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# THE CHANGING FACES OF POPULISM

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SYSTEMIC CHALLENGERS  
IN EUROPE AND THE U.S.

*edited by*

Hedwig Giusto  
David Kitching  
Stefano Rizzo





FEPS - Foundation for European  
Progressive Studies  
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CRS - Fondazione  
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dello Stato



Fondazione Italianieuropei

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# PREFACE

*Ernst Stetter*

**T**he Foundation for European Progressive Studies has always taken pride in its novel position within the European political sphere. As a think tank and political foundation, we operate as an intellectual crossroads between the European project and social democracy. At the very heart of this function is the task of bridging the gap between European citizens and their representative institutions. We aim to draw together different levels of democracy, from local government right through to regional, national and European administration.

Populism is both a reaction to, and a product of, the growing distance between citizens and their institutions of governance, whether that is at state or European level. Populist movements accuse European Union institutions of elitism and remoteness from the everyday lives of ordinary citizens. At member state level, they accuse the politicians of traditional parties of catering to unknown interests at the expense of their own people, and of inefficacy in a rapidly changing world. Populists play on fear and demagoguery instead of engaging in constructive dialogue to help improve public life.



They try to claim the mantle of democratic participation, while posing a most pressing and difficult challenge to democratic institutions.

Those who work within the political system have several options at their disposal. Some will adopt “copycat” tactics, absorbing some of the language of populist movements into their discourse. This runs the risk of legitimating such movements and bringing intolerant perspectives into the mainstream. Others will speak from an “Ivory Tower”, assuming that they know best and that they do not need to look beyond their own milieu. Yet elitism and populism are two sides of the same coin. Each begets the other and we see in several of the cases in this book that the technocratic impulse is often a particular target of populist and anti-system movements. The third possibility is to seek to understand these movements – and the conditions that allow for their growth – through rigorous research and empirical analysis. Only when we understand such social and political dynamics, beyond the sound bites and received truths of the 24-hour news cycle, will we then be able to offer viable counter-arguments.

This is the approach preferred by FEPS. It is about engaging in active citizenship to ensure the democratic legitimacy and viability of our representative institutions. It is a means to empower citizens to move beyond the easy answers of populists to a basis for a genuinely reflective and participative democracy. The foundation’s work on populist movements began with an initial request for research on far right parties in 2011, although related issues of citizenship, migration, social inclusion and democratic consolidation have been part of FEPS research activities since the beginning.

This particular project was born out of a conference in Rome organised by FEPS together with Italianeuropei and the Centro per la Riforma dello Stato. It was decided to publish a book of case studies to reflect the diversity and wide spectrum of movements that presently exist in Europe and North

America. It is impossible to include everything in one study but the pages that follow offer snapshots of groups ranging from new street movements and quasi-parliamentary organisations to those that have been somewhat systematised.

We hope the book serves as a fresh analysis to be used by policy makers, students and anyone with an interest in comparative European politics. The perspectives presented in this book represent the views and analyses of the individual authors and not necessarily those of the three sponsoring foundations. Having said this, I wish to congratulate all of the authors involved and to thank them profusely for their valuable work. I would also like to thank the three editors – Hedwig Giusto of *Italianieuropei*, Stefano Rizzo of *Centro per la Riforma dello Stato* and David Kitching of FEPS – for the time and effort they have taken to complete this project.



# INTRODUCTIONS

*Massimo D'Alema*

In many European countries public discontent against traditional political parties is rising, and at the same time there is a growing consensus for anti-establishment protest movements with populist undertones. In an effort to effectively respond to this crisis, it is necessary to first identify certain lines of research.

It is a commonly acknowledged fact that the decline of political parties, especially in the European context, is the result – among other things – of the changes in the composition of society, the breaking up of the social compromise – the welfare state – which was a fundamental component of the platforms of the political parties in the post World War II period, and not just of the social democratic and labour parties.

In Europe, over the last three decades, we have witnessed an ideological decline of the mass parties, albeit in different ways. In some countries, this decline has led to an actual systemic crisis, such as in Italy, for example, since the beginning of the 1990s, with various hitherto unsuccessful attempts to rebuild the political system, a process that is still dramatically under way.

This process has been accompanied, in recent years in Italy, by a radical criticism of traditional party politics. I am referring here, in particular, to the 5-Star Movement of Beppe Grillo, which has been hostile to the entire political party system right from the outset.

It is, of course, difficult to classify this movement based solely on traditional criteria of political analysis, in terms of a classical political spectrum running from right to left, because it takes on some of the features that political science typically defines as "populist" and feeds on elements that come from both the traditional left and the traditional right.

Grillo's anti-parliamentary, anti-party and anti-immigration position and his totalitarian claim that his movement should have no kind of dealings with other parties and aim at conquering 100% of the vote are unquestionably the expression of a rightist agenda.

On the contrary, criticism of social inequality, of the dramatic rise in unemployment, or the protest against the corruption phenomena that ever more frequently occur in the public sphere, are undoubtedly part of a left-wing world view. Along with the extreme opposition to the financial and banking system, pointed out as the enemy of the real economy, of households and small savers.

However, we must stress the new picture that has emerged from the last local elections: they have highlighted the growing difficulties of the 5-Star Movement, which, in my opinion, stem from the disappointment of supporters who voted the movement to bring in change and who, on the contrary, have been left thinking that their vote was just a wasted opportunity. In the aftermath, in fact, of the good results achieved by the 5-Star Movement at the parliamentary elections, it steadfastly declared its unavailability to enter into any kind of negotiation to form a government, despite the Democratic Party's (the party with the largest mandate) search for dialogue.

We must not, however, lose sight of the broader European context. Populist movements fuelled by anti-party and anti-European sentiments, in fact, are not an exclusively Italian phenomenon. Suffice it to mention the movements that have emerged in recent years in Germany, the Netherlands, Greece, Spain and France.

Obviously, the traditional fault lines around which political parties have grown in the twentieth century have lost their ability to serve as the key to understanding society. I am referring to the conflicts between Church and State, between centre and periphery, to the major social conflicts and, in particular, that between labour and capital.

We have witnessed a process of transformation that we could generically call the "Americanization of European political life", featuring an impressive growth of personalization, of the weight of the media and of the interference of the economic and financial powers. This has entailed a loss of autonomy by political parties and, therefore, their increasing permeability to interest groups capable of putting pressure on the political systems.

But there are other key factors to our analysis. The crisis of the political parties, in fact, cannot be understood without reference to the loss of power – and therefore of strength – of national politics as a whole, in the framework of the tumultuous development of economic globalization. This is a process that has uprooted the classical mechanisms on which nation states had been founded and had prospered.

Furthermore, we cannot fully understand the crisis of political parties without taking into account the growing supremacy of economics over politics, which has considerably weakened them, transforming them and eroding their grassroots base, social ties and identity.

In this regard, it has been calculated that, in the 1980s alone, the political parties' grassroots organization practically dropped by half in Germany, the UK and Italy. The parties

chased social change, gradually losing their leading role, progressively turning into “electoral cartels”, and eventually becoming personal parties.

In essence, the political parties’ original role as a bridge between society and the State, the “amphibious” nature of the party as an institution, which had driven them in the past, has been eroded. They have been increasingly identified with the state, thus separating from society and leading to the formation of a separate, featureless political elite, morphed into something resembling pure bureaucrats within the state dimension.

This has been one of the preconditions for the spreading of anti-political and populist mobilisation, which appeals to the *demos* – the people – against the political elites.

The other face of populism is technocracy, consisting in the shift of real power to increasingly unaccountable and unapproachable groups inspired by the economic rationality of what has been called the *pensée unique* (single thought). This has gradually shrunk the space of freedom of politics, rendering its very exercise meaningless, in terms of the power, the strength, the capacity to choose between different options and to influence the real processes of the economy. Politics discloses its lack of alternatives, and is reduced to performing the tasks required by the economic world.

“Do your homework.” No expression can give a better idea of the phase we are going through: European technocracy sets the agenda and politics must limit itself to implementing the directives imposed by the dominant economic rationality.

At the European level, this has also affected the pattern of integration, which has substantially missed the goal of its political and institutional strengthening. Europe’s ruling right-wing parties have expressed themselves exclusively through monetarist and austerity policies, denying opportunities for growth and development and contradicting the values of social inclusion and the social rights that once formed the core of the European integration dream.

It is no coincidence that European integration is the other major target of populist mobilisation. While, at the national level, populists tend to appeal to the people against the elites, at the European level they call on the national *ethnos* against globalization.

Against this backdrop, the crisis of politics in Europe appears as the separation between politics and policies. A dichotomy that could be defined, in Gramscian terms, as the contradiction between the national character of politics and the cosmopolitan nature of economy, whereby the place where decisions are taken is farther and farther away, more and more uncontrollable and in the hands of technocrats.

In short, populism and technocracy are two sides of the current crisis of European democracy. The separation between the forum of political decision-making (reduced to mere administration) and the place of mobilisation causes populist and ideological turbulence. What I mean by ideology here is false consciousness, not the constituent element of a collective movement.

The point now is how the political parties, and therefore democracy, can escape from the stranglehold of populism and technocracy, and recover a vital space in which to develop.

Of course, this involves a critical reflection on the way in which the parties have reacted, in recent years, to these transformations. In my opinion, they have primarily moved with the current, so to speak, trying to steer and balance the processes of personalisation, but basically accepting them as an inevitable drift. And, in fact, in part it was.

In order to counteract the downscaling of the all-encompassing role of the political party, obliged to operate within a highly complex society, with different forms of participation and social mobilisation, the mainstream idea in the past thirty years has been that of a non-ideological and programmatic party.

This is an inevitable process, which also reveals a potential democratic content. However, when it breaks up and removes



the links existing between society and the state, the risk is the weakening of democracy, leading to a form of democracy without quality.

Faced with these pressures, can we go in the opposite direction? And what kind of research and commitment does this require?

I think that we need to undertake a twofold action, moving both upward and downward. Upward because, clearly, Europe's national political parties can go back to having a function only if they have a supranational horizon. As I mentioned earlier, the European cosmopolitan dimension is becoming more and more essential, and connecting with a project that is not merely national could restore a certain vitality to the political party system.

Without denying the complexity and importance of the classic social conflict, the new fault line, in my opinion, now runs between globalised financial capitalism and the widespread social interests of the working citizen. The only solution, in such a context, is to strengthen the capacity of building up politics along this fault line.

Besides this, political parties, in order to regain a meaning, must clearly move in a completely opposite direction to the path they have taken in the past thirty years. They must focus on those elements of identity that over this long period have been increasingly pushed into the background.

In this sense, the problem is not to "re-motivate politics", so that this process can be perceived as an attempt by the political system to regain a leading role within society. The approach, rather, should be to re-motivate the left. I am convinced that politics can build up motivation only as a conflict, as the ability to envisage medium-to-long term alternatives, to make projects and to inspire vision. Implicitly, politics, by re-motivating itself as a conflict, can regain a leading role.

In my opinion, therefore, we need to rediscover the elements of our identity, as opposed to a trend aimed at de-

ideologise politics, at reducing politics to programmes. Indeed, a weak identity politics has diminished the reasons for belonging to a party.

This – I reiterate – is the necessary direction we should be moving in. Besides, politics in Europe today is regaining a meaning precisely due to the left-right conflict, at the level of the institutions, which is once again coming to the forefront after having been hidden for many years. Ultimately, extending this conflict to the supranational level is also a prerequisite for re-motivating politics within individual countries.

Then there is a downward action, with the aim of re-establishing a relationship with society, which of course requires the capacity to act on several fronts, considering various forms and instruments of participation, joint decision-making, but without mythicising. I am referring to the ability, which the large traditional parties have lacked so far, to use the web as a tool for participation and dialogue, while at the same time avoiding the magnification of the web as a new form of assembly system or direct democracy. We know, from experience, how this type of ideologisation has always had strong anti-democratic features. We experienced it in the 1970s and are still experiencing today the anti-democratic nature of this myth. The fact remains, however, that the inability of the political parties, their lack of preparation in exploiting and using all forms of social communication, of involvement, of joint decision-making, is an element of cultural backwardness.

The political parties are searching for patterns of interaction with society that can take the shape of forms of legitimisation. Let's consider the experience of the primary elections, for instance, which, after the Italian example, are now spreading to other European countries, albeit in different ways. In France the primary elections have undoubtedly mobilised grassroots participation around the election of the Socialist presidential candidate.

Of course, it is a vital research, and I think that, from this perspective, the political parties – particularly those we are most interested in – should know how to take up the elements of truth inherent in populism: the appeal to the ordinary citizen against the elites, the protest against the oligarchic nature of power. With respect to these matters, in fact, populist mobilisation can take on an innovative content that we cannot ignore.

The crucial issue, however, is that in the relationship with society we should not disregard the autonomy of politics, i.e. the identitarian and communitarian elements. If we wish politics to start “being a project” again, a vision for the future based on the Gramscian “spirit of separation”, then participation cannot exclude the idea of activism, of belonging.

In short, we can experiment with all forms of interaction, but the party member must once again feel part of a community, which involves rights and duties. If we want to prevent politics from building a separate elite that communicates with civil society over the web and through primaries, the political parties themselves must also go back to being a community that operates on the basis of common convictions, bound by a sense of belonging. The different forms of participation cannot remove the special bond that a party has with its members, who must also be given more power.

On the contrary, if participation cancels their power, because somehow the party becomes permeable and liable to be taken over, letting its decisions be influenced by a sort of “coalition of the willing”, a coalition that is inevitably created under the pressure of the media, this becomes a democratic opening in name only; the substance will inevitably be cultural subordination, the cancellation of identity traits, and the surrender of the autonomy of politics.

This effort *to rebuild a relationship with society*, which must be as open and multifarious as possible, cannot go so far as to sacrifice two concepts that I think are essential: the

autonomy of politics, namely, its ability to make decisions in a self-determined manner, with respect to society at large, and the sense of belonging, that is the vision of the party as a community of members. Otherwise, as I mentioned earlier, the party will inevitably become a professional elite that communicates with society through different channels, but which, ultimately, renounces to its policy-setting functions.

It is a very complex challenge. We need to acknowledge the downscaling of the role of political parties, that the centre of gravity in a democracy should move towards individuals and institutions, that political parties must take on a serving role.

This trend is, possibly, inexorable, but I can see a very strong risk: not only the emptying of democracy, but the loss of the political party as an agent of social change and innovation, a potential that was the *raison d'être* of the large political parties in the contemporary age. This is the risk I am most concerned about. A personal party, in fact, is inevitably a party that waives a horizon of change, greatly impairing the appeal and the very meaning of political parties.

Therefore, no matter how demanding a different line of research is, I believe it to be absolutely essential for a progressive party.



## EITHER THE PEOPLE, OR POPULISM

*Mario Tronti*

Populism, today, is a much talked-about and very controversial topic. Many different interpretations have been offered and, indeed, there's precious little meaningful that can be added to the debate. However, I think that alongside the sociological, political, historical and juridical interpretations, we also need to explore the issue from a political-theoretical perspective. Because populism tends to permeate the space between society and political institutions, it involves the space (precisely the space between society and institutions) which requires a relationship of mediation – something which organized political forces have not been capable of performing correctly both in the immediate past and in the present phase, as a consequence, or a negative effect, of the ongoing devastating crisis of politics. Furthermore, the issue of populism calls on us to reconsider the concept of “people”. In this regard there is a long history of attempted achievements and failed ideas that comes from far back and arrives to the present day. What is “the people” today? This is the question.

In 1870s Russia, a key word was *narodnicestvo*, which derives

from the Russian expression “going to the people” and was used as a label for a group of (mostly young) intellectuals who were rediscovering the peasantry. The traditional rural communities appeared to them as a hatching ground for revolutionaries – the peasants – who could spearhead social change, without going through the intermediate step of capitalism. Lenin scathingly criticized this approach, severing the ambiguous ties that had been in existence between Marxism and populism in Russia, in works such as *What the ‘Friends of the People’ Are and How they Fight the Social-Democrats*, and especially in his brilliant youthful work on *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*.

In the 1880s in the United States, populism is the movement which gives rise to the People’s Party, which also signalled a conflict between the countryside – specifically farmers in the east and the Midwest – and the industrial and financial centres who had the monopoly of power in the East. This movement, however, was short-lived and was soon absorbed in the general growth of the country, although with ideological and pragmatic after-effects typical of the American tradition. In the mid-twentieth century the same underlying factors resurfaced in Latin America, especially in Perón’s Argentina, with a shift from the rural to the urban areas, still with an attention to the more disadvantaged social groups, but with a nationalistic and authoritarian bend.

There is one key feature that radically distinguishes historical from contemporary forms of populism: a conflictual relationship with the dominant reality. While in the past populism was against development, now it is against stagnation. Its target today are the elites who wield full control of the economic and financial system, and especially of the political and institutional system. The rallying cry is for change, for the renewal of the present state of affairs, rather than the defence and preservation of, even less the return to, the past. This is the reason why, alongside traditional right-wing populism, a left-wing brand of populism has also appeared. The reasons are

self-evident. Historically, the various populist movements had the objective of turning back the clock of time, or at least of stopping it in its course, demanding a return to tradition, both national and popular. Today's populist ideologies tend to move with the times, to embrace innovation and modernisation; they represent a degenerated form of "newism": they want to make a clean slate of all the past and they demand a new beginning. They consider themselves enemies of the twentieth century, because they see it as representing a unique history that should not be repeated, with its large political parties, organised politics, the parliamentary State, with its rules and procedures and compromises, the selection of the political class through the taxing workings of the institutions. Instead, the populists vertically simplify the idea of consensus-building, envisioning the direct relationship between a democratic leader (instead of an authoritarian one) and the cheering masses, instead of the organised masses. Instead of government, a leader, and instead of the people, the crowd.

It is hard to say whether it is the anti-political wave that feeds populism, or whether it is populism that fuels anti-politics. Undoubtedly, they are two closely-intertwined new forces, featuring more or less intense degrees of irrationality, which feed off each other and prop each other up, and which are helping to push the current political systems towards forms of self-marginalisation, in favour of the takeover of power by the economic and financial elites. It should be highlighted that the origin of this process dates back to the 1980s. The three decades of neoliberal capitalism, in fact, coincide with the re-birth and growth of populism. Neoliberalism and populism: another huge political problem for the European Left.

Dominique Reynié, in the introduction to *Les droites en Europe*<sup>1</sup>, writes: "The advance of populism throughout Europe

<sup>1</sup> D. Reynié, editor, *Les Droits de l'homme en Europe*, Presse Universitaire de France, Paris, 2012.



since the mid-nineties is mainly the result of changes in the voting behaviour of the working classes. This new populism is an expression of the shift to the right. As a matter of fact, it has also been said that the populist right has become the new left, for the workers abandoned by the socialist parties. The role of Tony Blair's New Labour and of the so-called "Third Way" (the famous *going* beyond the Left and the Right), has often been stigmatized. This left has been accused of being nothing more than a softer version of the political right. The defection from the left parties by the lower-middle classes, however, predates the Third Way. It can already be observed a quarter of a century ago and has advanced in parallel with the crisis of the welfare state and with the advent of economic globalisation. If the working classes are turning their backs on the social democrats preferring the new populists, it is not because the left parties have moved too far to the right (something which probably is not among the top concerns of the workers), but because they are no longer able to defend the working classes in the face of increasing globalization and large-scale immigration. The crisis of the welfare state has to all intents and purposes destroyed the founding tenets of social democracy, while the internationalist universalism of the left parties has prevented them from taking a clear stance on the side of the native workers over the immigrants. The working classes have therefore lost a number of good reasons to support the left parties".

This is what Yves Mény, who has co-authored with Yves Surel the much-appreciated volume on populism and democracy<sup>2</sup>, has called the "despair" of the voters. These common-sense theories simply identify certain trends, without claiming either to explore or to explain them. Therefore, they do not propose any instruments for fighting them. On the contrary

<sup>2</sup> Y. Mény and Y. Surel, editors, *Par le peuple pour le peuple. Le populisme et les démocraties*, Fayard, Paris, 2000.

this is the task at hand. There can be no doubts as to the discontent of the people towards party politics, especially mainstream party politics, on the left and centre of the political spectrum; this discontent gives rise to populism, in its double-sided form: the direct relationship between the leader and the people and anti-politics. But we also need to examine the issue in more detail. First of all, we need to speak of *populisms*, in the plural, to highlight their distinctive characteristics, sometimes expressed in ethnic and national terms. Otherwise populism is likely to become a sort of umbrella term referring to different political movements. Furthermore, it is necessary to highlight the differences between modern-day populisms and the – frankly – more politically dignified forms of populism of the past. The word populism has recently taken on a distinctly negative, almost derogatory, meaning. In fact, the proponents of populist policies do not define themselves as such, but are called populists by their political opponents.

The question we must ask ourselves is how to save the concept of people from the populist drift. There is an increasing risk that even parties that were once mass parties, which viewed themselves as “popular” parties, with mass followings, may evolve, or rather regress, ideologically and pragmatically towards forms of interclassism, shifting upwards towards an unrecognisable political leadership, and downwards, appealing to a more middle-class segment of the population. Of course, there have been profound changes in the living conditions of the population in the more developed economies during the last decades of the twentieth century. The most obvious and surprising is that the industrial and agricultural working classes have lost their central role and that the working-class ethos no longer holds together, identifies and organises the people as such. Yet all these changes have not yet managed to completely destroy the popular foundations of the most advanced contemporary societies. Geographically distributed work patterns, precarious work, the lack of work,

the so-called “dematerialising” of many activities and jobs, the widespread ongoing state of exploitation and alienation, which is widening and deepening, from manual to intellectual workers, is not – objectively – a process that in itself makes a people, but it does make possible the establishment as a people of all those persons who make a living out of their work.

