Interdisciplinary Researches on Populism, Accountability, and Active Citizenship
Main Research Paths

By Antonio Maria Baggio

1 Research topic

The research «Interdisciplinary research on active citizenship, accountability and populism» deals with populism in the context of contemporary political societies, that already have created institutions for elective political representation, societies that have a cultural framework that recognizes the idea of democracy as a reference value, and that are capable to put into practice a political and legal order that translates the idea of democracy into a coherent and effective system, guaranteeing the consent of the greater majority. The general theme of the research is therefore the relationship between democracy and populism and it requires an examination of the constituent elements of the two phenomena and of the relationship between them.

Despite the diversity existing between current populisms, political sciences reveal some common elements: the tendency to diminish the role of political representation with respect to forms of direct democracy, the centrality of the relationship between the "charismatic leader" and the part of citizenship supporting him, the idealization of "people" in such a way as to feed nationalist ideologies that undermine international agreements and reject processes of building supranational political entities. What are the effects of these phenomena on the instruments, rules and culture of democracy? The latter require citizens having a regulated and organized political participation, not only of the plebiscitary type, they also require careful limitation of powers and balance between them, as well as constant monitoring of the work of the people elected to public office, as opposed to the uncritical delegation to the leaders. To what extent do contemporary populisms undermine these fundamental principles of democracy? For what reasons they attracted such a strong support? How can we respond to the real needs that may be at the basis of populisms, without abandoning democratic principles, but rather finding a better application of them? This research addresses these problems through an interdisciplinary approach.

2 Define populism

The discussion conducted from 19th to 21st May 1967 at the London School of Economics[1], is a conventional reference point for the debate on populism. Its central theme was, paradoxically, defining populism. The difficulty arose from the disparity of movements and ideologies that, over the past two centuries, have been classified as forms of populism, from Herzen and Tolstoy, passing through fascism and communism, up to the student movements of the sixties. The time span taken into consideration extended from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, that is, the period during which democratic (or at least tending towards democracy) political societies took shape, consolidated, or went into crisis.

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[1] The event was organized by the review *Government and Opposition* in collaboration with the *Humanitarian Trust London.*

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Faced with this complex variety of phenomena related to populism, it is not surprising that Isaiah Berlin invented, during the London debate, the "Cinderella complex": every definition elaborated by a theory - and therefore also that of populism - is comparable to Cinderella's shoe: perfect in itself, it does not find in reality any foot that exactly matches it[2].

Despite this, Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner had managed to identify six "issues" or themes characterizing populism. It is true that in the fifty years following the London event, the phenomenology of populism has considerably expanded. But the same themes can be found within the most recent studies, albeit re-interpreted and inserted in the contemporary context[3]. It is therefore convenient to start from the introductory summary written by Ionescu and Gellner[4] and try to understand, point by point, the new challenges that the phenomenon presents today.

3 Ideology and / or movement?

First of all, is populism an ideology, a movement, or both? Among past and contemporary scholars there are those who emphasize one alternative or the other, and it is understood that, from an analytical point of view, the two things must be considered separately. But the observation of a populist phenomenon as a whole highlights, in the first half of the twentieth century as in the two decades of the 2000s, the mutually generative link between ideology and movement: populism produces a reading of reality that has the aim of inducing social groups to make choices (ideological factor) that can generate movements, which in turn reinforce ideology. All of this can happen independently of the truth or falsity of what ideology affirms, because a persuasive circle is created that produces its own narratives and that has nothing to do with the "factual truths", that is, with a common heritage of values and of experiences that allows people of different beliefs to be part of the same political community. Rewriting history by eliminating its founding facts, the truths shared by witnesses, is one of the means used to give a different orientation to the political community.

4 Factual truth, lies and accountability

The factual truths can also be concealed by means of the "manufacture of images of all sorts, in which, again, every known and established fact can be denied or neglected if it is likely to damage the image; in fact, unlike an old-fashioned portrait, an image is not made simply to improve reality, but to offer a complete substitute for it "[5]. Lying, Hannah Arendt pointed out, is a form of action. A populist movement, as ideological, lives the paradox of being able to do politics independently of

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2 Berlin did not deliver a text for the book that came out following the event. However, two files can be found in the "Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library", both named "To define populism"; the first transcribes Berlin's interventions: berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/bibliography/bib111bLSE.pdf; the second is the "verbatim" of the entire meeting: berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/bibliography/bib111b.pdf.

