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Populism and democracy: a reassessment

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ABSTRACT
Populism comes in so many forms, both historically and in its contemporary manifestations, that we cannot assess its relationship with democratic institutions as if it were homogeneous. In this article, we reconnect with the history of the first movements that have called themselves populists and draw on an understanding of populism as an egalitarian impulse against oligarchic tendencies, centred on anti-elitism and the defense of a democratic common sense. This genetic approach goes against the dominant definitions which tend to overstretch its range of application while assuming a form of anti-pluralism as part of its common features. Then, we draw attention to the diversity of conceptions of democracy within populist thought and practices and show that the types of democratic institutions favoured by populist movements, and their attitudes towards intermediary bodies, are highly contextual. Finally, we argue that populism's inherent ambiguities shed some doubt on its capacity to respond to the current challenges faced by representative institutions.

1. Introduction

If European political scientists were asked to list the most pressing threats to modern democracy today, populism would most of the time be included among the suspects. The recent nomination of a 'post-fascist' candidate at the head of the Italian government, one century after the March on Rome, would probably be cited as an example, just as the invasion of the US Capitol by Trump's fanatics would have been mentioned one year and a half earlier. During the past decades, the (mis)uses of the p-word have grown exponentially. The upward trend became even steeper in the 2010s, to the point that the Cambridge Dictionary proclaimed it 'word of the year' in 2017. The 'populist hype' (De Cleen & Glynos, 2021) seemed irresistible; the word was literally on everyone's lips.

At some point, the dominant discourse on populism turns into a blunt tautology: the more populism is defined as today's main challenge to democracy, the more everything that looks bad for democracy is mistaken for populism. The perceived severity of the threat, in turn, is mostly determined by the dubious historical antecedent it is compared to. At best, populism is mere Bonapartism (Rosanvallon, 2020): the plebiscitary diversion of democracy for autocratic purposes. At worst, populism is proto-fascist: its rigid and

exclusionary definition of a good people always entails the authoritarian erasure of democratic principles and institutions. In both cases, the conclusion is similar: populism works against representative democracy and, today, goes by the names of Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and Viktor Orbán. As academics increasingly view the people *versus* democracy as a credible dichotomy (Mounk, 2019), any defender of the former becomes suspect with regard to the latter.

This standard view on populism is predicated upon a dominant academic definition. Highly contested for decades, the concept of populism is now mostly approached as a 'thin-centered ideology'. Populism, in Mudde's terms, is defined 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 volonté générale (general will) of the people.' (Mudde, 2004).

Mudde's definition sounds cleverly minimal and carefully neutral. It accounts for the plasticity of the phenomenon (on which see Taggart, 2000) – it covers both its left-wing and right-wing variants (or 'inclusive' and 'exclusive'), from Hugo Chávez to Viktor Orbán (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017) – while remaining seemingly agnostic on its normative value. For these reasons, it informs most of the current debates and is widely used in empirical studies that compare populist rhetoric, attitudes and policies. However, Mudde's approach does not come without pitfalls. As we cannot detail the many difficulties that arise from this definition, we will limit ourselves to three points.

Firstly, minimalism leads to conceptual stretching, as it merges into the same category actors that have very little in common in terms of sociology, ideology and organisation. This pitfall is particularly noticeable when Mudde comes to devalue the relevance of his own concept by acknowledging 'that populism is secondary to most populist parties, and mainly strengthens the host ideology' (Mudde, 2021).

Secondly, the reference to the notion of 'general will' is misleading: from its formulation in Rousseau (for whom the 'general will' and 'the will of the majority' are two completely different things) and throughout the French republican tradition, where it still plays a decisive role in constitutional law today, the 'general will' has always referred to an 'upright will' which constitutes a norm of justice because its object is the general interest of *all* citizens. The political philosophy of the general will, which is that of the democratic social contract, does not have as its frame of reference an opposition between the pure people and the corrupt elite, but the ideal of a society of individuals capable of agreeing on their common interests and of putting the general interest before particular interests. In Rousseau's view, corruption is not unique to the elites, the majority's will can be corrupted (and therefore no longer 'general') when the popular strata put their own interests before the general interest.

Thirdly, this definition views populism as *intrinsically* dangerous for democracy, a view that appears even more explicitly in the work of thinkers such as Jan-Werner Müller (2017), Pierre Rosanvallon (2020) and Nadia Urbinati (2014, 2019). According to that perspective, populism, owing to its moralistic conception of a homogeneous people on the one hand, and its fascination for charismatic leaders (which is not implied by Mudde's definition) on the other, jeopardises the constitutional checks and balances of modern democracy and lives in the perpetual shadow of a Caesarist derailing. Indeed, the imaginary vision of a homogeneous people easily leads to denying the importance of social

divisions within the population and the very existence of competing conceptions of the general interest, thereby threatening democratic pluralism (Abts & Rummens, 2007). By the same token, the substitution of political disagreements with a moralised antagonism between pure and corrupt actors leaves little room for legitimate opposition. As we shall argue in the paper, however, neither the homogeneous conception of the people, nor the moralistic reduction of politics, and even less blind obedience to a leader should be considered as defining features of populism.

In this respect, empirical approaches to populism that distinguish people-centrism and anti-elitism from anti-pluralism and Manichaeism (e.g. Akkerman et al., 2014) are already an improvement on those that simply amalgamate all these features. Yet they remain attached to the misleading idea that one is more of a populist if one scores high on all of these dimensions. And as a result, people will be labelled as populist even when their attitudes have much more to do with authoritarian personalities than with populism as such.