Ernesto Laclau, in his influential work *On Populist Reason*<sup>3</sup>, is critical of populism, while at the same time trying to save the idea of people. This is the right approach, as shown, in part, by the mention I would like to make here of the anomalous Italian situation, both in the past and today. Until a recent past there were in Italy large political parties supported, at the grassroots level, by important segments of the population, rooted in the social history of the country: namely, Catholic popularism, the socialist tradition, and communist diversity. There was a people then, hence there was no need for populism. Unlike today, when populism is rife precisely because the people, as such, no longer exists. At this point it has become necessary to explain the political meaning of people. Because this is exactly what it is. We need to establish when and how, exactly, this sort of “reality concept” dissolved. It occurred at the same time and context with the dissolution of the idea and practice of “class”. And not because the class status has disappeared, but because the reference to social classes has been abandoned by politics. This vacuum has been filled today by populism, which, as we saw earlier, no longer originates from the desire to defend the ancient traditions of a community, but has become a form of aggressive adaptation to the breakdown of all social bonds. An internally united and supportive people has changed into an angry mob of solitary individuals. We must once again investigate, and indeed redefine, the expression “working classes”, at the time of turbo-capitalism: the social composition, the geographical distribu-

<sup>3</sup> E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London, 2005.

tion of communities, the heritage of tradition, languages, dialects, culture, ethnic groups, caught between megacities and the suburbs, and medium and small provincial towns: no longer just *the Country*, but fractions of a Country, with separatist demands. And on top of this gender differences, at the workplace too, because they too act in a positive way in the lower rungs of society. This is a new kind of melting pot, with ambiguously postmodern features.

The concept of people, today, requires more thought and more politics than in the past. The concept of people is a political concept that we need to understand, together with the other secularised theological concepts, such as sovereignty, State, law. “The people” begins as a sacred order. In the Holy Scriptures the Lord said to Abraham, “ I will give you a people”. Jacob Taubes<sup>4</sup> reminds us that, for both Moses and Paul, the issue at stake was “founding” a people, the Jewish people, the Christian people. Thus, prophetic personalities on the one hand, collective historical entities on the other. Did not Marx too – speaking on behalf of the labour movement – found a people, the people at work, the working masses, as a political entity, capable of producing great history? The problem is that the people is either founded, or it creates new idols of own initiative and runs to worship the golden calf. Populism is precisely this. The leader today is not the Machiavellian Prince, the bearer of a mission. It is the point at which the shared sense of being part of a mass coagulates and expresses itself as the instinctual, emotional, irrational, passive victim of a previous – often media-oriented – treatment. And, in fact, it is true that one of the triggering causes that have led to the eruption of populism in the public arena is to be found in the abandonment of the social question as a key issue, by the po-

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J. Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2009 and *The Political Theology of Paul*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2004.

litical parties traditionally and historically responsible for this task. When they stopped acting as the mouthpiece of society, indeed, when they stopped building society through politics, by actively organising the masses so that they might effectively fight for their needs and to protect their interests, they opened the floodgates to the populist protest.

The populism of today is related much more to conditions that are external to the people, rather than to the expression of its most intimate conscious beliefs. There would be no room for the growth of populism without the primacy of the major communication media, without the hegemonic power of the virtual over the real, without the dictatorship of the media, whose message is to create opinions and destroy orientations. We should criticise this widespread enthusiasm for the miraculous virtues of the network, which supposedly creates interrelational relationships among free individuals, with hitherto unseen possibilities for alternative practices. In actual fact, everything is often guided from above: major interests, occult powers, political manoeuvring, which are made to appear as if they were coming from the bottom up so as to be more effective at the top. The organic intertwined relationship between populism and anti-politics tends to conceal the wielding of real power, which can thus move more freely. The populism of today is populism without the people. And while the category of the people required and produced thought, the opposite is true for the current practice of populism, which denies reflection at the root and promotes a visceral reaction to all and any dissatisfaction, discomfort, malaise. Has anyone ever seen a populist leader who needs an intellectual endorsement? Behind him one will always and only find a master of spin. I insist: the lexical shift from the “masses” to the generic “crowd” is indicative of a transition from politics as a conscious collective action directly to its opposite, to the blind actions of subordinate depersonalised individuals.

Which remedies – if indeed any remedies are still at all

possible – can be put into place to stop and possibly reverse this slide, this deterioration, which, day by day, widens and deepens the chasm separating and contrasting individual citizens and the public sphere? I see no other fundamental remedy than a forceful process of rehabilitation of political action and thinking, a rebuilding of the foundations of politics, restoring dignity to the professionalism of those who work in politics, not out of self-interest, but in the name of the “part” – both social and ideal – to which they belong, which they explicitly affirm and practice daily, both publicly and privately. We should not forget that the protest, the anger even, of simple people, workers and the unemployed, is directed against the political class as it is seen at work in everyday life, with its privileges, its remoteness, and last but not least, its corruption: political class and party practice. Therefore, advocating a return to politics is still not enough. The focus should also be on organised politics. How and when and in which new forms. Indeed, another reason why populism succeeds – and with it, inevitably, plebiscitarianism (that is, the desire to establish a direct vertical link between the masses and the leader) – is precisely the refusal of any mediation between the bottom and the top, between society and the institutions, between political choice and representation by an organised body. Political parties, in recent decades, have certainly not set a good example. They have badly fulfilled their social and institutional tasks, they have assimilated, rather than opposed, the worst vices of a civil society, trapped between proprietary individualism, marketisation and corporative interests. There is, and ever will be, no reform of politics without a reform of political parties.

But against all this, the way to go is not through the destruction of political parties, rather through their urgent regeneration. When, after World War II, the political phenomenon of *qualunquismo* exploded in Italy, it was short-lived. Why? Because at the time in the country the form of organ-

ised democracy founded on mass parties was well rooted and was on the rise. The active presence of mass parties in a short while cut the ground from under the feet of this anti-political movement, because the masses recognized themselves in their organizations. If you fail to organise what is below in society, the below will inevitably express itself in spontaneous forms of political immediacy, which however do not produce change, but conservation, that is dependency and subordination of a new kind. The key issue, therefore, is how to reorganise the political playing field, how to select the political players, simultaneously from the bottom up and from the top down, how to return to mediation between society and institutions, through representation, but also through belonging, how to go beyond self-centred attitudes and how to overcome the separation and distancing between politics and everyday life. What one should strive for (and this is above all a cultural endeavour, an endeavour of political culture) is not towards a post-democratic, rather a post-populist season.

Two strategic steps need to be taken. First of all, politics must be freed from the current sway of the economic and, above all, financial elites. Politics needs to regain its primacy; it must take back the helm, so to speak. It needs to beat the economic elites with a new generation of political practitioners. Secondly, there should be a new focus on action, struggle, and organization, at the supranational level in Europe. There can be no political Europe without founding a truly European people. This is not utopia. It's a vision, a mission. It is the *raison d'être* of the Party of European Socialists. No one can give it this purpose but itself.

## COUNTRY CASES



# NOT

THE CHANGING FACES OF POPULISM

# AUSTRIA

## AUSTRIAN POPULISM AFTER THE VICTORY OF THE FPÖ (AUSTRIAN FREEDOM PARTY) IN 1999: THE POLITICAL SUCCESS OF THE DISCURSIVE STRATEGY OF EXCLUSION

*Roberta Pasquarè*

The electoral success of a populist party is a symptom of political and cultural malaise in every democratic system. Austrian populism of the last decade is not an exception; its analysis requires turning one's attention not only specifically to the FPÖ<sup>1</sup>, a party characterised by international political studies as populist<sup>2</sup>, but rather to the Austrian political and cultural context as a whole, in the light of this party's success.

In order to reconstruct the general framework, the facts are thematically analysed below, including the political and social "consociationalism" that has characterised the Austrian

<sup>1</sup> Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, Austrian Freedom Party.

<sup>2</sup> S. Reinfeldt, *Nicht-wir und Die-da. Studien zum rechten Populismus*, Braumüller, Wien, 2000; P. Ignazi, *Extreme Right-Wing Parties in Western Europe*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003; *Die neuen Verführer. Rechtspopulismus und Rechtsextremismus in den Medien*, edited by C. Cippitelli, A. Schwanebeck, Fischer Verlag, München, 2004; *Populisten an der Macht. Populistische Regierungsparteien in West und Osteuropa*, edited by S. Frölich-Steffen, L. Rensmann, Braumüller, Wien, 2005; F. Decker, *Populismus. Gefahr für die Demokratie oder nützliches Korrektiv?* VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, Wiesbaden, 2006.

system since 1945, as well as the breakdown of the classical balance among parties due to globalisation in Austria and elsewhere.

In order to understand the cultural and media success of the FPÖ – evidence of the readiness of both the media and the public to accept and endorse this party’s political discourse – attention should be paid not only to FPÖ’s repository of talking points and strategies, but also to counterpoint dynamics between this repository and the reaction of the non-partisan press.

## **1. The end of the consociational system and formation of the electorate of the excluded**

The economic, social and political process, which offered the FPÖ the decisive chance to establish itself, began to develop in Austria at the end of the 1980s. During this time, the consociational mechanisms, active in the country since the end of WWII, began to collapse due to a combination of complex national and international causes.

From 1945 until 1966 governments were composed of stable cross-party coalitions, made up of the two major parties, the SPÖ (Austrian Social-Democratic Party) and the ÖVP (Austrian Peoples’ Party), and from 1966 till 1986 by unstable majorities with the participation of the FPÖ. On the one hand, starting from the mid-1980s, the Greens (GA)<sup>3</sup> entered the Austrian party system, followed in 1993 by the Liberals (FIL)<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, the FPÖ, led by Jörg Haider since 1986, began to acquire an ever increasing number of followers. This

<sup>3</sup> Grüne Alternative (Green Alternative) a party founded in 1987 by the union of two environmental parties and civil society movements.

<sup>4</sup> Liberales Forum (Liberal Forum) a free-trade liberal party founded in 1993.

shift in the Austrian party system was caused by several specific events, such as the end of the Cold War and Austria's entry into the European Union (1995), as well as by long-term socio-economic dynamics, such as globalisation and the spread of so-called post-materialist values<sup>5</sup>. The latter were first endorsed by a great number of citizens' associations and environmental parties, which, starting from 1987, were then channelled into the GA. As of 1993, however, the free-market paradigm, which became hegemonic after the end of the East-West conflict, was represented by the first truly liberal Austrian party, the FIL, who also advocated for civil liberties and a more secular society. At the same time, the FPÖ attracted voters who were dissatisfied with the economic policies enacted by the SPÖ and ÖVP to enable the country to become part of the Single European Market. These voters were distrustful of the European Union's expansion to countries from the former communist bloc. Other factors contributing to the formation of this new electoral landscape were the changes in the labour market caused by globalisation and the crisis of the welfare system. In this complicated political, economic and social environment, the FPÖ has managed to undermine the traditional parties in the eyes of a growing number of citizens, denouncing them as responsible – because of incompetence and opportunism – for all the national woes. They thereby succeeded in regrouping the voters who left both the SPÖ and ÖVP around a flexible, multifaceted and fundamentally xenophobic nucleus.

As the Austrian political scientist Anton Pelinka explains, starting from the 1990s, the FPÖ managed to surge ahead as a wholly new, anti-system and anti-party party by virtue of its marginal role in the national government up to that time, de-

<sup>5</sup> R. Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution. Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1977.

spite the fact that it was the oldest populist party in Europe (it was founded in 1956). Indeed, Austrian consociational democracy had not been built by the FPÖ, but by other political actors. The so-called “State of the Parties” (*Parteiinstaat*), that is, the control by the state of vast sectors of the economy and society was put in place by the by the SPÖ and ÖVP at the behest of the Soviet Union; the FPÖ had not taken part in the phenomenon of consociationalism, which was expressed at the political level in the form of across-the-aisle parliamentary majorities (ironically dubbed by the media as the SPÖVP); at the economic level as the “organised capitalism” of the unions, industrialists and the government, and, at the social level, in the typical form of multiple membership<sup>6</sup>. In other words, at the time when the two major parties were losing consensus, the FPÖ could claim that it had had no part in the so-called practice of “hyper stabilisation”<sup>7</sup> of the Austrian system. When postmodernism made its way into Austria through globalisation, admission into the EU, growing immigration and the crisis of the welfare state, the FPÖ was viewed as the party of the “losers of globalisation”<sup>8</sup>, the “disillusioned and tired of politics”<sup>9</sup>. Not unlike other European populist parties, the Austrian populist party was able to present itself as a “vicarious identity”<sup>10</sup> for the losers of globalisation and a substitute for the traditional parties in crisis, so that it still maintains a crucial electoral success, even though its policy proposals are

<sup>6</sup> Cf. A. Pelinka, “Die FPÖ im internationalen Vergleich. Zwischen Rechtspopulismus, Deutschnationalismus und Österreich-Patriotismus”, *Conflict & Communication online*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Irena Regener, Berlin, 2002, table p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, pp. 1, 4, 5, 10.

<sup>8</sup> W. T. Bauer, *Rechtsextreme und rechtspopulistische Parteien in Europa*, Österreichische Gesellschaft für Politikberatung und Politikentwicklung – ÖGPP, Wien, 2010, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, pp. 11 and 18 on European populism and pp. 54 and 56 on Austrian populism.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 3.

often considered “an ideology without a *Weltanschauung*”<sup>11</sup> and its leaders “devoid of their enchanting charm”<sup>12</sup>.

As a matter of fact, the FPÖ picked away not only the most conservative and xenophobic voters of the ÖVP<sup>13</sup>, but also, and above all, the labour voters of the SPÖ<sup>14</sup>. In a study of 2000, confirmed in the years thereafter by other political scientists, Plasser and Ulram identified the typical FPÖ voter as a young male worker, not associated with a union, not belonging to a church or civic associations and having a low level of education<sup>15</sup>. In light of these data, by comparing the analysis of the voters from the other parties, both at the local and the national levels, the two researchers found a further element and drew a conclusion. On the one hand, the labour world, instead of looking for representation within the left-wing party, the SPÖ, migrated towards the FPÖ where it became overrepresented. On the other hand, this very fact demonstrates the possibility of identifying a new line of conflict previously unknown in the Austrian system: a conflict defined by one’s

<sup>11</sup> F. Decker, *Populismus. Gefahr für die Demokratie oder nützliches Korrektiv?*, cit., p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> W. T. Bauer, *Rechtsextreme und rechtspopulistische Parteien in Europa*, cit., p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> R. Picker, B. Salfinger, E. Zeglovits, “Aufstieg und Fall der FPÖ aus der Perspektive der Empirischen Wahlforschung: Eine Langzeitanalyse (1986-2004)”, *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft (ÖZP)*, 33 (2004) 3, 263-279, p. 64; on how the FPÖ regrouped the scattered electorate of the SPÖ and ÖVP, on xenophobia and racism, see H. Czernin, editor, *Wofür ich mich meinetwegen entschuldige. Haider, beim Wort genommen*, Wien, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> The increase in workers’ votes of the FPÖ affected its total electorate: 1986: 10%; 1990: 21%; 1994: 29%; 1995: 34%; 1999: 47%. A. Pelinka, “Die FPÖ in der vergleichenden Parteienforschung. Zur typologischen Einordnung der Freiheitlichen Partei Österreichs”, *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft (ÖZP)*, 31 (2002) 3, pp. 281-290, p. 285. J. Flecker and S. Kirschenhofer, *Die populistische Lücke. Umbrüche in der Arbeitswelt und Aufstieg des Rechtspopulismus am Beispiel Österreichs*, Sigma, Berlin, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> *Das österreichische Wahlverhalten*, edited by F. Plasser, P. A. Ulram, F. Sommer, Sigma, Wien, 2000, p. 231-233.

greater or lesser capacity to adapt to (post)modernity. In order to attract and consolidate voters, the Austrian Liberal Party, the party of the “losers of globalisation”, made use of a practical communications device that may be summarised as the “strategy of exclusion”. This, according to the political scientist Hans-Georg Betz, characterises the FPÖ to such a degree that one can define it as the party of *exclusivist populism*<sup>16</sup>.

The aggressiveness of Austrian populism, not an isolated case in Europe in this respect, consists of referring to an original, harmonious community of hard-working citizens who are clearly different from other individuals, not so much in terms of specific and objective differences (language, religion, social composition, work activities, etc.), as in terms of superiority. In other words, the existence of an original, harmonious community must be protected from any contact, contagion or invasiveness by people who do not belong to the community and would thus be detrimental to it.

The FPÖ places boundaries around the happy citadel of the “original” population on the basis of three lines of demarcation which must be constantly guarded. The first boundary line is vertical: it separates the community of honest, hard-working citizens, capable of recognising and peacefully pursuing their collective and individual interests from scheming and good-for-nothing politicians. In this specific case, FPÖ attacks are directed at the chummy politicking of the SPÖ and ÖVP as well as the “regulatory madness” of the EU. The second boundary line is horizontal and separates a linguistic, cultural and ethical community, perfect in itself and self-sufficient, from extraneous and perverting elements, such as the immigrants from Eastern Europe, Slovenians from Carinthia and, above all, Muslims, who are attributed with all kinds

<sup>16</sup> H.-G. Betz, “Exclusionary Populism in Austria, Italy and Switzerland”, *International Journal*, 56 (3), 2001; also <http://www.renner-institut.at/download/texte/betz2.pdf>.

of fundamentalist generalisations. The third boundary line (which will be discussed at greater length in the next paragraph and which doesn't only involve the FPÖ) is less easy to define. It is the invisible boundary, which the media – not only those close to the FPÖ – is always trying to make more visible, between “us” and the “others”: the infiltrators, the ungrateful, the spies the backstabbers. More specifically, they are the do-gooders and intellectuals, always defending women's rights, homosexuals, transgender people, immigrants and minorities, including the Jews who constantly plot from Washington to damage a country – Austria – which once received and saved them. In light of the aggressiveness of the political positions of the FPÖ and its press, and of the official and unofficial activities of the youth organisations linked to it, it would be quite an understatement to define the FPÖ simply as a populist party. Indeed, considering the ideological and personal continuity with Austro-German National Socialism one can agree with Pelinka and Neugebauer in going further and describe it as an extreme-right party.

There are a number of features that the FPÖ shares with other European populist parties (racism, xenophobia, homophobia, reference to the harmonious unity of the original community, will to replace the oppressive systems of parliamentary democracy with those of “authentic” democracy, such as referendums and the choice of the leader by acclamation, etc.). The FPÖ however presents two distinct aspects: age and success. Unlike other European populist parties, which in general have been founded recently, the FPÖ has been in existence since 1956<sup>17</sup> and, also unlike its counterparts, for at least the last fifteen years it has been one of the three major parties at the national level. Its capacity to iden-

<sup>17</sup> A. Pelinka, *Die FPÖ im internationalen Vergleich. Zwischen Rechtspopulismus, Deutschnationalismus und Österreich-Patriotismus*, cit., pp. 3 and 11; and id., *Die FPÖ in der vergleichenden Parteienforschung. Zur typologischen Einordnung der Freiheitlichen Partei Österreichs*, cit., pp. 285 ff.



tify itself as the anti-party party during the years of the breakdown of the consociational system, as well as the cultural success of its exclusionary positions, have played a significant role in the longevity and success of the FPÖ.

## 2. Populist communication: the discourse of exclusion and the metadiscourse of exposure

The FPÖ and its media outlets have occupied a central position in creating an atmosphere of permanent scandal and crisis across the continent<sup>18</sup>. As Werner A. Perger pointed out, Austrian populism has had a great influence in Europe, by setting a political agenda (xenophobia, equation of immigration with crime, placing the blame on the intellectuals, Brussels paternalism, etc.) and by embracing a method of action (intimidation of non-compliant journalists, heroic self-victimisation)<sup>19</sup> at the centre of which is the break with the politically correct.

### ***a) The break with the politically correct: the metadiscourse of exposure***

In order to understand the cultural success of FPÖ communication and, in light of it, the position populism was able to occupy in the Austrian media, a 2002 study on political correctness by the historian and political scientist Katrin Auer<sup>20</sup> is especially enlightening. By analysing the expression “politically correct” as a concept, as a discourse and as a metadiscourse,

<sup>18</sup> W. A. Perger, “Haiders Schatten auf Europa”, *Die Zeit*, 26/2002, defines this phenomenon as the “Haiderization of Europe”.

<sup>19</sup> Werner T. Bauer, *Rechtsextreme und rechtspopulistische Parteien in Europa*, cit. p. 12 ff.

<sup>20</sup> K. Auer, “Political Correctness’ – Ideologischer Code, Feindbild und Stigmawort der Rechten”, *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft (ÖZP)*, 31 (2002) 3, pp. 291-303.

Auer exposes its quality as a stigma word, a tool for identifying the enemy and, in the last analysis, a means for the assertion of antidemocratic values. The concept of political correctness, that is, its meaning as derived from the various contexts in which it is used, is called into question by critics who define it as the refusal to tell things as they are. It is even portrayed as a deliberate lie, or as showing a lack of sense of humour and the courage of one's own true convictions. In this sense, Auer continues, political correctness is a stigmatised phrase, or rather a term used to negatively connote the person or object to whom it is being attributed. In Austria in the mid-1990s, the magazine *Wiener* took it upon itself to define political correctness as "the intimidating tyranny of those who only have half-knowledge and are devoid of sense of humour"<sup>21</sup>. The same magazine then spared no efforts to ignite a discussion on political correctness, that is, both its contents and its proponents. The objective of this discussion was to "inflame these kinds of people... these good people, the politically correct", by "telling jokes about homosexuals, black people and other such vulgarities [...]. Stand up for freedom of all opinions, even those from the right. [...] Affirm that there are differences of intelligence among the races"<sup>22</sup>.

In the discourse in political journalism about political correctness, the affirmation of principles typical of democracy – the rights of women, homosexuals and transgender, common-law couples, both hetero and gay, immigrants and non-Christian believers – was drained of democratic value and stigmatised, starting from the mid-1990s, with increasing force and frequency, as: "Dogma, inquisition, censure, incitement, residue of the Third Reich, linguistic etiquette [...], apartheid of discourse, Balkanisation of thought, rhetorical-discursive wish for

<sup>21</sup> Excerpt from *Wiener* Nr. 191, April 1996, referred to by K. Auer, cit., p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

annihilation, thought police or terrorism of intentions”<sup>23</sup>. Contrary to this, FPÖ sympathisers and readers of its press were presented as the real victims of tormentors who claim ownership of the victimhood narrative. FPÖ supporters were called to a manly resistance against the lies of the politically correct, to describe reality as it truly is, and to fight to reaffirm truth and freedom of opinion.