3 Mudde, Cas and Kaltwasser, Cristóbal R. (Edd.). *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012; Vallespín, Fernando - Bascuñán, Máriam M. *Populismos*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial 2017; Kaltwasser, Cristóbal R. - Taggart, Paul - Ochoa Espejo, Paulina - Ostiguy, Pierre (Edd.). *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017; Tarchi, Marco (Ed.). *Anatomia del populismo*. Napoli: Diana Edizioni, 2019.

4 Ionescu, Ghita and Gellner, Ernest. (Edd.), *Populism, Its Meaning and National Characteristics*. New York: The McMillan Company, 1969 (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969): 1-5.

reality; for this reason, it cannot accept to report to an external judge, but seeks only the internal confirmation of the affiliates, considered as if they were "the people", that is the whole. From here, to the desire to unify the exercise of all powers, failing their necessary division and distribution among different competitors, the step is short.

From these considerations, we understand the choice, on the part of our research, to examine and compare these ideological forms that tend to be self-referring in the light of the principles of accountability, that is, the availability and the ability to "account" that characterizes the democratic idea of power and the exercise of public offices. The use of knowledge developed by business and organization sciences, and, in general, the wealth of thought and experience accumulated in the field of accountability by civil society subjects is also particularly fruitful.

5 Critique of representation

The second characterizing theme was identified by Ionescu and Gellner in populism intended as a sort of "recurrent mentality", which occurs in historical moments in which the "intermediate social factors", that is, the intermediate communities between individual and state, associations, social representations, the middle class itself, appear weak, or unable to perform their mediation function. It is a well-known situation, which we experienced in Europe after the First World War and was one of the factors that promoted the rise of Fascism and Nazism: multiplying the sense of distrust and disappointment towards parliamentary systems, populist organizations they cancel the role of mediators and propose themselves as the direct guarantor of popular interests. The first form of mediation that is regularly attacked by populisms in history is the most politically relevant: parliamentary representation. It is a recurring and dangerous phenomenon that we already notice in Napoleon III, who tried to establish a direct link between the one who held the power and the masses, bypassing the mechanisms of representation that democracy of his time had built: «The Bonapartist regime traced the first lines of an emerging corporatism. This plebiscite experiment based its demand for legitimacy precisely on the fact that it was a reaction to the parliamentary fragmentation of liberalism: it represented a government of action created to replace an inept regime based on oratory»[6].

Numerous phenomena have contributed, in the last fifty years, to the weakening of the image of political representatives in various democratic countries: widespread episodes of corruption, introduction of electoral laws imposing co-optation of the parliamentarian from above instead of free choice by the voters, theorizations tending to limit or eliminate the role of political representation, interpretation of the instruments of direct democracy and of those of representative democracy as an alternative between two antagonistic political systems, hiding their natural cooperation and complementarity (even in a competitive sense).

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[5] Hanna Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin Books, 1977: 247-248.

[6] Maier, Charles S. «"Vincoli fittizi... della ricchezza e del diritto": teoria e pratica della rappresentanza degli interessi». In Berger, Suzanne. *L'organizzazione degli interessi nell'Europa Occidentale. Pluralismo, corporativismo e la trasformazione della politica*. Bologna: il Mulino, 1983: 70-71.

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6 Political psychology and construction of the enemy

The third and fourth themes cooperate strongly with each other: populism can also be defined in terms of political psychology, as it spreads the feeling that there is a conspiracy against the people, coming from an external enemy, an international entity that has, within the country, its agents, that is, an internal enemy, which constitutes a despicable and impure element, against which fear is fueled and hatred is organized. Fear and hatred reinforce each other and form a circle that develops with its own strength. Today we know new experiences of "division of labor", or "distribution of tasks" for example between different populist forces of European countries, which underline most of one or the other of the two feelings / attitudes: one, for example, can stimulate hatred towards elites who are hopelessly profited and corrupt: bankers, politicians, entrepreneurs, officials of the European Union; the other may develop fear of external agents or considered as such: ethnic or religious minorities, even if, in reality, as in the case of people of Jewish religion in Europe, they have been part of the "real peoples" for centuries and millennia; or fear towards immigrants. The circle of reinforcement between fear and hatred, can strongly influence the political debate, both within a country and in a continental dimension, as happened in Europe.