The most common dissident view on populism is provided by the proponents of Laclau's and Mouffe's post-Marxist approach, which conceives it as a purely formal logic of articulation of heterogeneous, unfulfilled social demands. Both analytically and normatively, however, this approach does not provide a satisfactory way out of the liberal-elitist aporias. On the one hand, its excessive formalism leads to the same conceptual stretching: right-wing, left-wing and even 'radical center' actors are merged into a unique category as soon as they attempt to construct a 'people' out of heterogeneity. On the other hand, it sees populism as necessarily and radically democratic – insofar as it creates a popular political subject against a power bloc and enhances politicisation against the technocratic administration of things – thereby sliding into another kind of normative essentialization.

Due to the distance between their most basic assumptions, the discussion between these two approaches increasingly turns into a dialogue of the deaf (Tarragoni, 2022). This state of populist studies accounts for the difficulty of appreciating the relationship between the varieties of populist actors and theories on the one hand, and democratic institutions and practices on the other.

In this paper, we therefore provide a re-assessment of the relationship between populism and democracy that avoids the symmetric pitfalls of liberal-elitist and post-Marxist pundits. By historicising and contextualising the nature of this relationship, we reconnect with a long-lasting intellectual tradition that has always insisted on its fundamentally *ambivalent* – if not wholly positive – nature (Berlin et al., 1968; Canovan, 1981; 1999; Frank, 2020a; Germani, 1962). Based on the comparison between historical examples of populism – the People's Party in the US, the Russian *narodniki* and Peronism in Argentina – and its current manifestations, we argue that what can meaningfully be called populism always proceeds from an egalitarian, anti-oligarchic impulse and is predicated upon democratic claims. Its conception of democracy, however, as well as the sociological content and boundaries of its core subject, the people, vary considerably depending on the socio-political context in which it operates. In particular, the nature of state institutions, the pre-existence of a democratic tradition and the degree of organisation of civil society have a crucial influence on populism's practice and imagination of democracy. As a result, rather than analysing the populist wave of the 2010s through the lens of essentializing and universalising categories – as if populism carried necessarily with it the

erosion or redemption of democracy – we contend that the democratising potential of today's specific form of populism should be assessed in light of the slow erosion of intermediary bodies throughout Western societies and the way it attempts (or not) to address it.

To this end, we start by departing from the dominant contemporary uses of the word populism. A look backward at the history of the movements that have called themselves populist invites a reappraisal of the concept (section 2). We also provide explanations for the historical shift in the meaning of the word. After that, we consider the varieties of ways in which populism, as we understand it, can relate to democratic institutions (section 3).

2. The great semantic drift

Nowadays, the word 'populism' in the media and academia is predominantly used to label 'anti-establishment', illiberal movements that appeal to the people to legitimize the power of an authoritarian leader (Urbinati, 2019). This usage is so massive that we forget how recent and surprising it is compared to the meaning the word had in the first half of the twentieth century, a meaning that prevailed until the 1970s in the US and France, even if, as we shall see, elements of the current use began to fall into place in the 1950s, when the history of American populism was falsely reinterpreted in the light of McCarthyism (Chollet, 2020, 2023; Tarragoni, 2019). For authors as eminent as Robert Dahl (1956) or Isaiah Berlin (1968), populism belonged fully to the field of democracy. In France, in 1982, the article 'populism' in the *Critical Dictionary of Marxism* defined populism by identifying it with the Russian narodniki, i.e. a movement of democratic and socialist intellectuals who intended to lend their voice to the oppressed peasantry. Even today, when she reconstructs the history of the notion of 'common sense', Sophia Rosenfeld (2011) defines populism by the mobilisation of a *democratic common sense*, so that populism counts among its great intellectual figures Thomas Paine and Hannah Arendt. As Antoine Chollet (2023) has shown by reconstructing their history, the first critics of populism as a 'danger to democracy' have projected onto it traits that are not specific to it but common to all electoral regimes; their narrative, which has been taken up uncritically by contemporary critics of populism, was based not only on a misguided and misinformed interpretation of US populism, but on a deep distrust of democracy as such, in which they saw the danger of the power of the incompetents.

Given populism's centrality in contemporary debates, however, it seems impossible either to cancel out the contemporary usage or to ignore the term altogether. As a result, the only option we are left with is to critically engage with the dominant approach. To be sure, the academic distrust of populism has to do with the actual ambivalence of certain forms of populism which, especially in Latin America, have been prey to authoritarian temptations (Collovald, 2022; Pécaut, 1983; Pranchère, 2020). It remains, however, that a rigorous definition of populism cannot disregard the historical core of its meaning and absolutize, as if they were the essence of the phenomenon, features specific to contemporary extreme right-wing movements that borrow only rhetorical devices from populism. The dehistoricized use of the concept that prevails today leads to imaginary genealogies: the current use is projected onto the past by replacing real history with fictitious history, as when scholars look for the origin of populism in

Bonapartism rather than in the first movements which called themselves populist (Rosan-vallon, 2020). The height of paradox is reached when a regime like Putin's is called 'popu-list' (Eksi & Wood, 2019; Robinson & Milne, 2017; Stockemer, 2019, p. 5), while it embodies all that the Russian populists had fiercely fought against in tsarism.

J.W. Müller (2017) does not hesitate to solve the difficulty by stating that the American populist party was not populist; yet, no one would accept a definition of 'socialism' that would be produced from the sole experience of Tony Blair's government in the United Kingdom and would state, as a consequence, that socialism excludes the critique of capitalism and that none of the historical socialist movements before the 1990s deserve the name of socialist. It is the same with 'populism' as with 'socialism' or 'liberalism': they are terms that cover distinct currents; they cannot be defined based on the specific features of some of their varieties only; their definition must start from their historical source and include the variety of their species through the history of their development. Any definition of liberalism begins with the study of Adam Smith and Benjamin Constant; any definition of socialism must situate the very different doctrines of Saint-Simon, Sismondi, Proudhon, Marx, Durkheim within a shared desire for a social regulation of capitalism, without projecting onto one of them what another one would have condemned.