More specifically, FPÖ discourse was intended to produce a split (the third line of the boundary mentioned above) between “the people”, individuals who know and experience the truth in their daily lives, and the *Gutmensch*, a term more or less akin to do-gooder. The *Gutmensch*, a neologism that only recently entered Austrian parlance, is he who can flaunt “a foreign friend”, he for whom “foreigners are all good people”.<sup>24</sup> By accusing those who tell it like it is of fascism and racism, he turns the victims into tormentors and the tormentors into victims. The term quickly acquired an anti-Semitic connotation, starting from negationist circles, as a result of which the reversal in the roles of victim and tormentor acquired a particularly effective ideological twist: Austria – a country that cheered the annexation by Nazi Germany and which, with a population of only 6.5% of the overall Third Reich population, contributed 33% of its ruling class and 75% of the commanding officers of its concentration and extermination camps<sup>25</sup> – is replaced by the Austrians – a population innocent of all guilt, but nevertheless forced to pay morally and financially dubious compensation to self-proclaimed victims and their descendents<sup>26</sup>. This victimisation then assumed the features

<sup>23</sup> K. Auer, cit., p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 10 ff.

<sup>25</sup> W. Kempf, “Die Konstruktion nationaler Identität in der österreichischen Presse seit 45”, *Conflict & Communication online*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Irena Regener, Berlin, 2002, p. 7n.

<sup>26</sup> On how and to what extent antisemitism in Austria is a deeply-rooted phenomenon in the population and used deliberately by the FPÖ, one can see the overview in the press over the last 15 years offered by Heribert

of a veritable syndrome of encirclement synthesised into the expression “East Coast”.<sup>27</sup> This alludes to the economic, political and cultural machinations concocted by Israel and implemented by Washington with the collaboration of the ungrateful Austrian Jewry – those same Jews who in Austria once took refuge and were protected. It also encompasses the intellectuals, who are seen as truly responsible for the discontent of the population. In order to identify and defend themselves against these persons and their views – elements clearly less recognisable than those making up the vertical and horizontal boundaries mentioned above – the FPÖ media (but also the magazine *Wiener*) drafted and distributed practical guides or handbooks on the topics they may have to discuss in order to recognise with whom they are dealing and learn how to respond.

#### ***b) Austria before all: the turning point in Austrian Patriotism***

When one speaks of Austrian nationalism, a distinction must be made between the earlier nationalism, of which Austria was the *theatre*, and a more recent nationalism, of which Austria was the *object*. In fact, in Austrian history, there have been many forms of nationalism and patriotism, radically different in aims and stance from one another.<sup>28</sup> During the

Schiedel, *Die FPÖ und der Antisemitismus - Ein lange verdrängter Aspekt*, site of the Documentary Archives of the Austrian Resistance, <http://www.doew.at/thema/fpoe/schiedel.html>, and some statistics reported by Werner T. Bauer, cit., p. 56 (e.g.: “14% of Austrians, but 30% of the voters of the FPÖ agree with the statement ‘it would be better not to have Jews in Austria’”).

<sup>27</sup> As, for example, in 2001 Haider placed Austrians in front of a choice: “the East Coast or the Heart of Vienna”; *ibid*.

<sup>28</sup> See, specifically W. Kempf, “Die Konstruktion nationaler Identität in der österreichischen Presse seit ‘45’”, cit. and S. Frölich-Steffen, “Die Identitätspolitik der FPÖ: Vom Deutschnationalismus zum Österreich-Patriotismus”, *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft (ÖZP)*, 33 (2004) 3, p. 281-295.

Habsburg era, for example, patriotism expressed ethnic or dynastic loyalty. After the Congress of Vienna it took the form of political assertion of Catholicism and adherence to the Restoration and, from the second half of the nineteenth century and for over a century, of an ideological dependence on Germany. It was this dependence on Germany that, starting from the 1990s, Haider's FPÖ managed to sever, giving rise to the unprecedented phenomenon of a nationalism aimed at Austria as an autonomous, ideological subject.

Starting from the years of the unification of Germany (1870) and the foundation of the Austrian Empire and Hungarian Monarchy (1871) – a geopolitical structure masterfully portrayed by the novelist Robert Musil in *The Man Without Qualities* as Kakania – Austrian patriotism was conceived as Germanic nationalism and as a reflection of the German nation. So, during the years of the First Republic (1918-1938), Austria was not considered a nation either by its own inhabitants or the political class. An indication of this was the fact that the new nation was defined as German Austria (*Deutsch-österreich*) in the founding act of 12 November 1918 and the same founders of the republican government saw the annexation by the German state as the fulfilment of the newborn republic.<sup>29</sup> Following this mood, the *Anschluss*, that is, the annexation in 1938 to Nazi Germany, was welcomed enthusiastically by the Austrian population and considered a healing of the fracture opened by the *Kleindeutschland* (small-Germany) option asserted by Bismarck. For the first fifty years of its existence, the Second Austrian Republic (founded in 1945) would be the theatre of two types of nationalism: the national-German patriotism of the FPÖ and the so-called *chic populism*<sup>30</sup>. The latter, defined by Wilhelm Kempf as the “symbiotic

<sup>29</sup> W. Kempf, cit., p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> W. Kempf, cit., p. 3.

alienation of the population from the nation”<sup>31</sup>, is expressed as a celebration of the glories of past centuries. It draws on the history of Vienna as the capital of the Holy Roman Empire, Austria as the bulwark of Christianity, successfully stopping the attacks of the Ottoman Empire, and on *Austria Felix*, the sole European power not torn by wars of succession, among other things. One sees in it the frivolity of the Viennese *fin de siècle* (Vienna of the Waltz, Sacher-Torte, the architectural splendours of the Habsburgs, etc.). Yet it does not lead to true patriotism or, for that matter, to historic, political and cultural criticism.

However, until the coming of Haider in the mid-1990s, the patriotism of the FPÖ was a sort of nationalism that was set up in ideological and personal continuity with Austro-German National Socialism<sup>32</sup>. Its representatives – including Haider himself during the early years – resumed both themes and language of the National Socialism of the *Anschluss*. They adopted the term and the ideology of “abortion” used by Hitler when referring to Austria, a country that was originally German and, thus, had to be annexed again to Germany<sup>33</sup>.

In the mid-1990s, Haider stuck to the language and stylistic aspects of the classical nationalism of the FPÖ, and therefore of German National Socialism (blood ties, racism, expulsion of foreign elements, etc.). However, taking the opportunity represented by the European elections of 1999, he launched an ideology that placed Austria at the centre of the new nationalism of the FPÖ. The success of this ideological message took concrete form in the assertion of the separation between the nation and the state, in which the nation would be the “com-

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, p. 1 and 13.

<sup>32</sup> A. Pelinka, “Die FPÖ im internationalen Vergleich. Zwischen Rechts-populismus, Deutschnationalismus und Österreich-Patriotismus”, *Conflict & Communication online*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Irena Regener, Berlin, 2002, p. 3 and W. T. Bauer, cit., pp. 53 ff.

<sup>33</sup> W. Kempf, cit., p. 7 and S. Fröhlich-Steffen, cit., p. 5.

munity of blood”, neglected and exploited by the Austrian political class, and put down and oppressed by the European political class. The internal enemies of this new nationalism, which purports to defend the “Austrian blood” and to put an end to the “excess of foreign elements”<sup>34</sup>, are drawn from a very wide range: Slovenians from Carinthia, immigrants, Jews of faith or origin<sup>35</sup>, homosexuals and – over the last ten years – immigrants of the Muslim faith, the dreaded wave of immigrants coming from the new member-states of the EU, and Turkey, whose entrance into Europe was strongly opposed by Heinz-Christian Strache, President of the FPÖ since 2005.

### **3. The electoral message of Strache’s FPÖ: personalisation, identification and creation of the enemy**

Heinz-Christian Strache, President of the FPÖ since 2005<sup>36</sup>, was no less inclined than his better known predecessor, Jörg Haider, to use the standard images and language of the extreme right, and was equally close to the neo- and pro-Nazi circles.

Born in Vienna in 1961 to parents from the Sudetenland, Strache grew up and was educated, both professionally and politically, in the Austrian capital. In 2000, he quit his profession as a dental technician to dedicate himself full-time to a political career, which he began in the position of district councillor from 1991 to 1996. From the beginning Strache presented himself as the defender of Viennese culture and

<sup>34</sup> W. Kempf, cit., p. 7 and S. Fröhlich-Steffen, cit., p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> On the antisemitism of the FPÖ, see H. Schiedel, *Die FPÖ und der Antisemitismus - Ein lange verdrängter Aspekt*, cit.

<sup>36</sup> N. Horacek and C. Reiterer, *HC Strache: sein Aufstieg, seine Hintermänner, seine Feinde*, Ueberreuter, Wien, 2009; H. Schiedel, *Der rechte Rand. Extremistische Gesinnungen in unserer Gesellschaft*, Edition Steinbauer, Wien, 2007.

later on of all Austria against the dangers emanating from non-Germanic cultures. From 1998, he served simultaneously as President of the third district (*Landstraße*) of Vienna and President of the youth association of the FPÖ *Ring Freiheitlicher Jugend* (Youth Freedom Ring), considered by Wolfgang Neugebauer, the Director of the Archives of the Austrian Resistance (DÖW), as an extreme-right organisation. His first political success, which he obtained in alliance with the ÖVP in 2001 in his capacity as president of the FPÖ group in the Municipality of Vienna, was to legislate on the unconstitutionality of municipal citizenship for non-EU residents, which had been promoted by the Greens and SPÖ. After becoming President of the FPÖ for Vienna in 2004, he promoted a popular referendum against the entrance of Turkey into the European Union, an issue which in the ensuing months would provoke a break with Jörg Haider. After a xenophobic electoral campaign, dominated by the Turkish threat (*Vienna cannot become Istanbul*), prior to the Viennese state elections of 2005, Strache's FPÖ obtained 14.8% of the vote, which, although 5% less than the previous round of voting, was an impressive result in light of the split of Haider and his faction from the FPÖ. In 2006, following an electoral campaign in which the aversion to Turkey was accompanied by more general xenophobic messages (presented in rap form by Strache himself) and homophobic messages, the FPÖ obtained 11% of the votes at the general elections, thus becoming the third party in parliament. The following year Strache contributed to the formation of the European faction "Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty" which was dissolved a few months after. In 2008 he told the Serbian daily newspaper *Vesti* that he was a "friend of the Serbs" and was against the newborn State of Kosovo, in evident contradiction with the principle of self-determination of the population he had endorsed just the year before when supporting the cause of more freedom for Alto Adige - Südtirol. Yet again, in 2008, the FPÖ obtained 17.5% at the general



elections and 27% at the elections for the Viennese state in October 2010 (it was another chance to compose a new rap song) confirming its position as the second party of the capital city, after the SPÖ with its 49%.

The electoral posters of Strache's FPÖ campaigns<sup>37</sup> reveal, with great clarity and repetitiveness, a number of constants which summarise his strategy of personalisation of the party, identification of the people with its leader, and creation of the enemy.

### ***a) The creation of the enemy***

Whatever the composition of persons who make up the "us" and "them", the "them" is always represented as an enemy, and the presentation of the political platform of the FPÖ is never detached from the figure of the enemy. The reference may be direct, as in the case of electoral posters that explicitly name what is to be feared (Islam, the current Mayor of Vienna, Turkey in Europe, the SPÖ, etc.), or indirect, as in the case of posters in which a slogan or a catchword alludes to what had been said or done in other situations (slogans such as "let's finally give our youth a chance" or "our land for our children" allude to the failure of others' policies, and makes Austrian youth, and not immigrants, the beneficiary of FPÖ policies).

The enemies Strache promises to defend the population against are mainly the European Union, non-Germanic cultures and the duo SPÖ-ÖVP; they are attacked individually or sometimes grouped into a single entity, a single enterprise of destructive complicity. Thus, for example, the campaign against the financial rescue of Greece became an occasion to remind people of the dangers of the Euro, which the FPÖ had warned

<sup>37</sup> The electoral posters at issue are available on the internet site <http://www.strache.at/2010/>.

against. Austria, the narrative goes, would now be exposed due to the inept and ill-advised policies of the Greens, SPÖ and ÖVP and to the political ineffectiveness and corruption of the Greek government.

On the other hand, during the European electoral campaign of 2009, which was fought as “a final settling of the scores”, the need for a strong FPÖ representation in Europe was not described as the attempt to make a local project into a transnational one. Rather it was said that this “is the only way of making those dumbheads understand”, that the objective is to “get in well in order to get out better” by electing “representatives of the people and not eurotraitors”. Another typical example is offered by one of the electoral posters of the campaign for the Municipality of Vienna of 2010<sup>38</sup>, which read “We protect free women. The SPÖ forces them to wear a veil”. The slogan is followed by five lines of print, in which fear is expressed of the colonisation of Vienna by Muslims, who want to erect minarets and who “trample on human rights”, all as a consequence of the “misguided interpretation of tolerance by the SPÖ”.

### ***b) Personalisation of the party and identification of the population with its leader***

In FPÖ propaganda during the 1990s, Haider was the leader who “knows what you want”, but the emotional height was

<sup>38</sup> The typical format of electoral posters for the Vienna 2010 campaign is as follows: at the top, on the left side, in printed upper-case letters, there is a slogan which promotes the “us” of the FPÖ; just below that, in printed lower-case letters, smaller and enclosed in a rectangle, the damage that the SPÖ (party of the mayor in office) had caused and would continue to cause. After this, in 4-6 lines, a bleak summary of the status quo and the impending threat. Below this, announced by the expression “FPÖ-HC Strache brings about:” are the concrete measures the FPÖ pledges to take. In the bottom right, a shiny red circle on the lower border (a guarantee stamp) contains the words “Say yes to Strache”.

reached during Strache's presidency of the party, when he was portrayed as the leader who "wants what you want". With Haider the link between the people and its leader consisted in the leader's capacity to interpret the will of the people. Under Strache the link becomes immanent and the will of the people identical to the will of the leader, despite a strongly hierarchical party structure modelled on a party of insiders<sup>39</sup>.

The leader's appeal to the people (never the object of a rational construct and based on emotional suggestions), often follows the linguistic clichés and metaphors of German and Austrian National Socialism. Thus, on the one hand you have the "Viennese blood" and on the other "the excess of foreign elements"<sup>40</sup>. "Austria before all" is contrasted with social policies of income distribution which also benefit the immigrant population. "The crucifix in the classroom" and "Santa Claus in kindergarten playgrounds" are juxtaposed with "the incomprehensible German spoken by the jobless guest worker". In general, there is a constant appeal to the people not to be fooled by the deceptions of multiculturalism, passed off by the SPÖ as peaceful coexistence. People are exhorted to have "more courage in the defence of our Viennese blood" and to listen to what we – FPÖ leaders – mean when we say that "too many foreigners are not good for anybody".

There was one electoral poster used in the Vienna Council

<sup>39</sup> H.-G. Betz, "Rechtspopulismus in Westeuropa: Aktuelle Entwicklungen und politische Bedeutung", *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaften*, 32 (3), pp. 251-264 and "Radikaler Rechtspopulismus im Spannungsfeld zwischen neoliberalistischen Wirtschaftskonzeptionen und antiliberaler autoritärer Ideologie", in D. Loch and W. Heitmeyer, editors, *Schattenseiten der Globalisierung*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M., 2001, pp. 167-185.

<sup>40</sup> *Überfremdung*, a term that can be translated as "excessive presence (or introduction) of foreign elements", was the term used by Hitler and national-socialist journalism, then revived by Haider to indicate non-Arian cultures on German soil.

electoral campaign of October 2010 which best exemplifies the way in which emotional appeal is combined with rational reasoning. On the right-hand side of the poster is Strache, who occupies one third of the space – white shirt, on a white background, sleeves rolled up to the elbows, a striped tie in a blue darker than the light blue of the FPÖ symbol – smiling and drawing the attention of the observer with his index finger pointed. Dominating the left-hand side, in red and black, is the main slogan: “We want integration rather than fake tolerance”. On the lower edge of this inscription, in smaller, slanted black letters, highlighted in red, is the notice “The ÖVP places itself at the service of Häupl’s policies”<sup>41</sup>. Immediately below is a summary of the recent actions by Strache’s political opponents: “In Vienna, SPÖ-Häupl stubbornly ignores the massive problems of integration and even wants Turkish schools. The ÖVP is making no resistance to the SPÖ. On the contrary: Marek<sup>42</sup> and Co. are selling out in order to get into a coalition with the SPÖ”. After a blank line, working as a counterpoint, is the description of FPÖ’s position: the “SPÖ and ÖVP criticise FPÖ and H.C. Strache for their attempts at true integration. But, in reality, we are just expressing what eminent conservative politicians are saying in other countries”. At this point the poster’s argument is based on German authority, that is, on the statements made by German politicians whose policies are respected by the international community, policies which are said to be quite similar to the ones held by the FPÖ. “Read it yourselves”: “The principle must be affirmed, says Angela Merkel, that children and young people of Turkish origin are to attend German schools”. Edmund Stoiber (CSU): “Politics must finally be prepared to state even awkward truths. Better integration is among them and, above all, it is a standing duty

<sup>41</sup> Michael Häupl, a member of the SPÖ and Mayor of Vienna starting from 1995.

<sup>42</sup> Christine Marek, Chairman of the ÖVP of Vienna and leading candidate in the elections of 2010.

of our fellow foreign citizens residing here". Joachim Hermann (also CSU) concludes: "A further wave of immigration would put a strain on the integration capacity of our country". At the bottom, the poster closes with the guarantee "Because I believe in YOU", the symbol of the FPÖ and the indication of the internet site that Strache launched as "Viennese blood".

There are two fundamental omissions in the content of the poster. First, the integration policies that the FPÖ would implement, if elected, are not mentioned. A comparison with the party's statements on the issue of immigration on other occasions reveals quite a different message. It is quite clear that the FPÖ's political discourse on this subject is not about integration, but rather exclusion. The second missing point is the lack of context in the statements quoted as "German authority", none of which supports FPÖ's typical position of the "excess of foreign elements". Apart from the conceptual inaccuracy of Stoiber, who uses the terms "citizen" and "foreigners" with reference to the same person, immigrants are called fellow citizens, and not "advocates of Islamist hate, who get away with stirring up conflicts on the pretext of freedom of religion". The principle stated by Chancellor Merkel is accompanied in Germany by a number of practical political measures: intensive language courses and civic initiatives, such as the opening of multicultural centres which the German majority parties do not portray as places of "dubious activity".

Other examples of how the will of the people is made to coincide with the will of the leader are found in a number of posters in which Strache meets with various groups: factory workers ("justice"), young people ("future"), elderly people in distress ("finally some respect"), and – in the most representative poster, in which Strache assumes the role of a father figure – a mother and child ("future at last"). In other posters, the purpose of which is to indicate the difference between the socialism of the SPÖ and the concept of society as propounded by the FPÖ, the message is clearly that it is the SPÖ

who has deprived the elderly of respect, the workers of justice and young of their future.

In general, the analysis of the contents of the political communication of Strache's FPÖ (electoral posters, the party's internet site<sup>43</sup>, discursive and metadiscursive strategies) reveals a strategy of identifying persons and practices that sets an "us", benevolent and salvific, against a "them", malevolent and dangerous, without degrees or logical coherence. On the one hand you have the criminalising discourse, and on the other the metadiscourse about the priggishness of its adversaries. There is an absence of a real critical analysis of topics and principles, beyond the slogans "We are for you", "They are against HIM, because HE is with YOU". There is no third modality for comparing adversaries or communicating with the voters. For example, in the FPÖ's propaganda, the issue of the welfare state, which not only requires technical know-how, but also a stance based on principle, is either reduced to an unspecified concept of "justice", or is resolved by attacking the non-qualified and parasitic immigration for which the SPÖ is responsible. It would therefore appear that the crisis of the welfare state was caused by unchecked immigration, so that the only policy that needs to be enacted is to stop it.

To sum up, the people, that harmonious unity of a hard-working, moral, native community – which is assumed as an axiom – is contrasted with the inept and deceitful political parties (SPÖ and ÖVP), with a fraudulent and oppressive European Union, with slimy and hypocritical intellectuals (the defenders of the politically correct); and finally with dangerous interlopers (immigrants, particularly Muslims). The discursive strategy on this includes the irreconcilable conflict between "us" and "them" and the suppression of "them". Thus, this strategy seeks to construct networks of guilty complicity among all those who do not belong to "Viennese blood" as represented by the will of the leader.

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.fpoe.at/>

# FERR

THE CHANGING FACES OF POPULISM

# FRANCE

## POPULISM AND NEOLIBERALISM IN FRANCE AND ITALY

*Pierre Musso*

The issue of “populisms” in Europe is often addressed without looking into the notion, inspired by the simplistic opposition between the supporters of “good” democracy, of tolerance and parties in power, on the one hand, and the surge of movements, parties or individuals credited with – or discredited as – being “populist”, even if they emerge from the people themselves. “Populism” comes across as pseudo-democratic, although it can be defined as essentially antidemocratic. If democracy is, by default, the expression of the sovereign power of the people, then when and to what extent can we qualify certain forms of communication or organisation as “populist”? It ensues that we need to explore the notion of populism before dealing with any other form of political organisation. Populism, in fact, can also be a trait of conventional political parties, across the political spectrum – as a “style” rather than an ideological platform – typical of certain contemporary forms of Neoliberalism in the South of Europe, such as Sarkozyism in France and Berlusconiism in Italy. Despite the differences between the two countries, the contigu-



ity of these two brands of “Latin” Neoliberalism has led to the coining of a new compound term “sarkoberlusconism”<sup>1</sup>, which can be styled – in form if not in essence – as “populist” or, better, “popularist”.

