing populism depending on the issues they promote. Therefore, the Five Star Movement is in part associated with left-wing populism along the lines of Podemos and the Lega is linked to the Hungarian Fidesv.<sup>41</sup> Still, it remains quite difficult to catalog the movement formed by Umberto Bossi in the early 1980s as evidenced by Brumazzo who notes that the Lega is the oldest party of the so-called Second Republic. In fact, the inclusion of the Lega on the inside of the populist universe does not correspond to its long-term presence in governments throughout the past 25 years. For these reasons, the Lega is catalogued by many scholars as polyhedric in nature because it synthesizes the tension of political protest with the assumption of political office both at the local and national level, even though the party largely adopts a typical populist communicative strategy.<sup>42</sup>

Beyond the individual cases, the Italian political system, both in diachronic and analytic terms, supplies a wide range of populist expressions and movements

<sup>40</sup> M. Rooduijn, *What unites the Voter Bases of Populist Parties? Comparing the Electorates of 15 Populist Parties*, in «European Political Science Review», 2017, 10, 3, pp. 351-68.

<sup>41</sup> K. Priester, *Right-wing Populism in Europe, in Populism, Populists, and the Crisis of Political Parties. A Comparison of Italy, Austria, and Germany 1990-2015*, Eds. G. Pallaver, M. Gehler, M. Cau, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2018, pp. 45-60.

<sup>42</sup> See M. Brumazzo, *The Northern League: Bossi, Salvini, and the Many Faces of Populism*, in *Ibidem*, pp. 142-147; G. Bulli, F. Tronconi, *Regionalism, Right-wing Extremism, Populism*, in *Mapping the Far Right in Contemporary Europe. Local, National, Comparative, Transnational*, by A. Mammone, E. Godin, B. Jenkins, London, Routledge, 2012, pp. 78-92.

dating back to the years immediately following the First World War such as the exaltation of the year 1919 as the birth of fascism (*diciannovismo*). In fact, in 1919 both the Fascist movement and the maximalist socialists made use of populism.<sup>43</sup> Italy, therefore, is a privileged observatory in which to chronicle the resurgence of anti-political and anti-parliamentary movements which occurred dating back to the age of Giolitti and continued through the advent of fascism, the period of the Constituent Assembly until the present day.<sup>44</sup> Again, it is possible to work through subtraction, by identifying as a root cause of populism throughout the past hundred years as the political system's lack of familiarity with liberalism and respect for individual rights and liberties. After all, according to Orsina, the adoption of a democratic form of government by Italy and a few other European countries in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War was based on utilitarianism instead of principle.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, democracy became the hegemonic form of government in Europe as a result of the persuasive hardships brought by the catastrophic conflict and the subsequent newfound economic prosperity. Not surprisingly, in some cases the contrived democratic systems remained largely ineffective.

It must be emphasized that the various studies dedicated to the political system of the Italian Republic have not associated the elusive and all-including term of populism to such a rigid and monolithic concept such as ideology, so it is more appropriate to focus on the narrative style although this can result in a sort of counterfeiting of the values belonging to other political families. At the same time, the Italian political system has often been the subject of specious comparison in studies dedicated to populism given that the majority of the formations that have been considered anti-political by conditioned reflex are considered inevitably of nationalist or fascist origin.<sup>46</sup> In these circumstances, the automatic linking between fascism and populism tends to emphasize the assumption of an authoritarian and/or racist political style or of a demagogic communicative strategy.<sup>47</sup> A more substantive approach is needed, however, given that populism exists in the present day in continuous evolution yet is compared to a completed historical period. This interpretative oversight is common to many studies that facilitate the comparison between models that are assimilable for their past, because it allows the possibil-

<sup>43</sup> E. Galli della Loggia, *Populismo senza qualità*, «Corriere della Sera», 10 dicembre 2018, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> E. De Giorgi, *L'opposizione parlamentare in Italia. Dall'antiberlusconismo all'antipolitica*, Roma, Carocci, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> G. Orsina, *La democrazia del narcisismo. Breve storia dell'antipolitica*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2018, pp. 40-9.