How can we then explain the 'semantic drift' (Jäger, 2017) that the word 'populism' has undergone? How come a term that used to designate the People's Party and the political experiences that took up its legacy (the Rooseveltian experience in the US, the Popular Front in France) came to describe the reactionary political projects of today's autocrats? Historical distance and forgetfulness may have played a role in the case of the narodniki movement, for which the main source remains the sum published by Franco Venturi (1952), but certainly not in the case of the well-documented People's Party. Several more plausible causes stand out.

A first moment of the semantic drift is, as already mentioned, the reinterpretations of the People's Party phenomenon by several political scientists in the 1950s as the prefiguration of McCarthyism or even fascism (Hofstadter, 1955; Lipset, 1960). These reinterpretations have since then been challenged by historians (Goodwyn, 1976; Pollack, 1962; Postel, 2007; Saloutos, 1960). Many of them now emphasise the profoundly democratic character of American populism, which aimed to strengthen representative democracy, not undermine it (Chollet, 2020, 2023; Jäger, 2021, 2022). North American populism was a movement defending liberal democracy and constitutional guarantees of freedom against oligarchic powers, which is why it cannot be described as anti-pluralist.

A second, more decisive step contributed at the same time to the change of meaning of the word by extending its field of reference and by bringing it closer to political movements with authoritarian features. This is the application of the term populism to Latin American regimes, the prototype of which was Peronism in Argentina, by authors whose pioneer was Gino Germani (1962). The term was applied from the outside, since these regimes, unlike the People's Party and the Russian narodniki, did not call themselves populist. By calling Peronism 'national-populist', Germani wanted to mark the difference between Peronism and, on the one hand, Italian fascism (which had the sympathy of some Peronist elites), and simple authoritarian nationalism, on the other. The introduction of the term populism was justified in that case by the presence of a truly social egalitarian dimension, linked to the power of the unions. Some contemporary authors hold to the term 'populism' to designate Peronism because they perceive it as a form of

democratisation that was imposed by a context of extreme inequality (Rouquié, 2016). Yet the paradox is that, while successfully used to single out a democratic dimension that differentiates Peronism from authoritarianism, the word populism has nonetheless been associated de facto with Peronism's other features, its nationalistic and authoritarian aspects. This association with Peronism has notably led to the inclusion, as a decisive feature of populism, of the presence of a charismatic leader (whereas there was nothing of the sort in the People's Party and the narodniki), which was further consolidated by Laclau and Mouffe, to whom it represented a valuable aspect of (left-wing) populism.

A third moment, of greater political magnitude, was that of the 1980s when, in France, Italy and Austria at first, the extreme right-wing parties won their first major electoral successes on European soil since WWII and thus started looking for normalisation and respectability. These parties strategically adopted a democratic language and consequently gave up formulating their xenophobic nationalism in terms of an opposition to parliamentary democracy. This phenomenon led media commentators to speak of 'populism', which was in many ways a 'misnomer' (Collovald, 2004). The far-right happily took up the term to better legitimize itself as democratic and to seduce the working class. Today, many figures of the international far right (Viktor Orbán, Steve Bannon, Eric Zemmour) claim to be 'populists', thereby intending to stand as more democratic than their critics who, by using the p-word as a stigmatising weapon, prove their contempt for the people and their adhesion to an elitist or technocratic ideal which is incompatible with democracy.

We should not underestimate the problem that arises here: by accepting to qualify these movements with this word, political scientists run the risk of uncritically validating a self-description that is part of a strategy of legitimisation. The fact that the rhetoric of some contemporary extreme right-wing movements has some populist features (appeal to the people and anti-elitism) does not mean that they have populist intentions. Their economic proposals, for instance, are usually at odds with those advocated by historical populisms. Even when taking seriously the 'welfare-chauvinist turn' of several radical right parties, they still bear little resemblance to the extremely progressive platforms promoted by the populists of the past. Moreover, it is clear that they are in no way related to the democratisation dynamic at play, for instance, in Latin American populisms.

The European success of the word populism in a sense alien to its history also has much to do with the absence of populist experiences and traditions in Europe, where the place of populism has been obstructed by the socialist movements. This absence of historical memory has facilitated an interpretation of populism based solely on the negative semantic charge of the 'ism' form of the word: much like the word 'nationalism', which designates both an authoritarian sacralization of the nation and a reduction of politics to it, populism came to be seen as a sacralization of the people and a reduction of politics to the 'tyranny of the majority'. In this view, populism is necessarily anti-pluralistic as it sees the people as the only source of truth and legitimate power holder.

As the return to the American and Russian sources of populism teaches, the core of populism is neither anti-pluralism nor hostility to the representative regime, but a demand for political and social inclusion of popular sectors. Rather than autarchic and self-referential movements claiming to be the only legitimate representatives of the

people, these canonic populist formations were intrinsically anti-authoritarian. In fact, the People's Party merged into the Democratic Party (to which it gave its social positioning), and the narodniki were divided between a liberal wing (opposed by Lenin in the 1894 libel *What the 'Friends of the People'Are*) and a socialist wing which, after converting to Marxism (according to Plekhanov and Vera Zasulich), founded the Russian Social Democracy (within which it fought Lenin). Both wings remained attached to democratic freedoms.