The notion of populism marks the crisis of political representation, but it can restrict the interpretation and obfuscate the phenomenon to be analysed. The term “populism”, in fact, tends to discredit both players in conventional political representation: the “represented” people, reduced to the role of passive audience, and the “representative” of the people – the political leader – exhibited in the part of a tribune, in order to invalidate his approach.

## 1. Neoliberal populism or popularism?

The word populism is a “pseudo-concept”, evanescent, weak, vague, flexible ... and overexploitation has stripped it of all content. Pierre-André Taguieff qualifies it as a “portmanteau word” or a “non-experienced concept”. In its worst connotation it is taken to coincide with extremist demagoguery<sup>2</sup>. The bottom line is that populism cannot be made to coincide with any specific political discourse or fixed ideological position. Populism is, rather, a lifestyle, a rhetoric, which, for over a century now, has intermittently flared up in all countries, fanned by politicians of all convictions, from the extreme left to the extreme right. Taguieff highlights how populism is a polemic term, defined as “a political style, grounded on the systematic use of the rhetorical stratagem of appealing to the

<sup>1</sup> P. Musso, *Le sarkoberlusconisme*, Editions de l’Aube, 2008, and *Le sarkoberlusconisme, la crise finale?* Editions de l’Aube, La Tour d’Aigues, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Y. Surel, “Berlusconi, leader populiste”, *La tentation populiste au coeur de l’Europe*, La Découverte, Paris, 2003.

public and on charismatic legitimation, as keys to driving political change”<sup>3</sup>. Such a style is actually an “empty mould”, devoid of content, because it constitutes neither an ideology, nor a political system. If populism is reduced to nothing more than a style, a language, or even the behaviour of a leader, then the notion can be used, but only within a limited range. Ernesto Laclau, in his attempt to develop a theory of populism, acknowledges that the word is used imprecisely and in too many ways: “Populism is a very recurrent but highly elusive concept. In contemporary political analysis, very few words have been so extensively used, yet so imprecisely defined”. Right-wing populism, he stresses, feeds on the bewilderment of social groups abandoned by the left, which should be concerned in organising and representing them.

The notion’s ambiguity, which is key to its overutilisation, serves the sole purpose of enhancing its disparaging connotations, and the word – combined with media manipulation – has been turned into an umbrella term covering a broad range of different situations. In any case, it is always used with a negative meaning, in expressions such as “populist drift”, “populist temptation” or “populist threat”. “Populism” is denounced as the very embodiment of the “European Evil”, at the core of the ongoing division and conflict that has been plaguing the continent over the last two decades. Apparently, it is fuelled by the ethno-cultural rearrangements taking place in European society, due to the perception of immigration as the root of all evils, especially the rise in unemployment. In developing countries, says Alain Touraine, populism is viewed as the “infantile disorder of democracy”; by analogy, we could add here that it is also the “senile disorder” of developed countries. Thus, populism has become the giveaway sign of

<sup>3</sup> P.-A. Taguieff, *L’illusion populiste. Essai sur les démagogies de l’âge démocratique*. Foreword to the second edition, p. 9, Flammarion, Paris, 2007.

the fear of the ageing European population, caught between globalisation and the perception of immigration. According to others, populism combines social protest and opposition to the so-called “elites” with chauvinism, manifesting itself through media exploitation of the leader’s performance, especially the so-called “popular” press and generalist television. Populism has become a catchword used to discredit certain politicians, as opposed to a democratic ideal grounded on “good governance” and what Habermas calls argumentative discussion.

According to Jacques Rancière<sup>4</sup>, populism has three key traits: first of all, “it addresses the people directly, circumventing their representatives and leading figures”; secondly “it exploits a rhetoric grounded on identity, expressing the fear and rejection of foreigners”; lastly, “it maintains that governments and the established elites are driven by their own private interests, rather than by the desire to forward the public interest”. Populism is basically “anti-elite”, it celebrates the pathos of the “man of the street”, focusing on direct communication with ordinary people. Populism provides an easy black-and-white world view, in which the defenceless people are pitted against the incompetent – and even corrupt – elites, which have come to create a separate caste. The basic message of all forms of populism can be summed up in the rejection of any kind of intermediate representative institution, considered useless at best or downright harmful at worst. This rejection is imbued with dreams of immediacy, proximity, direct contact and transparency, i.e. the down-scaling or outright elimination of political representation.

The indeterminate concept of “populism”, in fact, rests on the ambivalent notion of “people”, which can designate both a specific identity, *ethnos*, and a general body of citizens, the *demos*. Populism confuses (or has pretended to confuse) the

<sup>4</sup> J. Rancière, “Non, le peuple n’est pas une masse brutale et ignorante”, *Libération*, 3 January 2011.

two concepts of *ethnos* – the alleged “historical and cultural identity” of the people – and *demos* (or *populus*). The *ethnos* embodies the identity of a community sharing a common history and culture, as opposed to the “foreigners”, regardless of their provenance. The *demos* (that is, the *populus*) is a composite body, comprising the *democratic demos*, the body civic, also including the meaning given to it by Rousseau, the sovereign whose general will is indivisible, and the *social demos*, meaning the man of the street, the common people, the rabble, the wretched of the earth, as opposed to the elites – a consumerist crowd whose voice is left unheeded.

In its latter meaning, the notion of populism reflects the image of the people advanced at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by thinkers such as the Italian sociologist Scipio Sighele, in his book *La folla delinquente (The Criminal Crowd)*, or the French Gustave Le Bon, in *Psychologie des foules (The Psychology of Crowds)*, which tackles the theme of “impulsive and irrational crowds”. Frightened by the Paris Commune, Hippolyte Taine and Gustave Le Bon reduced the people to an ignorant “rabble”, manipulated and induced to violence by cunning “rabble rousers” and agitators. It was essential to associate the idea of a democratic society with the image of a dangerous mob. Likewise, in contemporary populisms people are crowds, audiences or masses left to their own devices by the established political elites and parties. In the era of consumerism and the mass media, the people are represented as a multitude of consumers and TV viewers, fascinated and frightened, helplessly caught between the two main spaces of modern-day social interaction: shopping centres and the neo-television screens or smart phones. Populism marks this twofold decline in the image of both the people and the elites.

The reason why many political pundits and party leaders use and abuse this concept of “populism” is to keep both the right-wing extremists (the National Front and Sarkozy in France, Berlusconi, the Northern League and Beppe Grillo in

Italy) and the left-wing extremists (Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France) outside the political mainstream, to the advantage of the “parties in power”, the only ones deemed fit to assume political responsibilities both at the domestic and at the European levels. This attitude, however, leads to demonisation, rather than to an effective analysis of the true issues at stake, which are the crisis of political representation and the strategy with which European unity may be rebuilt. At present, all political parties are faced with this crisis of representation and are looking for a remedy to this evil, which is corroding all democratic societies in which the population is, on average, highly educated.

Neo-liberalism has found an answer to this crisis by adopting a populist style, while maintaining the key tenets of economic liberalisation: this explains the success – in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – of “Sarkoberlusconism”. Of course, it would be hardly fair to maintain that Sarkozyism and the National Front in France, or Berlusconi and the Northern League in Italy, are cast from the same mould, although they have colluded at times or even formed alliances between them; no one, however, can deny that the neo-liberals Sarkozy and Berlusconi – who both belong to the European People’s Party (EPP) – are politically comparable.

Berlusconi and Sarkozy have exploited direct channels of communication with the people, reduced to the role of mere spectators and consumers, while criticising the so-called “intermediate bodies” (such as trade unions, the judiciary and even parliamentary assemblies). They have drummed up an “anti-political” and “anti-systemic” rhetoric, throwing in a bad light both party bureaucracies and Eurocratic elites, and multiplying their appeals to the “sound common sense” of the people. To characterise this form of Neoliberalism, the term “populism” proposed by the French sociologist Jean-Gustave Padioleau seems more appropriate than that of “populism”. The term “populism”, in fact, which dates back to the En-

lightenment, having since become obsolete, identifies a general form of political action: “Popularism is content with action. Conceived to strike and impress, ‘decisionism’ becomes tangible proof of its effectiveness. The actual production of substantial effects fades before the imperative of seducing [...]. Popularism effortlessly pulls the strings of consumerism to satisfy opinions. [...] The only form of time popularism is familiar with is urgency, speed and the ‘here and now’. It is not cut to stand the test of time. It’s ill at ease with the long term, and uninterested in the lasting consequences of its actions... Popularism is continuously on the go: it hops from one problem to another, thriving on the excitement sparked by all things novel. [...] The only diktat of popularism is: conquering and maintaining power”<sup>5</sup>.

Popularism seems to have become the key political trait of neoliberal right-wing movements in various southern European countries, as a response to the economic and financial crisis, especially to the crisis of political representation. Pierre-André Taguieff insists on the crisis of politics: “the condition for the emergence of populist mobilisation is a crisis of legitimacy, or ‘delegitimation’, a crisis of political legitimacy of the representative system as a whole”<sup>6</sup>. Returning to the definition of representation, we should highlight its dual meaning as the embodiment of a symbol *and* the expression of the people. For example, a President embodies the Nation and represents all his or her fellow citizens. The current crisis of political representation affects both these dimensions and produces a dual failure: on the one hand, the collapse of the symbols enshrining national and European values and, on the other, a political collapse, in that it transfers the responsibility for the

<sup>5</sup> See his article in the 15 October 2003 issue of *Libération*, “Les 400 coups du populisme” and his book *Arts pratiques de l’action publique ultramoderne*, L’Harmattan, Paris, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> P.-A. Taguieff, “Le populisme: quelques problématiques”, *XXe siècle*, 56, Oct-Décembre 1997, pp. 4-33.

economic crisis, and ensuing socio-economic inequality, to the leading “caste”, the establishment “elites”, even the institutions, dubbed as “ineffectual”.

Popularist neo-liberalism offers a twofold answer to this dual failure: it proposes an “emotional” democracy, reflecting the passions and fears of the people, and a democracy of experts, a technocracy legitimised by “technoscience”, the last remaining form of popular belief. Thus, political power today can be broken down into two very different dimensions: the transformation of politics along technocratic lines, combined with the stirring of passions and emotions, as a result of which a government exercises power through both fascination and fear.

The crisis of representative democracy is leading to a “telecratic” democracy, channelled via talk shows and soap operas, after Berlusconi, Sarkozy and Beppe Grillo’s manner, and a “technocratic” democracy, dominated by economists and scientists, a sort of “expertocracy” charged with handling high finance. To use a saying of Alain Supiot, “governance” by numbers is gradually replacing government by laws. In this context, representative democracy has been downgraded and replaced with neoliberal governance. Italy has been an excellent testing ground for this kind of political experimentation, showing the two complementary faces of neo-liberalism in succession: Silvio Berlusconi’s “populist” version was followed by an experiment in “expertocracy” conducted by Mario Monti, who has personally described his agenda as aimed at building a “more integrated and supportive Europe, opposed to all forms of populism”. Already in 2007, Mario Monti had asserted his “passion for Europe, independently of any electoral constraints”<sup>7</sup>, highlighting the growing gap in Europe between a supranational technical-economic rationality and national elections. In an editorial published in the Italian daily *La Re-*

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by C. Deloire and C. Dubois, *Circus politicus*, Albin Michel, Paris, 2012, p. 29.

*pubblica*<sup>8</sup>, Massimo Giannini spoke of a “democracy of the best” as opposed to a “democracy of electors”.

## **2. Sarkoberlusconism: a brand of populist Neoliberalism**

In 2012, Latin Neoliberalism – as exemplified by Sarkozy and Berlusconi, compounded into “sarkoberlusconism” – seemed to be declining inexorably, in the wake of Nicolas Sarkozy’s defeat at the Presidential elections of 6 May 2012, and Silvio Berlusconi’s thrashing in the local elections and the resignation of his government six months later. The simultaneous fall of these two “heroes”, who had triumphed throughout the Noughties, signalled a turning point. However, the “return” – in December 2012 – of Silvio Berlusconi for the 2013 election campaign, and the re-iterated appeals by right-wing liberals to Nicolas Sarkozy to find a solution to the internal leadership crisis, are evidence that “sarkoberlusconism” has not yet run its course. These two leaders have been the victims of the crisis of financial capitalism that they claimed they could prevent, of the wear and tear of an ineffective form of Neoliberalism, incapable of tackling globalisation, and of a style of power wielding – and nothing else – that could be called “populist”. Sarkoberlusconism aspired to resolve the crisis of capitalism in the name of its “moralisation” (Sarkozy) or “spiritualisation” (Berlusconi), in countries dominated by a Catholic ethic. What these two leaders have in common, and which enables us to speak of a “Latin” Neoliberalism, is that the institutions of their respective countries are grounded on Roman law and on the Catholic brand of Christianity: on the one hand, Rome as the seat of the Church’s spiritual power, on

<sup>8</sup> *La Repubblica* of 24 December 2012.



the other France as the “firstborn daughter” of the Catholic Church.

Roman law, the Catholic ethic and the primacy of television have shaped the imagination of these two countries. In fact, generalist television has developed along more or less the same lines on both sides of the Alps: it all started with a public monopoly controlled by the ruling party, whether the Gaullists in France or the Christian Democrats in Italy. Then, after 1968, radical criticism of this public monopoly – identified with the political monopoly in the country – accompanied by the drive towards deregulation in economic matters, led, in different ways, to the emergence of large privately-controlled commercial generalist TV networks, which in 1983 Umberto Eco called “neo-television”<sup>9</sup>, based precisely on an analysis of the television empire built by Silvio Berlusconi. Eco had already stressed the inadequacy of the analysis of the “Italian case”, presented merely as an example of “media populism”<sup>10</sup>, a form of “electronic caesarism”<sup>11</sup>, i.e. a brand-new version of populism. His suggestion was to look further into the matter, studying in particular “the techniques for a takeover of the state without dissolving its institutions or gagging the press, but simply through the clever management of the media”<sup>12</sup>.

Now, there exists a close link between this Latin Neoliberalism and the so-called generalist “neo-television” which serves as a media backdrop for its takeover. They are both “television animals”, which can play on people’s emotions and use a sensationalist approach when dealing with their person-

<sup>9</sup> Umberto Eco introduced this notion in 1983, in an article he wrote for the Italian current events weekly *L’Espresso*, called: “TV: la transparence perdue” (TV and its lost transparency), referred to in *La Guerre du faux*, Grasset, Livre de poche, Paris, 1985, pp. 196-220.

<sup>10</sup> Formula proposed by A. Candiard, *L’anomalie Berlusconi*, Flammarion, Paris, 2003, p. 43.

<sup>11</sup> M. Prospero, *Lo Stato in appalto: Berlusconi e la privatizzazione del politico*, Manni, San Cesario di Lecce, 2003, p. 81.

<sup>12</sup> *Le Monde*, 17 February 2002.

alities and their private lives. Dominique Reynié says, “the media world has a shady relationship with populism”, and also maintains that “the spectacularisation of information and politics tends to blend and merge in populism”<sup>13</sup>.

Neo-television talk shows are a key expression of sarkoberlusconism, as a powerful means for staging and exploiting the emotional relationship between the leader and his followers, also by turning the spotlight onto his private life. Now, one of the features of politics is to dramatise certain symbolic values, embodying them in the figure of a messenger endowed with a Messianic role in guiding the people. This is precisely the role that both Sarkozy and Berlusconi purported to perform: promoting the idea of the greater effectiveness of the Nation – and the State – as a business enterprise that can satisfy the competition requirements of globalization. Silvio Berlusconi even made “competitive democracy” one of his slogans in the 2001 general elections campaign, before adopting, like Sarkozy, that of “liberal revolution”. This was quite a natural development for Berlusconi, because of his past as an entrepreneur before “descending into politics” in 1993. Coming from the business world, and defining himself as a political outsider, he adopted an anti-political attitude; while Sarkozy aimed at reforming and renewing politics by introducing values taken from the business world, beginning with his definition of “work as a value”. In March 2010, addressing an audience of students at Columbia University, Nicolas Sarkozy claimed: “I am convinced... that we, politicians and statesmen, should be judged exactly like entrepreneurs, by our achievements”.

Both Sarkozy and Berlusconi have adopted the business-management model as a pillar of their political strategy aimed at reforming and scaling down the welfare state in order to adapt it to the neoliberal concept of the Nation as a business

<sup>13</sup> D. Reynié, *Populismes: la pente fatale*, Plon, Paris, 2011, p. 243.

enterprise<sup>14</sup>. This is why “sarkoberlusconism” can be defined as a “new neoliberal Euromediterranean political model with Bonapartist tendencies, combining State authority, a reverential attitude towards Catholicism and an entrepreneurial approach to government. It knocks together and syncretically mixes all the available signs and symbols, as a means to stop the cracks in political representation from growing wider”<sup>15</sup>.

Considering that the political and symbolic basis of sarkoberlusconism is the theory of government-as-business, actively competing in the world of globalisation, its practical implementation is inspired by the images and style of marketing, making use of business slogans and language, along with “neo-television” and its talk shows and reality shows, which mix and merge public and private life. This blend of business culture and neo-television confers a clearly “populist” style on the politics of sarkoberlusconism. Like in a reality show, it celebrates competitiveness, sometimes encouraging people to “win” by eliminating their rivals, at other times prompting compassion for the “victims”. In the words of anthropologist Georges Balandier, the political leader becomes a sort of reality show character (*télé-réels*)<sup>16</sup>. Acting like a celebrity neo-television style entertainer, he tries to enchant people by either selling them a dream or playing on their fears, telling jokes and stories and building a fictional world, in which to permanently ensnare his audience of citizens-consumers. His style becomes typically “populist”, mimicking that of a neo-television show.

However, sarkoberlusconism cannot be reduced simply to spectacularisation and the consummate handling of television or marketing techniques. It is first and foremost a neoliberal

<sup>14</sup> See M. Prospero, *Il comico della politica. Nichilismo e aziendalismo nella comunicazione di Silvio Berlusconi*, Ediesse, Roma, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> P. Musso, *Le sarkoberlusconisme*, Ed. de l’Aube, 2008, pp. 145-146.

<sup>16</sup> G. Balandier, *Le pouvoir sur scènes*, Fayard, edited and extended edition, Paris, 2006, p. 151.

world view that aims to transform the symbols embodied in the idea of government-as-business, by reorganising the welfare state along the lines of the doctrine of the *New Public Management*, with a President-CEO, a Manager of the Nation, whose task is to adapt and preserve the economic system.

Silvio Berlusconi has “naturally” introduced the ideas of neo-management<sup>17</sup> and neo-television in politics since he first stepped into the political arena, as a result of which he has been able to play both as “anti-politician” and as “neo-politician” (the new and different man) in a political context devastated by the “Clean Hands” judicial investigation. Exploiting the same power techniques used in the worlds of business and television, Nicolas Sarkozy (himself a professional politician) introduced an array of symbols and a stylistic devices that set him apart from his predecessors (Mitterrand and Chirac), whom he branded the “Do-Nothing Kings”. Mixing his public and private life – like in a talk show – he has never stopped celebrating “work as a value”, “competitiveness” and the “culture of achievement” along the lines of a business management model. Thus, sarkoberlusconism formed itself around this Gordian knot of Neoliberalism: the relationship between the State and the market. Sarkoberlusconism has syncretically amalgamated values imported from the business world, the media and the Catholic ethic – especially the work ethic, with the objective of plastering over the crisis of political consensus and reforming the State. In order to avoid the ambiguities about neoliberal anti-state attitudes, we must mention the following observation by the British researcher Stuart Hall: “an ‘anti-state’ strategy is not a strategy that re-

<sup>17</sup> “Neo-management”, according to Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, is the management of the 1990s, characterised by personal self-control, decentralised management divided into projects and the necessary skills for enhancing the technological competitive edge of globalised networked enterprises. Cf. L. Boltanski and E. Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Gallimard Nrf, Paris, 1999, pp. 124-153.

fuses to operate through the State, but a strategy that limits the role of the State and progresses by ideologically attempting to present itself as anti-state, for the purpose of populist mobilisation”<sup>18</sup>.

Thus populism is a key trait of sarkoberlusconism, but it is not sufficient to adequately analyse its content and approach, which are based on two characteristics explicitly claimed by its protagonists. On the one hand, it declares itself to be a “complex-free” right, openly neoliberal in economic matters as well as reactionary and authoritarian in its political outlook. Through its alliances and inspirations, sarkoberlusconism also embraces extreme right-wing issues, even from extreme right-wing parties (the National Front or the Northern League). On the other hand, it takes the form of “regressive caesarism”, marked by strong personalisation and the concentration of full powers in the hands of a single person. This caesarism is presumed to be justified by the cult of action, in order to tackle the many risks and challenges posed by the economic, financial and geopolitical crises. A self-proclaimed “man of action”, the neoliberal leader pits himself against the institutions that slow him down – such as the judiciary, or Parliament – and is constantly up against numerous fictitious enemies: foreign migrants, the European Union, in particular the European Central Bank and the Euro, Communism, State control, the “intermediate bodies”, etc., thereby revealing his “populist” tendencies.

But like every political actor, although it claims to be anti-political, sarkoberlusconism expresses a force which is its own source of legitimacy. From this point of view, neoliberal policies are hardly innovative, but they do operate through powerful mind techniques. According to Marin: “representation de-

<sup>18</sup> S. Hall, *Le populisme autoritaire. Puissance de la droite et impuissance de la gauche au temps du thatchérisme et du blairisme*, Editions Amsterdam, Paris, 2008, p. 161.

velops theatrical qualities that strike the eye and subjugate the gaze”<sup>19</sup>. This subjugation of the gaze enables Neoliberalism to govern through enchantment – if not awe – placing the leader under the permanent scrutiny of society, which, following a mirage of total transparency, wants to see and know all.