<sup>46</sup> A. Mammone, *The Eternal Return? Faux Populism and Contemporarization of Neo-fascism across Britain, France and Italy*, in «Journal of Contemporary European Studies», 17 (2) 2009, pp. 171-92; M. Caiani, D. Della Porta, *The Elitist Populism and the Extreme Right: a Frame Analysis of Extreme Right-wing Discourses in Italy and Germany*, in «Acta Politica», 46 (2) 2011, pp. 180-202.

<sup>47</sup> R. Eatwell, *Populism and Fascism*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, cit., pp. 510-3.

ity to trace the common dictatorial experience back to a political and social fabric ripe for the formation of populist movements inside the traditional parties.<sup>48</sup> As noted by Finchelstein, this often presents the risk of overlapping the totalitarian ideologies and populism, while ignoring that the success of modern populisms is frequently accompanied by characteristics typical of opposition to governing majorities and of anti-authoritarian politics.<sup>49</sup>

For this reason, especially when one rereads Italian political history through the filter of the populist category, it is useful to trace the typical elements that cyclically mark the crisis of stability which comes to afflict the constitutional order, without, hearkening back dogmatically to the previous fascist experience. This interpretation of institutional character presumes an endemic weakness of the Italian political system that was inserted into the new European order immediate aftermath of the Second World War for the sole reasons of respect for the fundamental individual freedoms and eventual NATO membership instead of a consolidated adherence to liberty and democratic values. Consequently, the entire Republican period is characterized by cyclical anti-political and anti-systemic forces that place the entire state apparatus in a constant crisis of legitimacy which lead to similarly pathological practices such as the pervasive presence of parties in the public sphere and diffusion of the unhealthy practice of patronage.<sup>50</sup>

Likewise, the examination of different kinds of communication adopted throughout the history of Italian political debate reveals a constant use of one of the archetypes of populist strategy: demonization of the adversary through the identification of the antagonist as an enemy. In this way, the level of contraposition present in the society is accentuated with the introduction of clauses that prevent the natural alternation between the opposing political forces such as antifascism, anti-antifascism, and anticommunism. At the same time, at the institutional level, elements designed to delegitimize the institutional order such as antiparty and anti-parliamentary rhetoric are used. In Italy, the adoption of an opposition strategy is traditionally based on the theoretical approach coined by the cultured Giuseppe Maranini, whose ideas were translated into political practice by Guglielmo Giannini and the monarchist party leader Achille Lauro.<sup>51</sup> Both Giannini and Lauro

<sup>48</sup> G. Pallaver, M. Gehler, M. Cau, *Introduction in Populism, Populists, and the Crisis of Political Parties. A Comparison of Italy, Austria, and Germany 1990-2015*, cit., pp. 9-14. On the concept of fascism as an "eternal" phenomenon in relation to the spread of populist parties, see U. Eco, *Il fascismo eterno*, Milano, La Nave di Teseo, 2018.

<sup>49</sup> E. Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History*, cit., pp. 98-174.

<sup>50</sup> G. Orsina, *La democrazia del narcisismo. Breve storia dell'antipolitica*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2018, pp. 110-118.

<sup>51</sup> M. Cocco, *Who's John Doe? The Roots of 'Qualunquismo' and the Populistic Protest of the Middle Class in Postwar-Italy*, in *Populism. A Historiographic Category?*, pp. 79-96; Id., *Qualunquismo. Una storia politica e culturale dell'Uomo Qualunque*, Firenze, Le Monnier, 2018; on Achille Lauro, see M. Tarchi, *L'Italia populista*, pp. 195-203.