Populism as such does not require the homogeneity of the people; in its early forms, it admitted that the people is a plurality whose unity is based on a common desire for freedom that leads to refusing the domination of oligarchic layers and reaffirming the democratic rights and powers of ordinary citizens. Even when considered as a merely discursive tool that strategically oversimplifies the political realm to build collective identification (Miscoiu, 2012), the populist unifying operation *presupposes* the heterogeneity of the people rather than its homogeneity. Besides, discursively masking pluralism and internal conflicts to form the broadest possible coalition and structure it around a single line of divide is a widely appealing electoral strategy that is not distinctive of populism[1] – which is why Laclau viewed populism as 'the political operation *par excellence*' (Laclau, 2005) – and that in no way entails the suppression of political pluralism once in power.

Similarly, it is hard to contend that populist movements and thinkers are best defined by the moralistic reduction of politics between a pure people and a corrupt elite. At best, moral framings are 'a constant in political life' (Katsambekis, 2022) and can thus hardly be used as one of populism's distinctive traits.[2] At worst, the opposite is true: as some authors would argue, based on a socio-cultural approach, populism represents a 'dirty' form of politics that performs the cultural habits of the lower classes into the institutional realm (Ostiguy, 2017).

Against the now dominant view, we argue that what distinguishes populism from other democratic movements, and socialist movements in particular, consists specifically in two features:

> — Its defensive or reactive dimension: populism reacts to a process of de-democratization or reacts to oligarchic (or elitist, or technocratic) tendencies; it does not carry the project of a new society. The People's Party and the narodniki intend to preserve and deepen what already exists, whether the American democracy or the Russian peasant commune; Peronism fights Marxism but wants to bring the plebs out of their misery and give them access to political dignity.

> — Its confidence in the popular common sense: populism does not produce an articulated doctrine, and in this sense, it is appropriate to speak of a 'thin ideology'. It should be emphasized that this reliance on common sense does not necessarily mean invoking shared beliefs or a national identity; it rests first and foremost on the conviction that each citizen is fully competent to judge the policies that concern him or her.

Owing to its ideological plasticity (Taggart, 2000), populism's meaning varies a lot depending on the nature of the common sense it appeals to and the sociological composition of the people it mobilises. Contrary to the much more precise figure of the industrial working class which prevails in the Marxist tradition, the political subject of populism took different forms throughout history. It ranges from the alliance of workers, farmers and self-

employed adhering to the ideals of small owners' and self-made men's democracy (People's Party), to the communal peasantry of the *Mir* (narodniki), to the plebs, the 'descamisados' that were previously excluded from the political sphere (Latin American populisms). The people of contemporary populist forces in Europe is quite different, too, as it consists of an attempt to bring together several social classes severely affected by the post-2008 recession: the impoverished middle class, the highly-qualified youth and the new poor of the urban and suburban areas, together with the declining industrial working class (Gerbaudo, 2017). However, these movements display the same defensive-reactive dimension as their predecessors: they react against the dismantling of welfare states and social democracy's abandoning of its reformist mission.

The ideological and sociological plasticity of populism thus enables it to take many different forms, depending on the context. However, it also generates confusion in today's debates in media and academia, where radical right parties are called 'populist' as soon as they claim to represent 'those who no longer feel represented', even when their leaders are successful businessmen fighting against the alleged 'cultural hegemony of the Left'. Still, we contend that the populist label, in light of its history, should be restricted to movements whose programme defends the interests of the popular sectors widely defined and promotes measures of social or political democratisation.

The historical core of populism can therefore be defined as the combination of two elements: *the promotion of the interests of ordinary people against the oligarchy* and *the valorization of popular common sense*. This core, which we take to be a necessary and sufficient condition for being classified as populist, can be combined with a diversity of optional characteristics[3], which explains the diversity of populist movements and theories throughout history. What this definition entails, however, is that we should not call 'populist' movements (or theories) that do not feature the core anti-oligarchic aspiration. In that regard, contemporary radical rights' approach is significantly different from both historical and contemporary forms of populism. Their appeal to the popular sectors, while usually limited to the most reactionary parts of their suburban and rural components in fear of social decline, is predicated upon *the opposite* principle: they rely on the mobilisation of widespread oligarchic affects – an identification with the winners, not the losers (Savidan, 2016) – and aggressively nationalist stances. In the US, the support for Trump clearly relies on such forms of oligarchic affects, while the continuity with historical populism is embodied by Bernie Sanders and the left of the Democratic Party (Frank, 2020b). In France, the *Rassemblement national* often pits the hard-working people, in fear of social decline, against '*les assistés*' (the beneficiaries of social assistance) – in particular way during the 2022 presidential campaign, when Eric Zemmour threatened Le Pen on her right flank (Ivaldi, 2022) – while this dimension was at play in the Yellow Vests movement too, without being necessarily dominant (Béroud et al., 2022; Blavier, 2021). On the contrary, one of the most prominent upholders of the populist approach within *La France insoumise*, François Ruffin, regularly urges his movement to neutralise these oligarchic affects at play in the popular constituencies by restaging the political battle as the one against the economic and political elite.

3. Populism's democratic ambivalences

When looking retrospectively at the policy achievements of historical populisms, they appear as a sort of functional equivalent to the welfare state institutions built during the post-WWII 'social-democratic consensus' (Berman, 2006). However, the specific features of populism compared to the social-democratic tradition – its defensive/reactive attitude and its reliance on the immediacy of popular common sense – lead to a particularly ambivalent relation to democracy.