Therefore, the sarkoberlusconian brand of Neoliberalism cannot be encapsulated within the rather weak notions of “populism”, or “media populism”, and even less in that of “peopolisation”, i.e. the mediatisation, in the popular press, of the political leader’s moods. Nor can it be reduced to just any old kind of “telepopulism” or of “telecracy”, and even less to a form of “television-controlled politics”<sup>20</sup>. Because this powerful medium (television) is only one of the technologies used as the stage, so to speak, on which the political narrative is enacted, featuring at its core the cult of the enterprise and the marginalisation of the welfare state, in order to bend it to the requirements of a neoliberal regime geared to globalization. Politically, economically and symbolically, sarkoberlusconism focuses on changing/downscaling the State, which must transfer competences to the European superstructure and commit itself wholeheartedly to worldwide competition. In the words of philosopher Pierre Legendre, the entire evolution of sarkoberlusconism has been inspired by this “bellicose fiction”. The Nation-State is required to behave like an enterprise in a global market, leaving “behind the front lines” all those who are not directly engaged in this economic warfare. Like Janus Bifrons, such neoliberal state shows two faces, competition and rivalry on one side and, on the other, compassion, as a means for maintaining social cohesion. This binomial – competition and compassion – legitimises both the broadcasting

<sup>19</sup> L. Marin, *Politiques de la représentation*, Editions Kimé, Collège international de philosophie, Paris, 2005, p. 252.

<sup>20</sup> G. Sartori, “Videopolitica”, *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, 19(2) August 1989, p 185.

of reality shows and the political project of sarkoberlusconism, because it uses and, indeed, overexploits the astuteness of TV shows.

Neo-liberalism defends a political and economic vision, moreover, according to Jean-François Lyotard, it is also the last “great narrative” still in existence because all the others have collapsed – and this apparently also explains the difficulties facing the European left after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In his book *Néo-libéralismes. Une archéologie intellectuelle*, Serge Audier points out how “Neoliberalism” acquired a threefold meaning since its inception: it is, in fact, at the same time a free-market ideology, a new form of public administration, in which the citizens are viewed essentially as consumers, and a set of economic policies that can be summed up in the triptych: “Deregulation, Liberalization and Privatization”. According to Serge Audier there is not one but many different types of Neoliberalism, unified under the same label by the fact that “Neoliberalism originally emerged as a doctrine aimed at saving capitalism”<sup>21</sup>, which means that it is closely linked to the crisis of capitalism. After 1968, Neoliberalism featured three large waves: in the 1970s and 1980s, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, who promoted so-called “wild deregulations”; then in the 1990s Clinton’s New Democrats, followed by Tony Blair, who overhauled and modernised the system; and lastly sarkoberlusconism in southern Europe, dominated by Roman law and a Catholic culture.

The brand of Neoliberalism known as sarkoberlusconism presents itself as the “true capitalism” of entrepreneurs, who apply the Christian social teachings and the capitalist ethic, in conformity with pope John Paul II’s encyclical “Centesimus Annus”, and inspired, in particular, by Michael Novak, a member of the very influential US think tank American Enterprise

<sup>21</sup> S. Audier, cit., p. 57.

Institute. Novak is one of the leading minds of American Catholic liberalism, author in particular of *Toward a Theology of the Corporation* (1990), in which he blends a vindication of free enterprise and a praise of religious compassion<sup>22</sup>. According to him, the three qualities of a good entrepreneur are “creativity”, “community building skills” and “practical realism” – three traits which are shared with conviction by sarkoberlusconism as well<sup>23</sup>.

By treating people as an audience of consumers and viewers, vulnerable to the techniques of marketing, management and neo-television, sarkoberlusconian Neoliberalism adopts a “populist” style, but this is merely the outward manifestation of a much deeper metamorphosis of politics. The trio competition/compassion/consumption reduces people to a consumer crowd, opening the door to extreme forms of populism, such as Grillo’s 5-Star movement in Italy, or the National Front in France, which thrive on the ruins of Berlusconi and Sarkozyism, respectively. The people, angry and even openly “revolting”, due to the effects of the European economic and social crisis, should remain passive, in awe in front of their screens, large and small, dazzled by an array of objects of consumption, or subjugated to the knowledge of the elites. Somehow, the people would no longer be capable of understanding a society and an economy that have become “too complex”. Paradoxically, the populist style makes it possible to contain and control popular criticism and discontent by channelling against the elites.

Despite its capacity for adaptation and its flexibility, sarkoberlusconian Neoliberalism no longer has the wind aft. But what future do the left-wing parties have, after the collapse of

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 566-567.

<sup>23</sup> The Italian Novak, according to Audier, is Rocco Buttiglione – “a sort of Italian Novak” – a scholar of Novak’s neo-conservative ideas and of the European Catholic right, once much appreciated by Silvio Berlusconi and one of the preferred philosophers of John Paul II (ibid., p. 576).



the Berlin Wall? In France they are divided between the ruling social democrats and a radical left that is influenced by the populist style. Does this mean that Europe can be built solely on the alternation in government of the established mainstream government parties – social-democrats and social-liberals – lest it falls under the sway of new forms of “populism” embodying the growing popular criticism against the transfer of sovereignty and restrictive budgetary policies? Forty years ago Pier Paolo Pasolini had already identified the underlying causes of the “populist” temptation, resulting from the reduction of a people of citizens to a crowd of consumers: “The persuasive actions that draw the masses towards a ‘hedonistic’ lifestyle... ridicule all efforts by the previous forms of persuasion, for example those drawn from a religious or moralistic conception of life”<sup>24</sup>. The triumph of this consumerist cultural hegemony, amplified by neo-television and marketing, has fostered a form of “blind hedonism, oblivious to all humanistic values”. The presumption that “no ideology other than consumerism can be allowed”<sup>25</sup> has promoted “populist” lifestyles, to the detriment of the popular expressions of conventional political representation.

The left in Europe, in fact, has been unable to address the new cultural hegemony of consumerism and the business dogmas of efficiency and competitiveness. On the contrary, it is precisely this that has produced sarkoberlusconism. Even though it has lost much of its appeal, it still persists in staging the enjoyment of political and economic power. On the one hand, the Italian Prime Minister-cum-Businessman was under the impression that he could still win the 2013 elections, despite his judicial problems and the crisis of his party. On the other side of the Alps, Nicolas Sarkozy announced that, after

<sup>24</sup> P. P. Pasolini, *Lettres luthériennes, Petit traité pédagogique*, Le Seuil, Paris, 2002.

<sup>25</sup> P. P. Pasolini, *Ecrits corsaires*, Flammarion, Paris, 1976, pp. 49-50.

leaving the Élysée Palace, he could “find a new job at the helm of a large private company, starting a second life as a CEO”<sup>26</sup>. The consumerist hedonism of the “crowds” and the enjoyment of power of the “elites” have become mirror images of each other, replacing political representation in a state of crisis: the diverse populist rhetoric is a sign of the collapse of the representative system.

<sup>26</sup> R. Dély e D. Hassoux, *Sarkozy et l'argent roi*, Calmann Lévy, Paris, 2008, pp. 12 e 14.

# FEAR

THE CHANGING FACES OF POPULISM

# THE FRONT NATIONAL AND THE NATIONAL-POPULIST RIGHT IN FRANCE

Nicola Genga

## 1. Populism and the Front National

After several decades of debate, there is still no theoretical consensus among scholars about the nature of populism. Experts are well aware, in fact, that this is a controversial issue, defined by an umbrella term that encompasses various political phenomena<sup>1</sup>. It is far from me, of course, to solve the matter once and for all in this paper. My purpose here is to propose several guidelines for analysing the French Front National, as a significant example of populism in contemporary democracy.

Generally speaking, the specialist literature tends to agree on the principle that populism cannot be considered an or-

<sup>1</sup> G. Ionescu, E. Gellner (edited by), *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London, 1969; M. Tarchi, "Il populismo e la scienza politica: come liberarsi del 'complesso di Cenerentola'", *Filosofia Politica*, n. 3, 2004, pp. 411-429; P.-A. Taguieff, "Le populisme et la science politique. Du mirage conceptuel aux vrais problèmes", *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, n. 56, 1997, pp. 4-33.

ganic political doctrine, while opinions differ as to whether it can be called an ideology<sup>2</sup>. In any case, it can be useful to consider populism as a descriptive tool used by observers and analysts, rather than a normative principle followed by political players. Taken as a theoretical construct, similar to a Weberian “ideal type”, the notion of populism can be applied not to a style<sup>3</sup> or a syndrome<sup>4</sup>, but to a dimension of political action and discourse<sup>5</sup> shared by a multiplicity of different phenomena. In short, we are faced with a concept that can be applied to a plurality of realities, ranging from the forms of populism that developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Russia and the United States, to the populist movements that sprung up in Latin America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and finally to the European neo-populisms of the last four decades.

If we attempted to isolate the core elements of this populist dimension in contemporary politics, we’d probably find it consisting of the following characteristics: the appeal to a mythicised people by a charismatic leader; the disparagement of representative institutions of democracy as they have developed historically (political parties and parliaments); a classless vision of society; a criticism of the elites viewed as a uniform entity; the propensity towards nationalism<sup>6</sup>. Later on

<sup>2</sup> M. Canovan, *Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy*, in Y. Mény, Y. Surel, editors, *Democracies and the populist challenge*, Palgrave, London, 2002, pp. 25-44. Y. Mény, Y. Surel, *Par le peuple, pour le peuple. Le populisme et les démocraties*, Fayard, Paris, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> P.-A. Taguieff, editor, *L’illusion populiste. De l’archaïque au médiatique*, Berg international, Paris, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> P. Wiles, *A Syndrome, Not a Doctrine*, in E. Gellner, G. Ionescu, cit., pp. 166-179.

<sup>5</sup> E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London, 2005; P. Worsley, *The Concept of Populism*, in G. Ionescu, E. Gellner, cit., pp. 212-250.

<sup>6</sup> Besides the classics E. Gellner, G. Ionescu, G., editors, *Populism*, cit., and M. Canovan, *Populism*, Junction, London, 1981, see P. Taggart, *Populism*, Open University Press, Buckingham-Philadelphia, 2000; G. Hermet, *Les populismes dans le monde. Une histoire sociologique. XIXe-XXe siècle*, Fayard, Paris, 2001; H.-G. Betz, S. Immerfall, *New Politics of the Right*:

we will see how all these traits emerge in the political discourse developed by the Front National.

One of the principal criticisms directed against populism as a label regards the derogatory undertones associated with the word<sup>7</sup>. Unlike liberalism, democracy and socialism, the term populism suffers from the lack of a “nominalist” status<sup>8</sup>. In other words, populist political movements and leaders shirk from using it to define themselves. This apparently demonstrates the negative bias associated with the word and, consequently, the need to remove it from the political vocabulary.

This nominalist criterion is not necessarily significant for the purpose of this analysis. In the light of the previous contention, according to which populism is an “ideal type” recognisable in a number of different phenomena, we could consider, for example, Boulangism and the Bonapartism of Napoleon III as two instances of populism, despite the fact that they emerged before the coining of the French term “*populisme*”, which first appeared in a French dictionary in 1929 with reference to a literary movement<sup>9</sup>. Besides these *ante litteram* examples, France has produced other political movements, such as Poujadism, which can also be classed as populist, irrespective of the use of the term by the movement itself<sup>10</sup>.

The nominalist criterion is even less significant if we consider that in French public discourse Le Pen’s Front National

*Neo-Populist Parties and Movements in Established Democracies*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1998; Y. Mény, Y. Surel, *Par le peuple, pour le peuple*, cit.; D. Albertazzi, D. McDonnell, editors, *Twenty-First Century Populism. The Spectre of Western European Democracy*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills NY, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> M. Canovan, “Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy”, *Political Studies*, XLVII, n. 1, 1999, pp. 2-16.

<sup>8</sup> S. Kobi, Y. Papadopulos, “L’ambiguïté du populisme: négation ou prolongement de la démocratie”, in R. Galissot, editor, *Populismes du Tiers-Monde*, L’Harmattan, Paris, 1997, pp. 13-44.

<sup>9</sup> G. Hermet, *Les populismes dans le monde*, cit., p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> M. Winock, “Populismes français”, *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire*, n. 56, 1997, pp. 77-91.

enshrines an explicit form of populism: initially recognised by external observers, then claimed by the party from the inside. The populist christening of the Front National, in fact, dates back to the mid-eighties, when the definition “national populisme” replaced the word “fascisme”, which had been used until then by scholars, journalists and politicians<sup>11</sup>. This was precisely when the FN emerged into the limelight, on the wave of its success at the European elections of 1984, when it gained about 11% of the vote. The party, which during the first ten years since its foundation (in 1972) had always polled less than 1% of the national vote, reaching two-figure numbers only at local elections, all of a sudden took centre stage in politics. The renewed attention of scholars paved the way for the analytical re-examination of the phenomenon.

The new formula was so successful that several retrospective reconstructions referred to the period between 1978 and 1981 as the “turning point of national-populism”<sup>12</sup>. The populist label gradually took over (also in the version of “néo-populisme à la française”<sup>13</sup>), to the point of becoming the hallmark of the Front. Piero Ignazi, stressing the “far-right” nature of the Front National, speaks of a “political alternative [...] veiled with populism and anti-establishment attitudes”<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> P.-A. Taguieff, “La rhétorique du national-populisme”, *Mots. Les langages du politique*, n. 9, October 1984, pp. 113-119; M. Winock, “La vieille histoire du national-populisme”, *Le Monde*, 12 giugno 1987; P. Milza, “Le Front National: droite extrême ou national-populisme?”, in J.-F. Sirinelli, editor, *Histoire des droites en France. Vol. 1 : Politique*, Gallimard, Paris, 1992, pp. 691-729.

<sup>12</sup> J.-Y. Camus, “Origine et formation du Front National (1972-1981)”, in N. Mayer, P. Perrineau, editors, *Le Front National à découvert*, Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, Paris, 1996, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> E. Lecœur, *Un néo-populisme à la française. Trente ans de Front National*, La Découverte, Paris, 2003. See also S. Gentile, *Il populismo nelle democrazie contemporanee. Il caso del Front National di Jean-Marie Le Pen*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> P. Ignazi, “Un nouvel acteur politique”, in *Le Front National à découvert*, cit., p. 76. See also id., *Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003, pp. 83-106.

The use of the term “national populist” undoubtedly has its advantages. It allows scholars to elude the controversial issues springing from the historical presence of Fascism in France<sup>15</sup>. It gives the members of the Front National – and its leader first and foremost – a more respectable image compared to that associated with the Vichy regime. Unusually, this label was self-confidently adopted by the Front members themselves. As we shall see, a number of statements emphasised the populist vocation of the movement. While Le Pen has always spurned the adjectives “Fascist” and “extremist”<sup>16</sup>, the populist hallmark has not only been accepted, but also adopted as a positive distinguishing feature.

## 2. Demos and ethnos

In the second half of the 1980s, the FN’s new national-populist stance took on more complex nuances. Jean-Pierre Stirbois, the party’s general secretary, wrote in 1988: “I am proud to reclaim the definition of national-populism [...], for me nation and people are two inseparably linked words, to which I am deeply and viscerally attached”<sup>17</sup>. In 1991, Jean-Marie Le Pen’s answer to the interviewers of the nationalist periodical *Aspects de la France*, who had asked him if he considered himself a populist, seemed to point to the possibility that Stirbois had, in fact, expressed a purely personal view: “Populism means taking into account the people’s opinion. If, in democ-

<sup>15</sup> A. Collovald, “Le national-populisme ou le fascisme disparu. Les historiens du temps présent et la question du déloyalisme politique”, in M. Dobry, editor, *Le mythe de l’allergie française au fascisme*, Albin Michel, Paris, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. J.-M. Le Pen, *Les Français d’abord*, Carrère-Lafon, Paris, 1984, pp. 172-173, 179.

<sup>17</sup> J.-P. Stirbois, *Tonnère de Dreux. L’avenir nous appartient*, Éditions National-Hebdo, Paris, 1988, pp. 215-216, 218.



racy, the people have the right to an opinion then, yes, I consider myself a populist”<sup>18</sup>. This clear reference to the link between people and populism will become a constant in the long term. On 10 December 2010, Marine Le Pen declared to *France 2*: “If, as I think, populism means defending the people from the elites, defending those who have been left behind from the elites that are choking them, then, yes, in this case I am a populist”<sup>19</sup>.

The populist connotation, therefore, is a stable element of the Front National’s political discourse. There are, however, two phases in which this aspect of the Front’s identity was particularly paraded; first between 1986 and 1988, then in 1994<sup>20</sup>.

In June 1986 Le Pen illustrated his core political values in the house organ *National Hebdo*, in an interview the title of which (“The people’s voice, today, is the voice of God”) clearly echoed the Latin saying *vox populi, vox dei*. Michel Collinot, representative of Stirbois’ solidaristic wing in the party, defined FN as “the Right that dares, the Right of deeply held convictions, the popular and populist Right”<sup>21</sup>. Bruno Mégret, at the time one of the party’s up-and-coming stars, suggested to Le Pen, in view of the approaching presidential elections, to “maintain the populist stance, being the only one to express it on the political scene”<sup>22</sup>. The 1988 election campaign featured slogans such as “alone against everyone” and “clean hands and head held high”<sup>23</sup>. The FN leaders presented themselves

<sup>18</sup> P.-A. Taguieff, “Populismes et antipopulismes : le choc des argumentations”, *Mots. Les langages du politique*, n. 55, 1998, p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> G. Ivaldi, “Permanences et évolutions de l’idéologie frontiste”, in P. Delwit, editor, *Le Front National. Mutations de l’extrême droite française*, Éditions de l’Université de Bruxelles, Bruxelles, 2012, pp. 107-108.

<sup>20</sup> M. Soudais, *Le Front National en face*, Flammarion, Paris, 1996, p. 165.

<sup>21</sup> *National-Hebdo*, 23 October 1986.

<sup>22</sup> *National-Hebdo*, 4 December 1986.

<sup>23</sup> H. Lecœur, cit., p. 76.

on their posters as “outsiders” who did not belong to the political establishment<sup>24</sup>.

This emphasis on populism climaxed in the summer of 1994. Samuel Maréchal, at the time one of the leaders of the party’s youth wing Front National de la Jeunesse, chose a very explicit claim for the summer school: *Populiste et fier de l’être!* (Populist and proud of it). Le Pen himself underlined the importance of this concept when, in his speech, he spoke of the FN as a “Front Populiste”<sup>25</sup>. This rhetorical strategy was summarised by the Front leaders in an article signed by Maréchal, in which populism is used as a positive self-designation, as opposed to the “anti-populism of the establishment, whose aim is to delegitimise the only true opposition alternative to the system”<sup>26</sup>. Conscious of the semantic ambiguity of the term populism, Front members come up with a rhetorical rebuttal: “History is full of words adopted by those against whom they’d been thrown and used as banners. Our opponents brand us as Fascists, right-wing extremists? Then we must seize the opportunity of populism!” On the following day Le Pen announced that the presidential campaign of 1995 would be based on the platform for a “national, sovereign, social, populist and moral Republic”<sup>27</sup>. The adjective populist, used in this electoral juncture, is linked to the proposal to hold a popular referendum. Like other populist movements and parties, Front members celebrate direct democracy as a “condition for guaranteeing the freedom of the people”<sup>28</sup>. In the case of the FN, however, referendum proposals are gen-

<sup>24</sup> A. King, “The Outsider as a Political Leader: The Case of Margaret Thatcher”, *British Journal of Political Science*, XXXII, n. 3, 2002, pp. 435-454.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. P.-A. Taguieff, “Populismes et antipopulismes », cit., p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> S. Maréchal, “Populiste : le débat”, *Présent*, n. 3168, 17 September 1994, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Y. Daoudal, “Le Pen candidat”, *Présent*, n. 3169, 20 September 1994, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> B. Mégret, *L’Alternative nationale. Les priorités du Front National*, Éditions nationales, Saint-Cloud, 1996, pp. 64-65.

erally associated with a list of specific issues, such as the Code of Nationality, the death penalty, stopping immigration, reducing the pressure of taxation<sup>29</sup>. This justifies the assumption that referendums are viewed not as a means of fostering policy inputs, but of promoting the output of a political agenda that cannot be pushed through parliament. Despite electoral results of between 4.29% (2007) and 14.93% (1997), the actual number of FN members of parliament has always been irrelevant, due to the two-round voting system in France. The two exceptions to the rule whereby the Front National is excluded from the National Assembly were the assemblies of 1986-88, when the temporary introduction of a proportional system enabled the election of 35 FN deputies, and the rare parliamentary constituencies won by Yann Piat (1988), Jean-Marie Le Chevallier (1997), Marion Maréchal-Le Pen and Gilbert Collard (2012).

A form of populism founded on the glorification of the people as “demos”, i.e. the sovereign people<sup>30</sup>, may effectively be linked with the expression of a sense of political frustration, due to this constant political marginalisation. The periods of “cohabitation”, in 1986-88 and 1993-95, with a Socialist President of the Republic and a Gaullist Prime Minister, influenced the anti-elitist interpretation of populism, which Taguieff defined as a “protest movement”<sup>31</sup>. Significant historical precedents for this rhetorical stance can be found in the anti-parliamentary movements of the 1930s, in the people-élite dialectic described by Maurice Barrès, in the separation (put forward by Charles Maurras) between the *pays réel*, the sovereign people, and the *pays légal*, the political establishment<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> J.-M. Le Pen, “Pour une vraie révolution française”, *National-Hebdo*, n. 62, 26 September 1985, p. 3. Cf. P.-A. Taguieff, “Un programme ‘révolutionnaire’ ?”, in *Le Front National à découvert*, *ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>30</sup> Y. Mény, Y. Surel, *Par le peuple, pour le peuple*, *cit.*

<sup>31</sup> P.-A. Taguieff, “Le populisme”, *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, Universalis, Paris, 1996, pp. 118-125.

<sup>32</sup> G. Birenbaum, *Le Front National en Politique*, Balland, Paris, 1992, p. 314.