7 The people-idol: populism and religion

Fifth element of the analysis, populism comes to constitute the image of an idealized, mythical and perfect people, often identified with only a part of the real people, interpreted as the only one that counts and that is worth saving. Ionescu and Gellner, mindful of the extreme experiences of the past Fascist and Nazi regimes, and of Socialist regimes of the Soviet area then in existence, spoke of "worship" of the people. In this sense, populism presents itself as a process of elaborating a fetish. The case analysis available fifty years ago had to do with regimes such as the Italian and German one, in which populisms, combined with strong ideologies and powerful material interests, imposed themselves and created dictatorships by exploiting the crises of weak democracies. In the era closest to us, however, we saw the populist ideological mechanism of departure from reality, at work within established democratic political regimes. With reference to contemporary situations, more than an "adored" people it seems correct to speak today of an "illusory people", as a product of persuasion mechanisms based on the systematic distortion of information implemented by populist parties, organizations and think tanks (in addition to that of sovereign states that can support the populist parties of another country) through the use of digital communication and social networks that did not exist in 1967[7]. However, the outcomes could be very similar. The research about "illusory people" is therefore also aimed at evaluating the risks of authoritarian involution and the possible threats to democracy with which contemporary populisms could become carriers[8].

Another aspect that needs to be considered today is the reciprocal aspect of the idea of the "adored people", that is, the "adoring people". The religious element has conquered a certain space in contemporary populisms, both in phenomena that can be correctly defined as fundamentalists, in cases where there is a desire to impose a confessional vision by the law; as in situations where

[7] O'Connor, Cailin and Wheatherall, James O. *The Misinformation Age. How False Beliefs Spread*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.

[8] Urbinati, Nadia. *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014.

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religious groups mobilize to directly support candidates in political elections; or in the form of exploitation of religious beliefs through the exhibition of their most popular symbols[9].

8 The ideological combinations of populism

Finally, it was observed that populism, understood as a "recurrent mentality", throughout history normally came to disappear, absorbed within stronger ideologies or movements. Ionescu and Gellner traced the possible processes of disappearance of populism to three general outcomes: socialism, nationalism and peasantism[10]. In a world context which, from a cultural, economic and political point of view is radically different from that of half a century ago, with which ideologies do they mix, towards which regimes do contemporary populisms tend? Certainly, a new analysis and adequate ability to predict developments, combinatorial skills and possible outcomes of populist phenomena is needed today.

9 The worldwide challenge of SARS-CoV-2

Research is taking place while the Covid-19 pandemic has involved all of humanity in a new challenge. As citizens, we observe the different ways in which different political regimes deal with the emergency. Institutions, cultural traditions, economic and legal systems, social and professional organizations, individual choices, international cooperation: all the subjects and elements that we have taken into consideration in the presentation of this research, and which constitute as many aspects and presences in associated life, are tested by the pandemic, experiment with new practices and new relationships with each other, discover resources and find previously unknown solutions. Research will accompany the evolution of this global challenge, trying to understand and evaluate new situations and perspectives. Particular attention requires the new grounds of confrontation and competition between authoritarian and democratic countries that the pandemic has opened, the forms of international collaboration and solidarity that will be put in place to react to the weakening of international governance pursued by some countries with populist guide, the initiatives that institutions and civil society will develop to counteract the growth of communicative manipulation through social media and ensure the correct formation of public opinion. The complexity of these phenomena makes precise specialist skills and intense interdisciplinary integration, necessary. And this is the methodology that guides the choice of authors and of themes that make up this research.

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9 Courau, Thierry-Marie – Abraham, Susan – Babi

, Mile (Edd.). «Populism and Religion». *Concilium. International Journal of Theology*, 2019/2.
10 Term with which we refer to the different forms of claims of the rural world against the city world, of farmers against legislators and the trusts of the food and distribution industry that impose laws and prices considered unfair.

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