It must be recognised, for instance, that the valorisation of 'common sense' can easily take an identitarian, nationalistic and anti-intellectual turn that paves the way for a 'right-wing' variant. Given populism's indeterminacy, the possibility of ideological slippage remains open. In Russian populism, there was already a tendency to sacralize the people as an undifferentiated unit with which everyone must identify (Karsenti, 2020). Within the People's Party, the Knights of Labor were tendentially hostile to Chinese immigration, as they falsely accused Chinese workers of being unfree 'bound' labour (Postel, 2019). Arguably, France's boulangisme (a movement in which former communards, patriotic republicans and future tenors of the extreme right, such as Barrès and Maurras, were mixed) could also be viewed as the earliest and most prominent example of a populism tending towards the right. Populism's egalitarian impulse can be 're-coded' in nationalist terms, for example by subordinating social policies to 'national preference'. In this scenario, populism is likely to produce policies that restrict the scope of minority rights, thereby eroding the liberal pillar of modern democracies. Still, we argue that this regression represents more of a side-effect of populism's main features (its reliance on common sense and relative ideological indeterminacy) than an inherent property of populism as such. What is more, when the anti-oligarchic impetus becomes secondary as it is supplanted by nationalist and exclusionary tropes, one should consider that populism has simply *turned into something else*.

In addition, the vagueness of populism's democratic common sense, besides making ideological shifts all too easy, tends to blur its concrete relation to specific democratic practices and make it particularly sensitive to contextual variations. This is why we believe that the standard view on the relationship between populism and democracy – that its inherent anti-pluralism contends with democratic principles – must be revised. While the urge for democratisation is part of the *raison d'être* of populist actors, it can take many different forms, not all of which are up to the demanding standards of modern democracy. The only way to gauge populism's democratic prospects is to analyse its concrete proposals on a case-by-case basis and to assess them on the backdrop of the particular context in which they take place. As we shall see in the following two subsections, there are about as many visions of (direct and representative) democracy as populist actors. The intrinsic ambiguities of the populist common sense, in turn, make it a poor response to the current crisis of political representation across Western societies.

3.1. What does 'people's power' mean?

The basic idea that democracy means rule by the people does not say much about the nature of the popular subject, which, as we have seen, varies considerably across space and time. The coalition between the impoverished middle class and the

highly qualified urban youth that contemporary populism attempts to bring together barely resembles the cross-class alliances of the past, articulated respectively around the Midwestern farmers, the Russian rural communities, or the *descamisados*. Neither is there an obvious democratic form to be endorsed by those, like populists, who want to empower the people. Depending on the context, almost any form of government can be favoured as long as it ensures popular control: promotion of referenda, call for a constituent assembly to reorganise institutional balances, revocability of the elected officials and term limits, etc. Nevertheless, the anti-oligarchic impulse means that some forms will clearly be excluded. This is the case, for example, of the most elitist understandings of democracy in which the role of the people is reduced to a choice among competing elites (Schumpeter, 1942). To remain a *popular* form of government, democracy must either mean rule by genuine representatives of the people (vs detached elites) or rule by the people without mediation (or some mix of the two). Let us examine these options in turn and see what kind of implicit image of the people they carry with them.

3.1.1. Rule by genuine representatives of the people

Populism needs not be hostile to representation. One can be moved by an anti-oligarchic impulse and yet recognise the need for and the value of political mediation. In contrast with the widely held assumption that all forms of populism display some degree of hostility towards intermediary bodies and representation (Rosanvallon, 2020; Urbinati, 2014; 2019), American populists embraced representation and wanted the Parliament to regain sovereignty vis-à-vis both the executive and private actors (Jäger, 2021; 2022). They also supported the use of popular initiatives, referenda and even the recall of federal judges, yet as complementary tools, against a background of electoral representation, or as 'last-ditch efforts to safeguard a programme' (Jäger, 2021). These instruments of direct democracy which were codified in the early 1900s in many US states were not central in their platforms in the 1880s and 1890s, in contrast with the economic policies they were pursuing. Hence, their support for instruments of direct democracy seemed more circumstantial than ideological.

Contemporary populism is not necessarily anti-representation either. Whereas every populist force criticises the deterioration of political representation based on a shared 'democratic common sense', their actual response varies according to their diagnosis of its main causes. On the one hand, when they identify the strengthening of the executive branch at the expense of the legislative as the main issue – as Podemos, La France insoumise, or the left-wing of the Democratic Party in the US do – populist actors strongly advocate the reinforcement of legislative assemblies. La France insoumise repeatedly called for the establishment of a 6th Republic through a constituent process that would get rid of the French 'hyper presidentialism'.[4] Meanwhile, Podemos has always actively supported the extension of the assemblies' prerogatives at every level, from the regional to the European (Borriello & Brack, 2019). On the other hand, when the alleged privileges of corrupted political representatives are the main target of populist criticism – as in the case of the Five Star Movement and the Yellow Vests, for instance – they may favour measures (term limits, reduction in the number of MPs, etc.) that actually weaken the assembly in front of the executive, even if they are promoted *in the name of better political representation*.

Regardless of the context, there are several reasons why populists may favour representation over direct democracy. Pragmatically, they may recognise the practical difficulty of a pure form of direct democracy, or even the fact that citizens may legitimately prefer to be represented than to have to make most decisions themselves. They may also value the mobilisation potential of democratic representation (Disch, 2011). If, for example, they acknowledge that the people is divided and needs to be unified in support of a common project, they will have reasons to value representation in general and the mobilising power of political parties in particular. This is manifest, for example, in Chantal Mouffe's plea for a left populism, which she seems to understand in a strong representative and party-centred sense (see in particular Mouffe, 2018, p. 48 and 55–57).

What pro-representation populists usually want, however, is some guarantees that representation will not be captured by the elite or the oligarchy. In this respect, they may be in favour of all sorts of democratic mechanisms allowing citizens to exercise more control over their representatives (see Vergara, 2020a).[5] One example is the right to recall representatives – a historical demand of socialist movements (Qvortrup, 2020) taken up recently by the Yellow Vests among others (Abrial et al., 2022). Another, more ambitious, is a kind of Tribunate of the people, as once existed in the ancient Roman Republic and is now advocated by 'plebeian' thinkers such as John McCormick (2011) or Camila Vergara (2020b, pp. 250–264).