In Le Pen's discourse, protest populism manifests itself as an invective against the "band of four" (Rassemblement pour la République, Union pour la Démocratie Française, Parti Socialiste and Parti Communiste Français) that form the *établissement* (a neologism invented by Le Pen from the English establishment) and an exposure of a *démocratie confisquée*<sup>33</sup>. Perceiving itself as cheated by the ruling élites, the Front National evokes a "third way" for unlocking the system, given that "the political class no longer serves the country, but occupies it"<sup>34</sup>.

For tactical reasons, the protest populism of the Front is ratcheted up in the run-up to important elections. In the European elections of 1994 the FN had to deal with the competition represented by the party of the football tycoon Bernard Tapie<sup>35</sup> and the souverainist trio Pasqua-Villiers-Séguin. The emphasis on the anti-political aspect of the Front's political discourse is a consequence of the need to claim the monopoly of the appeal to the people, in view of the following year's presidential elections.

The appeal to the people, the essential core of populism, is, in fact, a key element of the Front's discourse. In Le Pen's speeches between 1983 and 1996 the word *peuple* occurs 325 times and is second only to *pays* (440) as the most utilised word<sup>36</sup>. Qualitatively, Jean-Marie Le Pen pragmatically expressed the pre-eminence of the people in his political manifesto *Nos valeurs*, with a quote from Cicero and Hobbes *Salus*

<sup>33</sup> Y. Blot, *La Démocratie confisquée*, Jean Picollec, Paris, 1989.

<sup>34</sup> Scientific Council of the Front National, *D'une Résistance à l'autre. L'histoire en question de 1940 à 1993*, Éditions nationales, Paris, 1994.

<sup>35</sup> J.-W. Dereymez, "Un vieux démon de la gauche française", in O. Ihl, J. Chêne, É. Vial and G. Waterlot, editors, *La tentation populiste au cœur de l'Europe*, La Découverte, Paris, 2003, p. 69.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. I. Cuminal, M. Souchart, S. Wahnich, V. Wathier, *Le Pen, les mots. Analyse d'un discours d'extrême droite*, Le Monde Editions, Paris, 1997, p. 95.

*populi suprema lex esto* (“The good of the people shall be the supreme law”)<sup>37</sup>. Marine Le Pen, over twenty years later, stood for the 2012 presidential election with the slogan “La Voix du peuple, l’Esprit de la France”.

Piero Ignazi, among others, has observed that this vocation of the FN to pose as the defender of the people, is actually an attempt to claim for itself the function of “tribune”, at a time when the crisis of the system of political representation had widened the gap between the citizens and politics, fuelling animosity and distrust against the establishment in general. The Front National’s discourse, in fact, substantiates the “dualist” representation of an inflexible dialectic between two uniform groups: “the pure people vs. the corrupt elite”<sup>38</sup>. The populist protest led by the Le Pens – father and daughter – in the name of the *demos*, aims to expose the collusive alliances between the key players in the political system, whom Jean-Marie called the “band of four” or “Josrac and Chipin” (from Jospin and Chirac), while today Marine speaks of a “caste” or “système UMPS”<sup>39</sup>.

Returning to Taguieff’s binary classification, the protest populism of the FN intertwines with identitarian populism, thanks to the semantic ambiguity of the word “people”, which can be interpreted as both “the sovereign people” and “the nation people”. When Jean-Marie Le Pen claims that “the only defence left to this country is precisely the appeal to its people”<sup>40</sup> he is evoking the idea of the nation as a “community capable of feeling and expressing the sentiments that spring from an identity, a need, the joy of being together, a common destiny”<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>37</sup> J.-M. Le Pen, “Nos valeurs”, *La Documentation française*, 4 maggio 1988.

<sup>38</sup> C. Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist”, *Government and Opposition*, XXXIX, n. 3, 2004, p. 543.

<sup>39</sup> G. Ivaldi, *Permanences et évolutions de l’idéologie frontiste*, cit., p. 108.

<sup>40</sup> J.-M. Le Pen, *La France est de retour*, Carrère-Michel Lafon, Paris, 1985, p. 81.

<sup>41</sup> “Entendez le chant du peuple français”, *Présent*, 5-6 September 1996.

The foundation of this imaginary community<sup>42</sup> is made to date back to mythical racial origins (“a unique blending of Roman, Germanic and Celtic virtues”)<sup>43</sup>. From this perspective, the populism of the Front is conceived as a surrogate of the “*Français d’abord!*” (*French First!*) nationalism, and is driven by a concern for safeguarding a mythicised French *ethnos*, whose customs, traditions and future are mirrored in the “common sense of the ordinary people, now under the assault from the cosmopolitan ideology imposed by the rootless leftist intelligentsia”<sup>44</sup>.

Demos and *ethnos*, therefore, are two inextricably intertwined entities in the populist discourse of the Front national. Marine Le Pen’s platform for the 2012 presidential election makes use of the concept of “anti-French racism”, which is a typical invention of nationalist rhetoric based on a representation of the country as the defenceless victim of an international plot by a “worldwide hyper class”<sup>45</sup>. The nationalist discourse identifies a generic *Parti de l’étranger* as the enemy of the *parti de la France*, which the FN claims to represent. Among Jean-Marie Le Pen’s targets are the Brussels technocrats (*l’Europe des fédérastes*), which in 2005 were harassing France with the threat of a European Constitution<sup>46</sup>, and Islamic communalism, which Marine Le Pen declared to fight against, reasserting the principle of Republican secularism<sup>47</sup>.

<sup>42</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities Reflections on the Origins of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1991 (1983).

<sup>43</sup> J.-M. Le Pen, “Nos valeurs”, cit.

<sup>44</sup> B. Mégret, editor, *Militer au Front*, Éditions Nationales, Paris, 1991, p. 9.

<sup>45</sup> M. Le Pen, Speech of Bompas, 11 March 2011.

<sup>46</sup> *Le Monde*, 2 March 2005, *ibid.* in J. G. Shields, *The Extreme Right in France. From Pétain to Le Pen*, Routledge, London & New York, 2007, p. 311.

<sup>47</sup> G. Ivaldi, cit., pp. 100-101.

### 3. Postmodern national-populism and the neo-fascist legacy

Defining the Front National simply as a populist party, however, can be misleading. The Front National was founded in 1972 as an “amalgam of right-wing extremism”<sup>48</sup> and is part and parcel of “the ideological continuity of the nationalist, collaborationist and neo-fascist Right”<sup>49</sup>. The discourse of the Front National stresses the importance of hierarchy, the pre-eminence of the power of the state, a political vision based on the Schmittian binomial “friend-enemy”<sup>50</sup>.

This association should not come as a surprise: the recognition of a populist dimension in the FN is perfectly compatible with the party’s French neo-fascist legacy<sup>51</sup>. Although not all forms of populism are fascist, we can safely conclude that all forms of Fascism manifest themselves as a “dramatic version” of populism<sup>52</sup>. Fascism is effectively a populist deviation from democracy: like all heresies it branches off from the common trunk of orthodoxy<sup>53</sup>. Therefore – and despite appearances – there is no strident contradiction between hyperdemocracy and Fascism.

The populism of the Front National may, therefore, be interpreted in two different ways: either retrospectively or stringently linked to the events of the past twenty years. If we observe France’s historical background, this populism appears as a strategic resource and an added value. Like at the time of

<sup>48</sup> M. Winock, “Populismes français”, cit., p. 88.

<sup>49</sup> A. Dorna, *Le populisme*, PUF, Paris, 1999, p. 83.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. I. Cuminal, M. Souchard, S. Wahnich, V. Wathier, cit., pp. 92-94.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. J.-F. Sirinelli, *Histoire des droites en France. Vol. 2: Cultures*, Gallimard, Paris, 1992; Z. Sternhell, “Ni droite ni gauche”. *L’idéologie fasciste en France*, Complexe, Bruxelles, 2000; Id., *La droite révolutionnaire. Les origines françaises du fascisme*, Seuil, Paris, 1978.

<sup>52</sup> L. Incisa di Camerana, *Fascismo, populismo, modernizzazione*, A. Pellicani, Roma, 1999.

<sup>53</sup> R. Rémond, *Les droites en France*, Aubier Montaigne, Paris, 1982, p. 201.

Drumont, a leading exponent of an openly anti-Semitic parliamentary group, author of the slogan *La France aux Français* and editor of the newspaper *Le peuple français*, the appeal to the people is a typical method of aggregation of the radical right<sup>54</sup>.

Today, the most significant aspect of the populism of the FN, and of European neo-populisms in general, is that they can be viewed as a side effect of the Neoliberalism that dominated the 1980s. In an even harsher and more explicit language than Thatcherism, neo-populism appealed to the unorganised social sectors, criticised the parasitism of the trade unions, big business, the bureaucracy and professional politicians, in the name of the “common man”<sup>55</sup>. Although he does not use the “populist” label, Alfio Mastropaolo nevertheless acknowledges that the “new right prospers on the malaise of democracy, largely contained inside a neoliberal perspective and indeed it intensifies its tenets”<sup>56</sup>. In short, the Front National may be classified among those movements that have seized on the winning appeal of populism, suited to the neoliberal *Zeitgeist* and useful in fostering ethno-identitarian issues within a system that is strongly criticised at its roots<sup>57</sup>.

Jean-Marie Le Pen’s sensational breakthrough into the second round of the 2002 presidential election occurred on the wave of a protest and identity-based campaigns focused on the (alleged) security risks represented by the massive presence on French soil of Muslim immigrants.

The change of leadership in the FN has ensured a significant degree of continuity from this point of view. At the party

<sup>54</sup> M. Tarchi, “L’ascesa del neo-populismo in Europa”, *Trasgressioni*, XV, n. 1, 2000, p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> D. Grassi, *Il neopopulismo*, in N. Bobbio, N. Matteucci, G. Pasquino, editors, *Dizionario di politica*, UTET, Torino, 2004, pp. 739-740.

<sup>56</sup> A. Mastropaolo, *La mucca pazza della democrazia. Nuove destre, populismo, antipolitica*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2005, p. 192.

<sup>57</sup> P. Taggart, cit., p. 96.



conference held in Tours on January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Marine Le Pen was given the opportunity to continue her father's legacy by defeating the post-fascist Bruno Gollnisch, with 67.65% of the vote of party members. She expressed this desire for continuity of the nationalist approach of the FN in her acceptance speech. The vocation of protest populism is reflected in demagogical slogans such as "we are the people" or "putting the people back in control", combined with xenophobic undertones, such as "the European monster that's being hatched in Brussels", "the modern totalitarianisms are Islamism and globalism" and "identity-killing globalisation", viewed as an "economic horror, a social tsunami and a moral Chernobyl". The threats conjured up by Marine Le Pen are "the oppression of disorder" and immigration, against which she sounds the warning "Europe is not a caliphate, France is not a caliphate, it never has been nor ever will be". Her call for a "strong, secular, democratic and republican" state is associated with a tirade in defence of the country, which is in danger because it is "on the verge of breaking up". "The State and the Nation in our country are effectively indissoluble", the new FN leader declared at Tours, calling for an "economic and social patriotism".

Marine Le Pen, like her father, is the self-styled advocate of the delegitimation of the representative democratic system, in favour of a "plebiscitarian-ethnocratic" model<sup>58</sup>. The components of this new rhetorical platform – which may be defined as "postmodern national-populism" – are a "postmaterialist" patrimonial populism, which emphasises the Western values of secularism and an "ethnoscicism" based on a "chauvinist" vision of welfare<sup>59</sup>.

The concept of patrimonial populism entails, according to Reynié, the "conservative and virulent" defence of a tangible

<sup>58</sup> P. Ignazi, *Le Front National et les autres*, in P. Delwit, editor, cit., p. 41.

<sup>59</sup> See also J. Rydgren, "France: The Front National, Ethnonationalism and Populism", in D. Albertazzi, D. McDonnell, editors, cit., pp. 166-180.

heritage, the “standard of living”, and of an intangible heritage, “the lifestyle”, both related to the principles of individual freedom, gender equality, secular institutions and the secularisation of society, and is linked to the concept of “post-materialist values”<sup>60</sup>. According to the perspective of patrimonial populism, the governing elites are responsible for having botched immigration policy, thus exposing this heritage to the pitfalls of multiculturalism and Islamism. This is the position of Marine Le Pen with regard to the secular State. Since the conference of Tours the leader of the FN has associated the struggle against radical Islam with the protection of republican values in general and of the rights of women<sup>61</sup>.

Then there is the “ethnosocialist” component, which refers to notions such as “welfare chauvinism”<sup>62</sup> and “national preference”, and addresses the role of the Nation-State and the French welfare model. The speeches by Marine Le Pen at both Tours and Nice (11 September 2011) testify to her decision to target the working classes, proposing a brand of national-identitarian socialism<sup>63</sup>. The State is no longer seen as a Mo-

<sup>60</sup> D. Reynié, *Populismes : la pente fatale*, Plon, Paris, 2011, p. 16; R. Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1977; *Id.*, “Changing Values among Western Publics from 1970 to 2006”, *West European Politics*, XXXI, n. 1-2, 2008, pp. 130-46.

<sup>61</sup> A. Dézé, *Le front national : à la conquête du pouvoir ?*, Armand Colin, Paris, 2012 ; L. Liszkai, *Marine Le Pen. Un nouveau Front National ?*, Favre, Lausanne, 2010 ; P.-A. Taguieff, *Le nouveau national-populisme*, CNRS Éditions, Paris, 2012.

<sup>62</sup> H.-G. Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe*, Saint-Martin’s Press, New York, 1994; H. Kitschelt (with A. J. McGann), *The Radical Right in Western Europe: a Comparative Analysis*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1995.

<sup>63</sup> The studies on the electorate of the FN feature labels such as “working-class Lepenism” and “left-wing Lepenism”. See N. Mayer, *Ces Français qui votent FN*, Flammarion, Paris, 1999, pp. 85-90 e P. Perrineau, “La dynamique du vote Le Pen. Le poids du gauchisme-lepenisme” in *Id.*, C. Ysmal, *Le vote de crise. L’élection présidentielle de 1995*, Département d’études politiques du Figaro et Presses de Sciences-Po, Paris, 1995, pp. 243-261.

loch from which the people must defend themselves, as in the Pujadist and neo-liberal view of Jean-Marie. Marine Le Pen speaks of “our social model, our public services, our pensions”, always however excluding foreigners from the perimeter of “national solidarity” and putting the French first with regard to the payment of welfare benefits, social housing, employment, etc. The Scandinavian populist movements of the 1970s, according to which the benefits of the welfare state should be reserved only, or primarily, to nationals, had already expressed these ideas.

This propensity towards ethnosocialism by the FN, however, has some aspects of originality, because it was favoured first by the geopolitical upheavals of the recent decades of globalization, and then by the economic crisis that began in 2008. But even in this case there are significant historical precedents that go back to the remote past of the French radical right; suffice it to say the already mentioned movement founded by Édouard Drumont *La France aux Français*. Or, more recently, the slogan *Français d’Abord!* and the principle of national preference. Ethnosocialism is grounded on a selective vision of the *République*, which does not view Fraternity in the universal meaning of 1789, but with reference only to the national community, in line with the idea of “cultural differentialism” developed by the *Nouvelle Droite* cultural movement and implemented by the FN since 1980s<sup>64</sup>. In addition to being spelled out on paper, the principle of “national preference” in allocating social services and welfare benefits, has also been partially applied in Vitrolles, one of the municipalities governed by the FN<sup>65</sup>.

Marine Le Pen’s political platform for the 2012 presidential

<sup>64</sup> J.-Y. Le Gallou, *La préférence nationale : réponse à l’immigration*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1985; B. Mégret, *300 mesures pour la renaissance de la France*, Éditions Nationales, Paris, 1993.

<sup>65</sup> J. G. Shields, cit., p. 311.

election (*Mon projet pour la France et les Français*)<sup>66</sup> confirmed this mix of ethnosocialism and “patrimonial” populism.

French “economic patriotism” is reflected in the commitment to “Reindustrialise France through reasonable protection at the borders” and to “Renegotiate the European treaties to regain national sovereignty”. In the chapter titled “For a Europe of Free Nations”, it is stated “France must regain control of its borders, preferably through a free association of European States that share the same vision and the same interests on matters such as immigration, the regulation of foreign trade and the circulation of capital”. Furthermore, “all economic partnerships with the Maghreb countries will be renegotiated, on the basis of the interruption of the migratory flows towards France”. Generally speaking, Marine Le Pen quantifies the objective of limiting legal immigration as a reduction “from 200,000 to 10,000 entries a year”.

Among the commitments by the FN candidate was a reminder of the inviolability of the French model, which consists in “Restoring true public services throughout the country, especially by ensuring that everyone has access to quality care”. Support to the principles of the welfare state is accompanied by the exclusion of “non-nationals” from its services. Any sign of universalism is, in fact, tempered by the intention to “Stop immigration and establish a national priority for employment, housing and social care”. According to the principle of “national priority”, which is an updated version of national preference, “family allowances” will be “reserved to families where at least one of the members is French”, “the health care programme provides access to health care anywhere, for all the French” and “companies will be encouraged, when hiring, to prefer French nationals with the same qualifications”. Furthermore, “affirmative discrimination in hiring or enrolling interns, students or apprentices will be prohibited in the public

<sup>66</sup> <http://www.marinelepen2012.fr/le-projet/#>.

sector, as well as in private companies, schools and other educational establishments even partially financed with public funds”.

The link between so-called “ethnosocialism” and “patrimonial populism” consists in the idea of “anti-French racism”, which is presented and explained in the section of the political programme on the “One and Indivisible French Republic”. Islam is implicitly evoked in relation to the intention to “impose Republican secularism against any political religious demands”. The principle of secularism is upheld with the commitment, in the case of Marine Le Pen’s victory, that “all financing by the local communities of places of worship or religious activities will be prohibited” and that “the 1905 law will be strictly enforced”.

In conclusion, the clash of civilisations in the twenty-first century evoked by Huntington is the cleavage along which the FN has reformulated its political stance as a postmodern version of entrenched nationalism. The ethno-populist penchant of the French right’s political and cultural programme is a challenge to both the traditional right, in the throes of its defeat at the 2012 presidential election, and the left, which returned to the government after ten years. The current economic crisis is fertile ground in which the seeds of an appealing proposal to the working classes, hard hit by the effects that globalisation is producing in the heart of Europe, can sprout and bring fruit. In the next few years Marine Le Pen and her party will be able to play an important role in the process of reorganisation of the French party system, especially with regard to the right wing of the political spectrum.

# GERMANY

## THE FAILURE OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN GERMANY

*Frank Decker*

The mid-1980s saw the emergence of a new kind of political party in a number of western European countries. These new movements emanating from the far right fringe of the political spectrum have since been commonly referred to as belonging to a new breed of “right-wing populism” by both political scientists and journalists alike<sup>1</sup>. In the immediate aftermath of these parties’ (Front National, Lega Nord, Vlaams Blok, Austrian Freedom Party) first major gains at the polls, a number of observers were willing to simply dismiss them as fleeting protest movements that have always made an appearance in western democracies from time to time. Just as it had been the case in the past, these new challengers were expected to lose their support among the electorate as quickly as they had gained it, eventually leaving their respective parliaments altogether. Nevertheless analysts and scholars would be proven wrong by subsequent political developments. Instead of disappearing, right-wing parties were able to broaden their base

<sup>1</sup> F. Decker, *Der neue Rechtspopulismus*, 2nd ed., Opladen, 2004.

of support and expand throughout Western Europe. Over time, these movements would also spread to the nascent democracies of central and Eastern Europe<sup>2</sup>.

One of the few countries that have proven to be an exception to the rule is the Federal Republic of Germany. Right-wing extremist and populist movements have certainly had a degree of success at the polls in Germany as well, but these parliamentary gains have been confined exclusively to the regional level (and to European elections which are traditionally considered by the electorate to be far less important than state or federal elections) where right-wing challengers have been able to pass the 5 percent threshold on a number of occasions. These parties have nonetheless failed to establish themselves as a national force – a development that is set to continue for the foreseeable future.

Why has this been the case? In order to answer this question I would like to first assess the conditions that have led to the success of right-wing populist parties in a number of countries but which are apparently lacking in Germany to this day. Following this I will ask if there are functional equivalents in Germany that are able to compensate for the lack of success or complete absence of these right-wing populist actors.

## **1. Reasons for the lack of success of populist right-wing parties in the Federal Republic**

Political scientists overwhelmingly agree that the appearance of parties that have been established on the far-right fringe of the political spectrum are an expression of a deep crisis of trust and representation that are present in today's democratic politics. The reasons for this lie in the disintegrative

<sup>2</sup> C. Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge, 2007.

consequences that modernisation has had on society. According to many assessments regarding the rise of populist movements, their base of support is particularly strong among those parts of the electorate who feel they have been left behind or express fear of losing their status within society<sup>3</sup>. Therefore we appear to be dealing with the manifestation of a protest movement that has risen in part due to trends towards individualism in society while expressing the desire for an identity. Foreigners can usually be found at the centre of these populist aversions<sup>4</sup>.

(1) If this assessment is right then there is no reason to believe that it somehow applies less to Germany than it does to other European countries that have been subject to widespread modernising processes. Particularly within the society of the former East Germany, where social bonds of large parts of the population have broken down due to the pace of political change and other factors, the potential for a party or movement from the far right should be particularly high (the comparison to other post-communist societies in central Europe is obvious). Furthermore, in terms of the general cleavages, Germany's party system by and large resembles that of other western European nations. The underlying structural trends are the following:

- The continuing existence of a socio-economic cleavage which pits free market supporters against those believing in social equality.
- The replacement or overcoming of traditional religious and confessional divisions by an overarching socio-cultural cleavage. In this case liberal and libertarian views are in conflict with conservative and authoritarian convictions.

<sup>3</sup> T. Spier, *Modernisierungsverlierer? Die Wählerschaft rechtspopulistischer Parteien in Westeuropa*, Wiesbaden, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> H.-G. Betz, "Rechtspopulismus in Westeuropa. Aktuelle Entwicklung und politische Bedeutung", *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*, 31, 2002, p. 252 ff.



- The appearance of a regional East-West cleavage following the reunification of Germany<sup>5</sup>.