are both held as examples of anti-politics presented in an eccentric, caricatured fashion. This brand of politics was later reformulated by part of the establishment party Christian Democrats as demonstrated by leadership of Amintore Fanfani in which the population was identified as a holistic collective and the party as an all-encompassing organization. This rather cryptic transition does not escape the eye of Lupo who confirms the versatile nature of anti-political and populist groups in the Italian Republic.<sup>52</sup> From that point forward, Italian political debate has witnessed frequent manifestations of populism capable of surviving inside the traditional political parties and institutional order. Some examples are the unscrupulous use of expressions such as: “silent majority”, “people”, and “man on the street” whereas others occur through the use of the label “populist” by daily newspapers without explaining the real meaning of the term.<sup>53</sup> This is significant in that the newspapers function as an intermediate body between the society and institutions such as political parties, labor unions, and the men and women holding positions in those institutions. The indistinct use of the term populism is often the result of a rhetorical exercise that has overlapped distinct concepts such as **partitocrazia**, antipolitics, demagoguery but has also contributed in designing an “imaginary populist” beginning with the 1970s.

Italian political history, in fact, supplies a consistent sequence of chameleonic expressions traceable for different reasons to populism without necessarily belonging to the anti-political space. In this sense, the mobilization of Italian business sectors in the 1950s, influenced by Poujadism, arose out of the deep distrust of parties together with the desire to participate in elections by presenting candidates identifiable through their economic activity as a means of discrediting the “professionalization of politics”.<sup>54</sup> The later revolt of Reggio Calabria presents an emblematic union between populist narration and local identity that contributes to the widening of case studies which continue until the end of the First Republic where Leoluca Orlando’s Rete movement formed from a faction of the Christian Democrats, solidified by a charismatic leadership, appealed to the dynamism of the “civil society” to counterbalance the decadence of the political class.<sup>55</sup>

In conclusion, the analysis of the Italian context must not underestimate the correlation between strategies of communication and the advent of private broad-

<sup>52</sup> S. Lupo, *Partito e antipartito. Una storia politica della prima Repubblica (1946-1978)*, Roma, Donzelli, 2004, pp. 88-93; 111-3.

<sup>53</sup> See G. Sartori, *Il monito del Cile*, 3 novembre 1970, p. 1; A. Ronchey, *Un fantasma in Italia*, 3 settembre 1976, p. 1.

<sup>54</sup> D. Baviello, *Anti-political Communication of the Italian ‘Employers’ Associations in the Years of Poujadism*, in *Populism. A Historiographic Category?*, pp. 97-108.

<sup>55</sup> L. Ambrosi, *La rivolta di Reggio. Storia di territori, violenza e populismo 1970*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2009; D. Saresella, *Tra politica e antipolitica: la nuova «società civile» e il movimento della Rete (1985-1994)*, Firenze, Le Monnier Mondadori, 2016.

casting in which the institutional information is flanked and undermined by in-depth transmissions and/or entertainment where the political class and the masses are directly in contact, thus resulting in the dissolution of the usual filter represented by intermediate bodies. In this way, the political era of “pop” which served as an incubator for the populist style of communication.<sup>56</sup> The transformation of the communication and the growing media coverage of politics are not the only distinctive elements of Italian politics. Still, over the last twenty years these two factors mark the passage between the First and Second Republics and contributed decisively in the creation of the context in which new narrative strategies tied to the use of alternative media and the creation of a democracy based on “popular moods” could succeed.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> R. Brizzi, *Comunicare la politica in Italia nella transizione fra prima e seconda repubblica*, in *Parole sovrane e storia contemporanea in Italia e Germania*, by S. Cavazza and F. Triola, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2017, pp. 223-30.

<sup>57</sup> G. Pallaver, *Populism in the Mainstream Media*, in *Populism, Populists, and the Crisis of Political Parties. A Comparison of Italy, Austria, and Germany 1990-2015*, pp. 108-116; and see S. Cavazza, *Consumi, società e politica in Italia (1980-2000)*, in *L'Italia contemporanea dagli anni Ottanta a oggi*, vol. II, *Il mutamento sociale*, Eds. E. Asquer, E. Bernardi, C. Fumian, Roma, Carocci, 2014, pp. 211-26.

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