3.1.2. Rule by the people

The anti-oligarchic impulse, however, can also lead to skepticism about elections' capacity to bring to power genuine representatives of the people. If one takes into account, for example, the inherent aristocratic character of elections (Manin, 1997), i.e. their tendency to bring to power people distinguishing themselves from the masses by some common traits, or the 'iron law' that political parties tend to take an oligarchic form (Michels, 1911), there are reasons to look for more direct ways of empowering the people.

Popular referendums are attractive, in this respect, because they are the most inclusive and direct form of decision-making. When they are initiated by citizens and binding, in particular, they appear as interesting instruments for the empowerment of the people. This is why populist movements will usually have strong reasons to support their use. Populist leaders, in turn, may value government-initiated referendums to strengthen their own legitimacy and show that their claim to be genuine representatives of the people is valid. In practice, however, parties characterised as populists under standard definitions of the term will not necessarily push strongly for referendums (Gherghina & Pilet, 2021) or make more intensive use of referendums than non-populist actors (Gherghina & Silagadze, 2020). This probably reflects the fact that movements and parties unduly labelled as 'populist' mix popular, anti-oligarchic aspirations with strong, authoritarian leadership. Authoritarian leaders who claim to embody the will of the people are likely to be reluctant to see their claim rejected in an unsuccessful referendum (see Taggart, 2000, pp. 103–105).

Populist theorists and movements can also be more skeptical about referendums. They may be aware of the risk of capture of initiatives and referendums by private interest-groups, and sometimes by parties themselves. Eichenberger et al. (2022, p. 349), in a balanced review of the literature, refer to this as a possible 'populist paradox': whereas

in principle direct democracy mechanisms allow to circumvent captured politics, interest groups can capture initiative and referendum processes that were meant to empower the people.

Populists may also regret the unreflective or individualistic[6] aspects of popular referendums and therefore endorse other forms of popular empowerment such as participatory budgeting or randomly selected citizens' assemblies.

The case of citizens' assemblies (also known as deliberative mini-publics) is particularly interesting insofar as they combine populist and non-populist features, which make them ambivalent from a populist viewpoint. On the one hand, citizens' assemblies are clearly popular and anti-elitist. The fundamental assumption that everyone is equally or at least sufficiently competent to make political decisions (Rancière, 2005) is the antithesis of the elitist (or 'aristocratic') logic of elections, which were conceived as a way to single out the best rulers (Manin, 1997). Empowered citizens' assemblies can therefore be seen as a powerful instrument to counter oligarchic tendencies (McCormick, 2011). On the other hand, they empower only a 'mini-populus' (Dahl, 1989, p. 340) – not the whole people, which can only hope to be adequately represented by chance. What is more, the probabilities to accept the invitation if selected (Jacquet, 2020) and to weigh in deliberations, to have one's voice heard (Sanders, 1997) are unequally distributed. One risk is therefore to see randomly selected representatives of the people form a new elite disconnected from the wider public. This potential disconnection between the mini- and the maxi-populus is seen favourably by deliberative theorists, who count on inclusive and rational deliberations within the mini-populus to refine public opinion (Fishkin, 2009). However, it is met with skepticism by those who want to empower the many, not the few (Vergara, 2020b, pp. 228–231). Sortition offers rule by a mini-populus, not rule by the people.

In addition to this lack of inclusion, some populists are likely to be skeptical about the project to promote peaceful deliberation. Emphasising the divide between the people and the oligarchy, populist theorists tend to picture politics as strongly adversarial, as a fight for power rather than a process of collective reasoning (Mouffe, 2005; 2018). As a result, they may appreciate the popular feature of sortition, but they will usually dislike the deliberative one. Hence, they might be more favourably inclined towards adversarial than deliberative uses of citizens' assemblies. Adversarial uses include McCormick's (2011) idea of a Tribunate of the plebs or, to a lesser extent, Gastil and Wright's (2019) hybrid bicameral system, where the sortition assembly has the power to veto legislation by the elected one.

An interesting difference between the two uses of citizens' assemblies relates to how the people is pictured. In McCormick's work and in the way in which some political movements see sortition, the people is seen as unified or easily unifiable against the elite. The citizens' assembly is thus conceived as a unified body of largely interchangeable citizens acting as a popular check on elected actors. Deliberativists, in contrast, tend to picture the people as more heterogeneous and crossed by a diversity of cleavage lines. Hence, the emphasis will be on mutual understanding and attempts to overcome disagreement through deliberation rather than joint action against the elite.

Finally, if populists prefer institutions that empower the larger public instead of mini-publics but are skeptical about referendum democracy, they may be more attracted by a third alternative: council democracy. Council democracy is a pyramidal form of assembly

democracy, where the whole people can be gathered locally to make decisions and delegate revocable representatives to higher ladders of decision-making (Lucardie, 2014; Muldoon, 2018). It has historically been defended by socialists, anarchists and radical republican movements and theorists, and it seems to face a renewed interest in the academic literature (Muldoon, 2011; 2018; Vergara, 2020b). Such a democratic form requires a break with the idea of strong leaders – which is in any case not intrinsic to populism as we understand it.

In sum, there is a diversity of ways in which popular power can be promoted to fight oligarchic tendencies. No single democratic institution is a 'natural' ally of populism. Therefore, populist movements' and theorists' institutional demands are likely to be highly dependent on contextual factors such as their perception of the functioning of elections, parties or referendums in a given political context.

In that perspective, contemporary populism is not to be understood as a reaction against representative democracy as such, but against the dysfunction of representation in liberal democracies with oligarchic tendencies and technocratic orientations. As we shall see in the next subsection, the fact that this reaction can sometimes take the form of hostility towards intermediary bodies (public representatives, political parties, trade unions, etc.) is more indicative of the current state of party democracy and of the loss of credibility of its main actors than of the anti-pluralist 'essence' of populism.