(2) Just as there is no lack of a social foundation for right-wing populism, there is no reason to argue that institutional factors can be held responsible for the weak state of right-wing political parties in Germany. The 5 percent threshold required to enter Germany's federal Parliament is a far from unattainable challenge and new parties are not discriminated against when it comes to party financing provided by the state. The fact that the NPD – a party explicitly opposed to Germany's constitution – receives almost half of its income from state funds aggravates many. The effect of Germany's federal electoral system on a budding party's chances is ambivalent. On the one hand, it is easier to form a new party in the political environment of a state or a city. At the same time, though, this makes it far more difficult to forge a united party at the federal level. The same effect can be found in voting patterns across the country. While voters are willing to vent their anger in state or European elections, the desire to punish parties drops in federal elections that are regarded to be far more important.

A much more significant reason for the failure of right-wing populism is the country's political culture. The continuing repercussions of Germany's National Socialist past mean that right-wing extremists as well as populist movements and their goals are stigmatised in a unique manner. This heavy weight of history on the political environment presents a twofold problem for anyone wishing to challenge it. First of all, getting access to media is made more difficult due to the fact that they are less than enthusiastic about providing populists a venue through which to express their views and do not necessarily approach them with an unbiased view. Right-wing parties are

<sup>5</sup> F. Decker, *Parteien- und Parteiensystem in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Stuttgart, 2011, p. 68 ff.

therefore always in danger of being linked to the ideology of Adolf Hitler. Secondly, members of right-wing populist parties who see themselves as more moderate are in constant threat of being infiltrated by extremist forces that see these parties as a way of escaping their political isolation. The ensuing struggle for the party's ideological outlook and platform is bound, sooner or later, to ruin the party's public image<sup>6</sup>.

(3) A question which is not all that easy to answer is whether right-wing parties are lacking political opportunities in Germany. There is no reason to doubt the existence of such openings since – as we have just seen – the social foundations on which right-wing protest movements can build on are in place in Germany as in many other countries. By comparing European right-wing populist parties it becomes apparent that there is a programmatic-thematic formula for success for these movements.

- On *economic matters* right-wing parties are taking advantage of the growing divide between the rich and the poor by positioning themselves as defenders of the welfare state. Referring to their political ideology as “right” in this particular policy area is therefore questionable. During the 1980s, most right-wing populist parties still ran on a platform of Neo-Liberalism and subscribed to a program of deregulation and tax cuts. This strategy began to lose its appeal for right-wing politicians at the same time as centrist parties (and Social Democrats) began to move towards such policy approaches. Due to this development, right-wing populist parties' electoral core has since shifted towards the working class and the unemployed.
- On *cultural matters* right-wing populists see themselves as anti-immigration-parties. Fighting the modern day penchant for ethno-cultural melting pots, they seek instead to emphasise the shared kinship of a historically evolved, ho-

<sup>6</sup> R. Karapin, “Radical-Right and Neo-Fascist Political Parties in Western Europe”, *Comparative Politics*, 30, 1998, p. 225.

mogenous national community. At the same time, the fundamental understanding of what constitutes a nation is no longer based on the unique traits of a single nation but is instead fed by an all-encompassing western-Christian identity contrasted with a non-western Islam. This also explains why members of these right-wing populist movements have been able to cooperate so well on a pan-European basis.

- On *political-institutional matters* right-wing populists have emerged as resolute critics of party-based political systems. In their place they wish to see the establishment of a system of direct democracy. It is no surprise then that many of these political movements refrain from referring to themselves as “parties” altogether. The biggest opportunities for right-wing populist parties can be found in political systems where parties have monopolised power to an advanced degree. The most prominent examples in this respect are Jörg Haider’s Freedom Party in Austria, the Lega Nord in Italy and the Pim Fortuyn List in the Netherlands.

This interaction of economic, cultural, and political elements also goes a long way towards explaining why the European unification process has served as a key rallying issue for new right-wing parties in recent years. According to the line of argument put forward by right-wing populists, the EU represents virtually everything that has gone wrong in Europe in recent years due to the changes brought about by modernisation: a loss of material wealth, a demise of western culture caused by excessive immigration and a crisis of political representation. The usually abstract issue of globalisation is thus linked to a concrete perpetrator. Euroscepticism has therefore become an integral part of most right-wing populist platforms despite the fact that some of them (like the Lega Nord) used to support distinctly pro-European positions in the 1980s<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> F. Hartleb, *A Thorn in the Side of European Elites: The New Euroscepticism*, Centre for European Studies, Brussels, 2011.

While in Germany there is no lack of a similar formula for success, these policy areas tend to yield little prospect for electoral gains by themselves. Criticism of Germany's party-based state is largely confined to discussions initiated by elder statesmen or intellectuals, with public interest in such matters only rising in case of a scandal. On the one hand, this can be attributed to the existence of institutional counterweights (federalism, constitutional control by the courts, referenda, and the media) that tend to limit the clout and influence of political parties. On the other hand, the German party system has proved to be competitive enough to make political change possible (by alternating coalition governments).

In terms of mobilisation the general debate surrounding the welfare state appears to be more promising. Even within this policy section though the chances of success for right-wing populists have been and continue to be limited. Up until the Schröder government introduced far-reaching labour market reforms, this policy area offered few, if any, prospects of attacking the main parties due to the fact that both Christian Democrats and Social Democrats supported and implemented policies aimed at preserving the status quo while avoiding deep cuts. The newly founded Left Party (Die Linke), which entered the political arena after a merger between the East German post-communist PDS (Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus) and the West German WASG (Electoral Alternative for Labour and Social Justice, which itself had come into existence as a response to the SPD's Agenda 2010) became the sole major party to take up the issue of welfare cuts as a key part of its platform in the wake of Gerhard Schröder's reforms.

This then leaves immigration and the European Union as the most important topics of mobilisation for European right-wing populists. The reason why neither issue yields any sort of electoral gains for new right-wing parties in Germany continues to puzzle knowledgeable observers. Let us have a look at the subject of immigration first. It was made abundantly clear

by the “Sarrazin debate”<sup>8</sup> in 2010 that there is indeed a tension under the veneer of general consensus on the actual existence of multiculturalism<sup>9</sup> in Germany. The immense media outpour caused by Sarrazin’s intervention stands in stark contrast to the complete lack of political reactions to his controversial book. What is the reason for this? One possible explanation could be that the integration of immigrants into German society has been conducted in a more successful manner than Sarrazin and his supporters among the public have suggested. Compared to France, the handling of integration has been an immense success story. The causes behind this can first of all be found in the composition of the main immigrant community (Turks instead of Arabs from the Maghreb); secondly, in the more favourable conditions surrounding the social issue of housing (large German cities with districts that sprang up in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century are better at integrating the immigrant population than the comparable French *banlieues* housing projects); thirdly, generally speaking, any conflicts regarding the recognition and acceptance of the immigrant population’s cultural backgrounds are usually carried out in a less acrimonious manner. This latter point shows that an anti-discrimination policy simply based on the equality of all citizens – as advocated by some – fails to sufficiently address the fundamental issue<sup>10</sup>. When all is said the pressure to adopt the cultural traits and views of the majority is particularly high in a nation like France whose republican values have always

<sup>8</sup> Thilo Sarrazin, a former member of the Bundesbank’s executive board and finance senator of the state of Berlin (from the SPD), published a highly controversial book in 2010, in which he chastised members of Germany’s Muslim immigrant community for their apparent unwillingness and inability to integrate. See T. Sarrazin, *Deutschland schafft sich ab. Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen*, München, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the term “multiculturalism” see: B. Löffler, *Integration in Deutschland. Zwischen Assimilation und Multikulturalismus*, München, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> S. Luft, *Staat und Migration. Zur Steuerbarkeit von Zuwanderung und Migration*, Frankfurt a.M., 2009, p. 327 ff.

regarded immigrants as part of the nation's citizenry. This only serves to exacerbate potential conflicts. In Germany, on the other hand, past conflicts about the recognition of distinctive cultural backgrounds have been carried out in a more subdued manner without attracting too much public attention due to the country's decision to forgo anything called an "integration policy"<sup>11</sup>.

Avoiding a comprehensive integration policy as well as the decision not to politicise the topic can be regarded as the main reasons why political newcomers have failed to find opportunities in this particular policy area. A decisive factor was the shared stance by both major parties (including the SPD) not to discuss these matters in the public sphere<sup>12</sup>. It was up to the Green Party in the 1980s – after it had just emerged on the political stage – to provide a counterbalance to the Christian Democrats on a range of issues regarding foreigners. The SPD's decision to remove its requirement of reforming Germany's outdated immigration laws in the early 1990s in exchange for the approval of new asylum restrictions is symptomatic of the party's conduct on this issue during the period. In the meantime, the Christian Democrats continued their defiant stance on immigration and the integration of foreigners, arguing that Germany simply was not an immigrant nation. The first cautious steps towards a comprehensive integration policy were made after Gerhard Schröder's red-green coalition entered office. This did not have an immediate polarising effect, although the SPD learned its lesson in the wake of the CDU's campaign against the planned introduction of dual citi-

<sup>11</sup> D. Loch, "Soziale Ausgrenzung und Anerkennungskonflikte in Frankreich und Deutschland. Vergleichende Reflexionen zu sozial benachteiligten Stadtvierteln", in W. Heitmeyer, R. Dollase, O. Backes, editors, *Die Krise der Städte*, Frankfurt a.M., 1998, p. 290 ff.

<sup>12</sup> S. Borschier, "Why a Right-Wing Populist Party Emerged in France but Not in Germany: Cleavages and Actors in the Formation of a New Cultural Divide", *European Political Science Review*, 4 (2012), p. 125 ff.

zanship in 1999. Since then it would simply no longer present the opposition with an opportunity to target them on the issue.

Similarities can be found on the question of European integration as well. In this policy area, the CDU has managed to avoid a rise in Euroscepticism by employing a mix of implicit nationalist rhetoric and pragmatic government policies. From the opposition both the SPD and the Greens supported all major decisions of the governing CDU/CSU-FDP coalition aimed at saving the euro. Criticism of the eurozone's bailout measures can usually be found among the two smaller government parties, the FDP and CSU. Euro-rebels within the FDP failed to find enough support for an anti-bailout initiative drawn up by one of their deputies. Such proposals also lacked broad public support. During the 1990s, the Bund Freier Bürger and its successor Pro D-Mark already had to come to terms with the fact that the euro could not be used sufficiently as an issue for mobilisation. While the majority of Germans did reject the introduction of the common currency, their opposition to the project played only a minor role in their choices at the polls. On top of that, criticism also emerged within both major parties (i.e. Edmund Stoiber from the CSU and Gerhard Schröder within the SPD), allowing them to "co-opt" the issue.

(4) In addition to the lack of political opportunities, the key cause for the lack of populist success at the polls is the general ineptitude of Germany's right-wing populist movement when it comes to streamlining organisational structures. Contrary to most other European countries, where different protest movement strains have coalesced and given rise to one party, the far-right in Germany continues to be divided. Scholars often note the absence of a charismatic leader as the decisive reason<sup>13</sup>. Taking a look around Europe, it becomes fairly

<sup>13</sup> U. Backes, "Ist ein Ende der Mobilisierungsschwäche deutscher Rechtsparteien in Sicht?", in Hans Zehetmair, editor, *Das deutsche Parteiensystem*, Wiesbaden, 2004, p. 206.

obvious that the success of virtually all right-wing populist parties is owed to the political adroitness of these figures whose names (Le Pen, Haider, Fortuyn, Bossi and so forth) are now universally recognised thanks to their electoral feats. Nevertheless the conclusion that a German right-wing populist party needs a leader comparable to Haider or Le Pen fails to provide a sufficient answer. After all, the existence or non-existence of such a figure is not just dependent on chance. The Federal Republic too has seen a number of political leaders who were quite adept at pushing the right populist buttons (Franz Schönhuber and Ronald Schill come to mind) and who came fairly close to matching the traits assigned to charismatic populist leaders<sup>14</sup>. This proved to be of particular importance in the immediate aftermath of their respective parties' entry onto the political stage, but could not prevent their ultimate demise in the polls. Neither the Republikaner nor the Schill-Party was able to use a broader political platform to free themselves from their dependency on short-term issues for electoral success<sup>15</sup>; nor were they capable of establishing functioning party structures. At the same time they also failed to ensure united and coherent conduct by their more visible representatives in the public sphere.

## 2. The channelling of right-wing populism through “functional equivalents”

The existence of right-wing populist feelings cannot be gauged solely by the presence or success of the newly established political parties. With regard to Germany in particular, the ques-

<sup>14</sup> A. R. Willner, *The Spellbinders. Charismatic Political Leadership*, New Haven/London, 1984.

<sup>15</sup> The Republikaner sought to exploit the supposedly uncontrollable tide of asylum seekers while the Schill-Party adopted a tough stance on crime.



tion needs to be addressed whether there are different avenues available for the expression of right-wing views which reduce the likelihood of the creation and eventual success of right-wing populist parties. A closer look is warranted in a number of areas: first of all, the ability of mainstream parties to integrate right-wing views and their proponents (this applies in particular to the CDU/CSU); secondly, the role of the tabloid press (primarily the *Bild* newspaper); thirdly, the presence of a left-wing protest party represented by the former PDS and currently, at the national level, by the Left Party; fourthly and finally, the unabated high rate of racially motivated violent crimes against foreigners since the reunification of the country.

(1) Both the CDU and CSU have always aimed at ensuring that no democratically legitimate party would be established to their right. During the 1950s the CDU successfully absorbed all remnants of national-conservative competitors. Doubts were cast on this Christian Democratic strategy when the National Democratic Party (NPD; itself founded in 1964) entered a number of state parliaments in the late 1960s<sup>16</sup>. Following its narrow failure to enter the *Bundestag* in 1969, the NPD disappeared as quickly as it had initially surfaced. After being forced into opposition, the CDU/CSU was able to court right-wing voters more freely and pool these forces within their party; in the process, the Christian Democrats were also able to erase any base of support which the parties from the extreme right might have wished to use for themselves. The decision in 1983 by dissatisfied CSU supporters to defect and establish their own party (the Republikaner) did not present a challenge to the dominance of the Christian Democratic sister parties. Along with more restrictive policies on immigration and foreigners in general the CDU/CSU was able to capitalise

<sup>16</sup> R. Stöss, *Politics against Democracy. Right-Wing Extremism in West Germany*, New York/Oxford, 1991, p. 144 ff.

on the reunification of the country that had taken place under the administration of the party and effectively removed a significant slate of many right-wing platforms. Whenever far-right parties have entered state parliaments<sup>17</sup>, both the CDU and CSU have resisted the temptation to cooperate with them<sup>18</sup>. The CDU was only willing to enter a coalition with the non-extremist Schill-Party in the city state of Hamburg. The newcomers' self-implosion while in government would eventually pay off handsomely for the CDU at the next regional election.

Germany's centre-right camp's ability to fend off challenges from the far right is largely based on the fact that, contrary to the CDU/CSU's sister parties in Italy, Austria, or the Low Countries who have historically placed a larger emphasis on Catholic social teachings, it has seen itself from the very beginning as an all-encompassing big-tent party of the middle-class that could also house conservative and nationalist elements.<sup>19</sup> The union between the CDU and CSU, stopping short of complete unification, has proven to be an immense blessing as it has allowed both parties to appeal to a broader segment of the electorate than either of them could reach by itself. In relation to the CDU, the CSU stands to the left of its sister party on economic matters while occupying a place to the right on cultural issues; in this respect it reflects the tendencies of many right-wing populist parties across Europe.

<sup>17</sup> Part of this string of far-right success stories were (together with the Republikaner): the Deutsche Volksunion/German People's Union (DVU; founded in 1987) and a resurgent NPD which has taken over the mantle of leadership among right-wing movements since its entry into the Saxon state parliament in 2004.

<sup>18</sup> During the 1969 presidential election the CDU nonetheless failed to reject the NPD's votes in the federal assembly for the Christian Democratic presidential candidate, defense minister Gerhard Schröder, who lost out to SPD-candidate Gustav Heinemann by a mere six votes in the third round of voting.

<sup>19</sup> F. Bösch, *Die Adenauer-CDU. Gründung, Aufstieg und Krise einer Volkspartei 1945-1969*, München, 2001.

Even after the change of leadership from Helmut Kohl to Angela Merkel, both the party's inner cohesion and the tight relationship between it and the CSU were at no point under threat. Recent rumblings within the conservative wing of the party and its establishment of a "Berlin Circle" do indicate a slight unease with respect to Angela Merkel's modernising efforts, particularly concerning the newly introduced family and education policies and her attitude towards nuclear energy. Nonetheless, an uprising does not appear to be in the making since her opponents have failed to map out an alternative strategy.

Like the CDU/CSU the FDP also definitely warrants attention when discussing the ability of Germany's middle-class parties to absorb specific segments of the electorate. Its role as an anti-clerical and secular counterweight to the Christian Democrats enabled it to be the sole influential survivor among the country's minor parties during the 1950s. Initially a close ally of the CDU/CSU, the Free Democrats eventually developed into a corrective force within Germany's party system. Particularly during its time in government with the SPD (after 1969), the party was able to make a name for itself as a balancing force on the right to the Social Democrats' economic policies. This role – which the FDP managed to retain after its switch back to the Christian Democrats in 1982 – has remained an integral part of the party's ideological foundations and eliminated virtually any inroads for right-wing populists on economic matters.

The FDP has also resisted the temptation to emulate the success of populist movements such as Austria's Freedom Party by moving to the right on cultural issues. Its decision to completely disavow the party's nationalist roots after entering a coalition with the SPD has removed any foundations on which to base a comprehensive right-wing agenda. Any assertions that the party's late vice-chairman Jürgen Möllemann intended to make such a course correction when he presented

his own “Projekt 18” to the party leadership should be met with scepticism<sup>20</sup>. If indeed he intended to ease in a policy shift he could hardly have chosen a worse topic than his criticism of Israel from a pro-Arab stance, which – to make matters worse – had slightly anti-Semitic undertones<sup>21</sup>. The ensuing concerted opposition to Möllemann and his views by the country’s media also left him as a pariah within his own party.

(2) The last point testifies to the extent to which challengers are dependent on media outlets that shape public opinion. The more the media focus on issues that have seen their importance in the public discourse increase due to their mention by right-wing politicians, the bigger we can expect a favourable response by the electorate. For example, without the support of Austria’s influential *Kronenzeitung* tabloid the rise of Haider’s Freedom Party would not have been possible. This also applies – albeit to a lesser degree – to the success of the Schill-Party in Hamburg which owed part of its meteoric rise to editorial decisions made by the powerful Springer Press. When Schill fell out of favour with the tabloid press due to his antics as a senator, his party started dropping in the polls at a record pace.

Even outside of the sphere of party politics, the tabloid media serve to feed and at the same time absorb right-wing populist sentiment. Within Germany this applies in particular to the *Bild* newspaper whose editorial approach is programmed to fuse national-conservative and socio-populist positions. The views propagated and conveyed by the *Bild* can act, on the one hand, as a measuring stick of popular opinion towards the parties, whose agenda may be influenced and altered by it, and on the other, as a simple lightning rod for

<sup>20</sup> F. Decker (cfr. note 1), p. 156 ff.

<sup>21</sup> Nowadays a number of right-wing populist parties, such as the Belgian Vlaams Belang, explicitly express support for the State of Israel in order to underline the cultural disparities between themselves and non-western Islam.

public opinion. This is exemplified by the newspaper's role in propping up the debate surrounding Thilo Sarrazin's book *Deutschland schafft sich ab*. Even though this debate, which went on for a number of weeks, had many of the traits of an electoral campaign, it failed, for all intents and purposes, to have any lasting impact on Germany's party system, both in terms of their policy platforms and at the ballot box.

(3) Another factor in the channelling of right-wing populism that should not be underestimated is the existence of the Left Party (*Die Linke*). Their brand of populism bears a slight resemblance to the one represented by their counterparts from the right end of the political spectrum both in terms of the means of agitation (together with its accompanying stylistic devices) and also with regard to its ideological bases<sup>22</sup>. Its key ingredients are an anti-elitist protest attitude, widespread media coverage thanks to the charismatic leadership duo (Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi) and a staunch defence of the welfare state. At the very least we may say that from time to time Oskar Lafontaine deliberately employs talking points pertaining to the issue of cultural identity (for example on immigration). As a matter of fact, the former SPD-leader may be right in his assessment that social protest buttressed by cultural issues is a formula for success that does not necessarily have to be the sole purview of representatives of the right-wing variety of populism. As electoral studies have shown, protest voters courted by the Left Party belong to the same social groups left behind by modernisation and whose support is vital to right-wing extremist parties as well. In East Germany this applies in particular to the NPD and its anti-capitalist platform. Their gains would be far more pronounced if it were not for the Left Party.

<sup>22</sup> F. Decker, F. Hartleb, "Populismus auf schwierigem Terrain. Die rechten und linken Herausfordererparteien in der Bundesrepublik", in F. Decker, editor, *Populismus in Europa*, Bonn, 2006, p. 206 ff.

Today left-wing populism has three distinct advantages in Germany over its counterpart from the right: First of all, it is able to appeal to a broader base of support thanks to its simultaneous use of regionalist and socio-economic cleavages. The NPD has in the process lost its previously purely East German identity<sup>23</sup>. Neither this development nor the considerable problems surrounding the merger of the PDS with WASG (which at times has made the party appear completely inept and chaotic) should significantly limit the party's path to success. Secondly, in terms of its organisational structure, the party profits from its deep roots in East German society where it is able to take advantage of a sizeable network and sufficient resources that enable it to prevail in regional contests. And thirdly, it is not subject to the same degree of stigmatisation. The NPD's past role in the GDR and lingering suspicions of extremist ties and views continue to weigh on it, but are no longer able to delegitimise a party that can count on the support of about a quarter of East Germany's population. This situation is reinforced by the Left Party's vehement opposition to right-wing extremism. Its efforts and perseverance on the issue continue to remain unmatched in German politics. Particularly because the party is above reproach regarding suspicions of fascist tendencies, it is able to utilise (without fear of recriminations) issues and methods that are usually employed by right-wing populists to garner votes.