3.2. Populism in disintermediated democracies

Given its plasticity, populism has given many forms to the popular subject and the expression of its will throughout history. Such diversity should warn us against the temptation to assess the democratic credentials of populism *in abstracto*, as if it were *by essence* against the rule of law, constitutional checks and balances and/or political representation. The common denominator behind past and present forms of populism – the defense of a broad popular coalition against oligarchic interests – is too loose to provide us with a specifically populist 'democratic road map' on the basis of which we could evaluate it.

This comes with at least two major consequences. Firstly, the openness and inclusivity of 'the people', and the procedures by which populism gives voice to it, is not a pre-given but a matter of contention between contradictory forces that shape the movements *from within*. For instance, the American Populists were torn between vertical and horizontal practices, reductionary and expansionary conceptions of the contours of the people (Grattan, 2016), and the Yellow Vests movement only progressively got rid of the antisemitic and xenophobic components that were initially visible within its ranks. Secondly, and more importantly for our purpose, populism's plasticity makes it particularly sensitive to external conditions, thus calling for a context-based assessment of its democratic potential. The extent to which populism can be a threat to democracy's constitutional pillar or a corrective for its most elitist tendencies is hardly separable from the context in which it arises. When criticising the most authoritarian features of the Peronist regime, for instance, to what extent are we evaluating its populist nature or, say, the absence of a preexisting democratic culture of alternance and the incomplete autonomy of state structures in postwar Argentina?

The same contextual warning holds for contemporary populism, which displays a fundamental difference from its predecessors: whereas historical populism went hand-in-

hand with the development of mass politics, today's populist breakthroughs in Europe are predicated upon its decline. For the populists of the past, a flourishing civil society was key to the democratic revival they were invoking, as it was the best lever to open up the political institutions to the masses. Be it under the form of cooperatives, associations or trade unions, the activities of the party were part of a much wider network of emancipatory practices (Grattan, 2016; Jäger, 2021). By contrast, the recent populist upsurge in Europe took place in a wholly different configuration, marked by the slow demise of party democracy and its acceleration in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis. The decline of the intermediary bodies (parties, churches, unions, clubs, associations, etc.) that used to bind together specific groups and voice their claims have created social atomisation and widespread feelings of underrepresentation (Mair, 2013). The reaction of mainstream parties, which have sought to insulate themselves by retreating into the national and European institutions (Bickerton, 2012; Katz & Mair, 1995), has only fed the democratic disenchantment further. On top of that, the perceived consensus of centre-right and centre-left parties around austerity during the crisis of the eurozone has proved deleterious. By widening the gap even more between citizens and institutions, and completing the crumbling of the old mass parties, especially on the left, it paved the way for the emergence of populist formations.

Given the loss of credibility that plagues the intermediation structures of party democracy, most calls for better representation in the current context tend to be tinged with hostility towards those structures. Here lies probably one of the most serious accusations against contemporary populism, whose reliance on strong leadership and vertical forms of organisation are said to undermine the intermediary layers and actors that, at least since Tocqueville, are considered as the true cornerstones of modern democracy (see for instance Müller, 2021 and Osborne, 2021). Today's populist forces, in fact, usually display an uneasy relationship – to say the least – with other parties, trade unions and civil society organisations, which they view as bureaucratic machines directly or indirectly responsible for the loss of popular control over political decision-making. This, in turn, puts a serious limit on populism's claims for a democratic revival in step with the times. Owing to its 'commonsensical' and 'reactive' nature, populism is keen to adopt simplistic and intuitive solutions that barely respond to the magnitude of the democratic crisis it diagnoses.

Most populist actors have translated their promise of democratic revival into their own organisational setting: in one way or another, they have taken their distance from the traditional form of political parties. Calling themselves 'movements', they have adopted a light structure and resorted to online decision-making procedures to bypass intermediary layers of organisation and create a direct relationship between a 'hyperleader' and his inner circle, on the one hand, and a connected 'superbase', on the other (Gerbaudo, 2018). This anti-party approach was often predicated upon the sacralization of the Internet as a democratic panacea. In so doing, however, populists rarely fulfil their promises. Research has repeatedly shown that their participatory tools often turn out to be merely plebiscitary and pseudo-participatory settings (Biancalana & Vittori, 2021) and that hierarchies among members, supposedly kicked out of the door, tend to come back through the window (Gomez & Ramiro, 2019). Their organisational setup often leads to a split between superficial and volatile forms of involvement for the many, and more intense and perennial engagement for the few – usually the activists who enjoy higher levels

of social capital. The old mass parties, notwithstanding their sociological flaws as bureaucratic structures oriented towards self-conservation, were at least aiming at the construction of a micro-society (with its own culture, worldview, and solidarity networks) that could also work as a vector of popular emancipation. Finally, the populist crusade against 'politics as usual' might prove deleterious as it further weakens the already weakened mediation structures.[7] By rejecting the classic party form, populists often throw the baby out with the bath water, mistaking one of the symptoms of the current democratic malaise for its cause. Or, to put it differently, they tend to reject party organisation in general rather than simply resisting the process of cartelisation.

At best, therefore, populism fails to address one of the key democratic issues of our time: 'How to revitalize a moribund civil society and empower the popular sectors that feel increasingly alienated from politics?' At worst, its organisational expedients tend to further accelerate the process of disintermediation and social atomisation that plague Western societies. To be sure, populism is hardly the only factor to blame for the current fading away of mediation structures. 'Men resemble their times more than they do their fathers', as the proverb goes. Just as the American Populists belonged to the post-Civil War era (Postel, 2007), today's populism is the reflection of the particular environment in which it arises: an increasingly disintermediated form of democracy. In that regard, the anti-party feelings are in no way specific to populism as such, but are shared by almost all the new competitors to mainstream parties. This category includes the radical right forces, but also the new centrist leaders who push their liberal-reformist agenda through anti-establishment rhetoric and 'start-up' electoral platforms (Macron's *Renaissance*, Renzi's *Italia Viva*, Rivera's *Ciudadanos*) and which, for these very reasons, are often mistakenly described as populists, too (Fougère & Barthold, 2020). This, in turn, should warn us even more against overstretching the concept – given the family resemblances between those actors, which simply stem from the structural context in which they arise, we might end up seeing populists *everywhere* – and allocating the blame too quickly, since populism is hardly the only actor involved in the current democratic impasse.

All in all, therefore, the main threat that populism poses to modern democracy might be slightly different from what is often claimed. Given the variety of populism's conceptions of *who* is the people and *how* it should exercise its sovereignty, it is hard to find a Manichean and anti-pluralist 'essence' of populism, universal and timeless, that would threaten the constitutional pillar of democracy. However, if one adopts a more exacting conception of democracy based on its postwar developments in Western societies – in which parties give life to a truly 'organic' form of democracy – populism appears as helpless at best, and deleterious at worst. Its ideological and organisational limits preclude it from proposing a credible solution to the decline of party democracy, and might even deepen the widespread malaise that this decline engenders. While it is certainly unfair to blame populism – at least in the way this paper proposes to define it – for all the current democratic flaws, it should also be clear that a force that cannot fulfil its promise to ensure popular participation and contain the spiral of political apathy and resentment in the long run does not deserve to carry the flag of democratic regeneration either.

4. Conclusion

This article was meant to explore in more depth what we see as a complex and varying relationship between populism and democracy. Our argument can be summarised in five main claims. First, populism comes in many guises, both historically and today. Second, what unifies the diversity of populist movements and parties from their origin up until now is neither the claim that politics should reflect the general will of the people, nor mere anti-elitism, nor anti-pluralism, nor fascination for charismatic leaders. It is a popular reaction to oligarchic tendencies in the name of democracy. Third, the egalitarian impulse of populist forces is mainly defensive-reactive in nature and rooted in a democratic commonsense, rather than in a fully-fledged ideological worldview aiming at the establishment of a radically new social order. The next two claims stem from the latter: on the one hand, there is no 'natural' institutional translation of populist aspirations, no single institutional formula protecting against oligarchic tendencies; on the other, populist movements' and authors' visions of democracy, representation and intermediary bodies are highly context-dependent. Therefore, we contend that any serious appraisal of populism's true democratic potential should analyse its interaction with the context in which it arises and thrives.

Despite the strong contextual differences between the populist experiences on the American continent and in Russia between the late nineteenth century and the mid-20th – while representative democracy was already on the rise in the USA, it still was little more than a mirage in Russia and Argentina – they occur in the period that saw the irruption of the popular masses on the political scene. By contrast, recent populist movements have emerged in a context of disintermediation and 'demassification' occurring across Western societies. The discrediting of political parties and other intermediary bodies that ensued largely explains the evolution from a highly organized populism embedded in party democracy to anti-party forms of populism relying on vertical and digital shortcuts. What has changed in the meantime is the status of representative democracy – and party democracy in particular – in the collective imaginary. Along the way, populism has followed the general evolution from a sort of Durkheimian, corporatist democracy to a more Schumpeterian conception where elites compete for people's unenthusiastic support through simplistic media rhetoric and targeted electoral marketing.

This new dominant democratic form appears to us as poorly emancipatory and insufficiently addressed by existing populist challengers, who often turn out to be the most enthusiastic gravediggers of party democracy. At least three major pitfalls have been highlighted in this paper. First, the commonsensical appraisal of 'the people', if not accompanied by strong ideological keystones, is too vague to prevent shifts towards anti-pluralist, exclusive, nationalistic and xenophobic interpretations. Second, the diagnosis of a crisis of political representation, if not rooted in a careful analysis of its nature and its causes, can easily turn into a simplistic rejection of representation in its principle. Finally, the reliance of today's populism on online communication and organisational shortcuts circumvents the crucial issue of mass mobilisation and organisation in times of disintermediation, which any seriously pro-democratic force should take up courageously. Although populism should not bear alone the responsibility for the last two issues – which have more to do with the present state of democratic politics than

with intrinsic features of populism – even the most progressive among its current avatars have so far failed to address them convincingly.

Notes

1. Think about socialists emphasising the divide between workers and capitalists, or neoliberals emphasising the divide between those who work hard and the 'assisted'.
2. Consider again the moral condemnation of the 'assisted' who fail to take responsibility for themselves, or conservatives' moral battle for the respect for 'life' or for family values.
3. We take inspiration, here, from Mansbridge and Macedo's (2019) 'core-plus' approach to populism, while deviating from their own definition of the core, which insists on the 'moral' aspect of the populist battle against the elite and leaves the common sense aspect outside of the core.
4. On the more ambivalent case of 'La France Insoumise', see Cervera-Marzal, 2021.
5. This may apply more to activist populists and populist theorists than to some cynical citizens who would want the representative system to 'deliver what the people want without them having to pay continual attention to it' (Stoker & Hay, 2017).
6. Vergara (2020b, p. 4) claims that initiatives, referendums and recalls are, just like elections, 'powers of the individual, not the many as collective subject'.
7. One could even argue that the more established actors are discredited, the more populist forces are tempted by a radically anti-political approach that adds fuel to a fire. The Italian Five Star Movement stands as a perfect example of this tendency.

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