(4) A final mention has to be made of the continued high levels of racially motivated crimes in Germany, a fact that received new attention in the light of recent revelations of a string of murders by a far-right terror group which spanned a decade. Interestingly, very little research has been done on the question of whether the existence of a right-wing populist

<sup>23</sup> This is made evident by the party's voter composition which has shifted towards the socially marginalised segments of the population in the former GDR as well.

movement that gives voice to right-wing sentiments can serve to prevent, or reduce, the likelihood of hate crimes originating from the far right. Koopmans' Europe-wide comparative study, which revealed such a correlation, is in dire need of an update<sup>24</sup>. This deficit is made even more apparent by recent findings on Germany and its regions which point in the opposite direction<sup>25</sup>. Success at the polls for the far right NPD was subsequently followed by a rise in racially motivated crimes. Such findings should come as no surprise to anyone, since strong organisational ties exist between the NPD and Neo-Nazi movements that are ready to use violence. One should also remember that the NPD's recent rise has to be seen in the context of the non-existence or weakness of other right-wing parties. This continues to set Germany apart from other nations with a lower rate of race-related crimes (such as Austria for example).

## Conclusions

The question of if and when a new right-wing populist force can be established in Germany tends to gain traction whenever the prospect of voters abandoning the centre-right camp appears imminent or already underway. Quite often this will coincide with new polls indicating potential support levels for a party to the right of the CDU/CSU at double digits. Translating potential support into votes is of course an entirely different matter. However, even if sufficient support within the electorate did exist, local right-wing populist movements would still be lacking two key components of success that are

<sup>24</sup> R. Koopmans, *A Burning Question. Explaining the Rise of Racist and Extreme Right Violence in Western Europe*, WZB, Berlin, 1995.

<sup>25</sup> U. Backes, M. Mletkzo, J. Stoye, *NPD-Wahlmobilisierung und politisch motivierte Gewalt*, Cologne, 2010.

evident in all instances in which right-wing movements have had strong showings at the ballot box in Europe: 1) a party platform that can yield electoral gains and 2) a charismatic leader.

Will Germany's twin centre-right parties be able to stave off challenges from new political parties just as they have done in the past whenever disenchanted politicians who had fallen out of favour with their old parties were acclaimed as the new leading figures of right-wing movements? It seems rather obvious that none of the "usual suspects", who are mentioned whenever the media see a new right-wing movement on the horizon, will give up the comfort of complaining from their armchairs for the long, slow grind of building a party from the ground up – the risk of failure simply seems too high. This should also apply to any possible attempt to attach themselves to a pre-existing party structure. After the FDP voted in favour of the European Union's bailout mechanisms, it appears to be safe from any euro-sceptic or right-wing populist takeovers. Hans-Olaf Henkel, the former Chairman of the German Employers' Association, instead decided to settle on the Free Voters (*Freie Wähler*) as a vehicle for his own agenda. After strong showings in a number of local elections and even entering the Bavarian state parliament in the 2008 regional election, it was suggested that the issue of Europe could prod them into entering federal politics.

However, the chances of further electoral gains appear to be hampered by the party's inbred organisational structure. The Free Voters are made up of a fairly diverse group of activists whose state branches do not necessarily mirror one another. Creating a strong federal branch and developing policy stances on all issues at the national level goes against the party's identity; after all the Free Voters conceive themselves by and large as an "anti-party party" whose natural base of support is primarily at the communal level. Consequently, a number of state branches, such as for example Baden-



Württemberg, have already left the federal party since they are, in principle, opposed to any sort of “federalisation” of the movement. They appear to have been proven right by the party’s dismal failure in the 2009 European election in which it only managed to garner 1.7 percent of the vote despite fielding a prominent former CSU politician such as Gabriele Pauli at the top of their federal list.

The example of Gabriele Pauli’s ineffectiveness in winning votes should serve as a warning to Hans-Olaf Henkel. It is a reminder that a party’s organisational deficits cannot be compensated simply through name recognition. The comparison that is sometimes made with the Left Party and Oscar Lafontaine’s role in making it electable in the west of the country is in this case inaccurate. Before joining the WASG, the former SPD leader made his own political involvement in the party contingent on a future merger between it and the PDS which already had a strong base of support in the east of the country. This was a decisive prerequisite for the ensuing success of the newly founded party. The potential leaders of a new right-wing party can only dream of such favourable conditions attending the creation of their own parties.

# GREECE

## THE RISE OF THE GOLDEN DAWN

*Daphne Halikiopoulou, Sofia Vasilopoulou*<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The past year has witnessed the rise of the Greek Golden Dawn, a populist violent extreme right-wing party that espouses the principles of National Socialism. Over 400,000 Greek citizens voted it into Parliament in June 2012, granting it 18 seats out of 300, while more recent polls estimate its support at over 14 percent, placing it as the third strongest party after the centre-right New Democracy and the radical left-wing Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA)<sup>2</sup>. On the one hand, this development may be understood as particularly surprising: in a country that experienced a Nazi invasion in the 1940s and a military dictatorship (1967-1974), the far right

<sup>1</sup> The name sequence reflects the principle of alphabetical order. The work has been carried equally by both co-authors.

<sup>2</sup> 2013 VPRC Opinion Poll, June, available at [http://www.vprc.gr/uplds/File/teleytaia%20nea/tvxs%20maios/Political%20Conjuncture%20and%20Governance\\_Jun2013.pdf](http://www.vprc.gr/uplds/File/teleytaia%20nea/tvxs%20maios/Political%20Conjuncture%20and%20Governance_Jun2013.pdf)

has enjoyed limited support during the post-dictatorship era. On the other hand, the rise of such a party may be understood as less surprising in the context of the severe economic crisis facing European countries, which has had significant socio-political and economic consequences in Greece.

The Golden Dawn is not a new group. It began in the form of a bulletin published in December 1980 by a group of former members of the neo-fascist Party of August 4th, which differentiated itself ideologically from other Greek far right-wing factions by emphasising its Nationalist Socialist principles<sup>3</sup>. The group expanded its activities from bulletin to grass-roots violent movement and the establishment of Popular Association – Golden Dawn in 1983<sup>4</sup>. The first time it officially ran for elections was in 1994. However, it remained in the margins of the Greek political system enjoying very little electoral success and confining itself to extra-parliamentary activities that tended to involve violence at the street-level. It is only in 2012 that the Golden Dawn made an electoral breakthrough and entered parliamentary politics.

This electoral breakthrough has effectively transformed the Golden Dawn from what was largely seen as a marginal illegitimate movement to a fully-fledged party with considerable support operating within the confines of procedural democracy. Its progressive entrenchment in the Greek political system raises a number of questions regarding the nature of democracy and policy-making: the issue of the legitimisation of violence; censorship, tolerance and freedom of speech; social segregation and its endorsement through the incitement of hatred; backlash from minority and left-leaning groups; and

<sup>3</sup> D. Psaras, *Η Μαύρη Βίβλος της Χρυσής Αυγής, Ντοκουμέντα από την ιστορία και τη δράση μιας ναζιστικής ομάδας* (The Black Bible of the Golden Dawn: The documented history of a Nazi group), Polis, Athens, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> A. Ellinas, "The Rise of Golden Dawn: The New Face of the Far Right in Greece", *South European Society and Politics*, 2013 (forthcoming).

how governments may implement policies to address these problems.

This chapter discusses the Golden Dawn phenomenon by proceeding as follows: first it provides a brief overview of the Greek political context; second it examines the ideological make-up and electoral support of the Golden Dawn; and third it assesses the implications of its rise in terms of democratic politics and policy-making in Greece.

## The Greek context

Democratic rule was restored in Greece following the fall of the military junta in 1974. Since then the pillars of the Greek political system may be defined as “two-partyism”, adversarial politics and clientelism, which although a long-standing feature of Greek society was consolidated in the post-dictatorship era. The Greek political system may be characterised as a parliamentary democracy in which two political parties alternated in power, i.e. the centre-left Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) and the centre-right New Democracy. The Greek electoral system is a form of reinforced proportional representation, which allows the winning party to form a strong majority government by granting it bonus seats. As a result, during the post-dictatorship era PASOK and New Democracy dominated the political scene by together occupying over 80% of the seats<sup>5</sup>. As a consequence smaller parties have tended to be excluded from electoral representation; and given the effects of the junta and the negative connotations associated with the right, the smaller parties that did enjoy limited representation tended to be predominantly left leaning.

<sup>5</sup> S. Vasilopoulou and D. Halikiopoulou, “In the Shadow of Grexit: The Greek Election of 17 June 2012”, *South European Society and Politics*, 2013 (forthcoming).

The dominance of PASOK and New Democracy has taken place within the context a deeply embedded clientelistic system<sup>6</sup> based on widespread corruption, cronyism and patronage networks. Although it has changed in nature, scope and intensity over the years, clientelism has been a constant and pervasive feature of the evolution of the Greek political system dating from the pre-industrial 19<sup>th</sup> century Greek state. This system persisted throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and became consolidated and assumed mass proportions following the fall of the military junta and the establishment of the two-party political system of modern Greece. Given that the clientelistic networks became consolidated on the basis of the Greek two-party dominance, the system became one where Greek voters tended to choose parties not on the basis of ideological and/or class divisions but rather on the capacity and willingness of parties to provide patronage<sup>7</sup>. Essentially a two-way rent-seeking process characterises the relationship between voters and parties, the latter using the state to provide 'rents'.

The economic crisis, which erupted in 2009, entailed the signing of formal mutual agreements between Greece and its creditors (IMF, EU, ECB) in exchange for bailout packages. Economic policy conditionality included the adoption of severe austerity measures with paramount socio-political implications, which resulted in mass demonstrations, often turning violent, and intense popular discontent. Greek disillusionment has centred around disapproval of the political system as a whole and a rejection of the two main political parties, which have defined it for decades. PASOK and New Democracy have been discredited for their policies and their long-standing association with clientelism. As a result, the period since 2009

<sup>6</sup> K. Featherstone, "The 'party-state' in Greece and the fall of Papan-dreou", *West European Politics*, Vol. 13 (1), 1990, pp. 101-115.

<sup>7</sup> Y. Papadopoulos, "Parties, the State and Society in Greece: Continuity within Change", *West European Politics*, Vol. 12(2), 1989, pp. 55-71.

has witnessed the fragmentation of the Greek two-party system, the implosion of PASOK and the rise of anti-system politics, thus opening up political space for smaller radical or extremist parties.

## The rise of the Golden Dawn

In contrast to continental Europe<sup>8</sup>, which experienced the rise of the far right during the 1980s and 1990s, in Greece the far right tended to be marginalised electorally during the same period. Its presence was confined to small youth grass-roots movements and minor – usually splinter – parties of the periphery<sup>9</sup>. The first radical right-wing party to receive parliamentary representation in Greece during the post-dictatorship era is the Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS). LAOS was established as a splinter party from the centre-right New Democracy by Georgios Karatzaferis in September 2000. The party first received parliamentary representation in the 2004 European Parliament elections and subsequently entered the Greek parliament in 2007 after gaining ten seats. In 2009 the party increased its representation to 15 seats. However its success was short-lived. Shortly after the effects of the economic crisis and the division of Greek society along the lines of a pro- and anti-memorandum cleavage<sup>10</sup> and the association of LAOS with a pro-memorandum agenda served to weaken the party's electoral support. Subsequently the elections held in May and June 2012 resulted in the party failing to reach the 3% threshold required in Greece in order for a party

<sup>8</sup> P. Hainsworth, *The Extreme Right in Western Europe*, Routledge, Abingdon/London, 2008; C. Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> S. Vasilopoulou, *Euroscepticism and the radical right: domestic strategies and party system dynamics*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou, cit.

to enter parliament. Since the June 2012 elections, the newly formed Independent Greeks (ANEL), another splinter party from New Democracy, and the extreme right-wing Golden Dawn occupy the political space of the populist non-mainstream right, together holding 38 seats in parliament.

What could explain the sudden electoral breakthrough of an extreme right-wing party, such as the Golden Dawn, which for most of the post-dictatorship era remained marginalised? For scholars of the far right, the rise of the Golden Dawn may be seen as a broader European phenomenon associated with economic crisis<sup>11</sup>. Greece fulfils many of the conditions favourable to the rise of right-wing extremism, including rising unemployment, popular disillusionment and deep societal divisions. However, the Greek case is to an extent unique. First, other European countries significantly affected by the crisis including the so-called PIIGS (Portugal, Italy, Ireland and Spain) have not experienced a comparable support for far right-wing extremism. Second, the Golden Dawn is not comparable to other far right-wing European parties that have been enjoying electoral success during the past decades in countries such France, Switzerland and the Netherlands. Parties such as the French Front National, the Dutch Freedom Party and the Swiss People's Party that are performing well in their respective domestic electoral arenas gained much of their electoral support before the onset of the economic crisis. Some, such as the Dutch Pim Fortuyn, were successful even at times when immigration was constant<sup>12</sup>. These parties belong to what scholars may term the "new" far right: unlike

<sup>11</sup> D. Bell, "The Dispossessed", in D. Bell, editor, *The Radical Right*, Anchor Books, Garden City, NY, 1964, pp. 1-45; H.-G. Betz and S. Immerfall, *New Politics of the Right: Neo-Populist Parties and Movements in Established Democracies*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1998; S.M. Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*, Doubleday, New York, 1960.

<sup>12</sup> R. Koopmans and J. Muis, "The rise of right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands: A discursive opportunity approach", *European Journal of Political Research*, 48(5), 2009, pp. 642-664).

the Golden Dawn, they have modernised their practices, distanced themselves from fascism and adopted a more moderate rhetoric<sup>13</sup>.

Therefore, in order to better understand the rise of the Golden Dawn, it is important to nuance and unpack the characteristics of the party itself as well as the political context and culture of the country within which it operates. To some extent, the Golden Dawn should be better understood as a type of social movement, exemplary of the emergence of a new type of politics characterised by anti-establishment, violent, community and grass-roots practices. As such, it is more comparable to other right-wing grassroots movements, or parties, which engage in activities of street violence. Perhaps the party most comparable to the Golden Dawn in the European context is the Hungarian Jobbik party, which is also experiencing unprecedented rise and has also progressed from a grassroots movement to a fully-fledged political organisation with parliamentary representation.

## Organisation and ideology: what the Golden Dawn stands for

The Golden Dawn is a militant organisation whose basic tenets include the concentration of power in the hands of the leader; an emphasis on the ideology of National Socialism; the superiority of the Greek nation and a focus on ethnic markers of identity including race, blood and creed; and anti-system

<sup>13</sup> M. Golder, "Explaining Variation In The Success Of Extreme Right Parties In Western Europe", *Comparative Political Studies*, 36(4), 2003, pp. 432-466; D. Halikiopoulou, S. Mock and S. Vasilopoulou, "The civic zeitgeist: nationalism and liberal values in the European radical right", *Nations and Nationalism*, 19(1), 2013, pp. 107-127; P. Ignazi, "The extreme right in Europe: A survey", in P. Merkl & L. Weinberg, editors, *The Revival of Right-Wing Extremism in the 1990s*, Frank Cass, London, 1997, pp. 47-64.



politics and rejection of substantive democracy. The party's leader, Nikolaos Michaloliakos has been involved in the Greek far right from a very young age and has often had dealings with the law, as have other members of the Golden Dawn who now enjoy MP status, including Elias Kasidiaris, who is the second man in command. The Golden Dawn's organisational structures resemble those of the Nazi system: violence, discipline and ultimate respect for the leader to the extent that party members are required to stand and salute upon the leader's arrival. Its members define themselves as street soldiers. Some, including its leader, have authored monographs that tend to glorify violence.

The Golden Dawn is an extreme, ultra-nationalist and racist party. Among current far right-wing parties in Europe, it is the one that most resembles traditional Nazism, in its outright espousal of National Socialism: the endorsement of what it terms the "third biggest ideology in history", i.e. nationalism, combined with support for an all-powerful state premised on "popular sovereignty"<sup>14</sup>. The party's logo is the Greek meander, which is reminiscent of the Nazi swastika. Since its election, the Golden Dawn has been careful in its public espousal of the Hitlerite regime. Although in the past it has made declarations glorifying the "enlightened leadership of Adolf Hitler"<sup>15</sup>, the party has also been quick to argue that Nazism is case-specific, i.e. the type of National Socialism as applied to Germany alone, and therefore it is inappropriate to speak of a Greek variant of Nazism. However, despite this rhetoric, the espousal of National Socialism can hardly be disassociated from Nazism on ideological grounds. The party is staunchly

<sup>14</sup> Golden Dawn (2012a) "Identity" available at: <http://www.xryshaygh.com/index.php/kinima>

<sup>15</sup> D. Psaras, *Η Μαύρη Βίβλος της Χρυσής Αυγής, Ντοκουμέντα από την ιστορία και τη δράση μιας ναζιστικής ομάδας* (The Black Bible of the Golden Dawn: The documented history of a Nazi group), Polis, Athens, 2012.

and openly anti-communist and anti-liberal, both of which it describes as tyrannical<sup>16</sup>.

The Golden Dawn emphasises white supremacy and equates the state with ethnicity. Its ideology centres on the Greek nation, which it understands as an organic entity defined by ethnic identifiers. These identifiers are confined to biological and cultural elements such as bloodlines, language, religion and community of birth, making the Greek nation an exclusive club to which membership is restricted. The Golden Dawn's main focus is on the linear progression of the Greek nation through time, ranging from antiquity to modernity. Greece is presented as an ancient nation which has existed from time immemorial: from Ancient Sparta, the time of Plato and Homer, the Byzantine Empire and the Greek War of Independence and its heroes<sup>17</sup>. The party glorifies the past: Greece was "Great" before and will be again<sup>18</sup>. Partly this is linked to its irredentist policy, which seeks to "restore" former territories of the Byzantine Empire to the Greek state, including parts of modern Turkey and Cyprus. As such they have also been forging links with the Cypriot far right-wing equivalent party, the National Popular Front (ELAM)<sup>19</sup>.

There is a clear line of delineation between members and outsiders. The criteria for inclusion in the Greek nation are ethnic: outsiders are excluded from the national community on the basis of race, creed and ethnicity. Greek status cannot be acquired; it is something one is born into. As such, racism informs the party policy agenda. The Golden Dawn is staunchly and indiscriminately anti-immigrant, emphasising that there is

<sup>16</sup> Golden Dawn "Golden Dawn: an ideological movement" available at: <http://www.xryshaygh.com/assets/files/ideologia.pdf>, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Y. Katsourides, "Determinants of Extreme Right Reappearance in Cyprus: The National Popular Front (ELAM), Golden Dawn's Sister Party", *South European Society and Politics*, 2013 (forthcoming).

no such thing as “legal” immigration. During its electoral campaign in June 2012 many of its members declared that immigration could never be legal; the party manifesto promised that if elected the party would expel all immigrants from Greece. In the same manifesto the party denied the granting of full political rights to any non-Greek – as defined by the biological features described above – on the grounds that granting Greek citizenship to non-natives will “spoil” the continuity of the Greek nation<sup>20</sup>. They have been organising numerous welfare provision activities such as blood donations and “soup kitchens” intended only for Greeks, a status to be confirmed by the presentation of a Greek identity card to one of the Golden Dawn members on site.

The Golden Dawn’s ability to link nationalism with anti-system politics can be seen as a partial explanation of the party’s electoral success in crisis-ridden Greece. The party portrays the Greek nation as pure and virtuous, which has, however, plunged into crisis as a result of the weakening of its national sovereignty. This is the doing of internal elites and their “anti-Hellenic” policies, which have been in place to serve foreign interests, including the United States and international Zionism. The Golden Dawn pledges to “destroy” the old “rotten system” which it associates with stagnation and corruption. Its cause is a struggle between the “pure” Greek nationalists versus the “evil” others and their internal collaborators. This type of populism, consistent with Mudde’s<sup>21</sup> definition, places a great emphasis on the Memorandum of Understanding and the austerity measures which it sees as the product of exploitative foreign powers and their domestic collaborators, i.e. those Greek politicians who have, and continue to, support it in order to profit financially. This type of rhetoric has enabled

<sup>20</sup> Golden Dawn (2012b) “Golden Dawn: an ideological movement” available at: <http://www.xryshaygh.com/assets/files/ideologia.pdf>, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Mudde, cit.

the Golden Dawn to link its nationalist narrative, i.e. the supremacy and purity of the Greek nation, with economic narratives, i.e. the attribution of responsibility for the economic crisis to the “anti-Hellenists” both external and internal traitors who seek personal profit. After all, a “real” Greek is only someone with an ethnic consciousness<sup>22</sup>.

## Support for the Golden Dawn

The Golden Dawn ran for elections for the first time in 1994. Since then it has competed in municipal, national and European electoral arenas. Table 1 below shows its electoral results in national and European parliamentary elections when the party stood alone. In other years, it has also participated in the electoral competition as part of various far right-wing alliances, equally with limited success. May and June 2012 constituted an electoral breakthrough for the Golden Dawn, which witnessed its electoral gains to rise from under 0.5% to just under 7%.

**Table 1, Golden Dawn’s electoral performance<sup>23</sup>**

Year	Election	Percentage	Seats
1994	European	0.11	0
1996	Parliamentary	0.07	0
2009	European	0.46	0
2009	Parliamentary	0.29	0
2012 May	Parliamentary	6.97	21
2012 June	Parliamentary	6.92	18

<sup>22</sup> Golden Dawn, cit., p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> Source: Greek Ministry of the Interior ([www.ypes.gr](http://www.ypes.gr)). Note that in other years the Golden Dawn has run as part of an alliance with various far right-wing organisations. These have not been included in this table.

Greece is a country where electoral turnout tends to be high. The May and June 2012 elections witnessed a particularly low turnout in comparison to previous national elections, i.e. 65.12% and 62.49% respectively. Although some sources<sup>24</sup> estimate the turnout a little higher (as official figure did not take account of updated electoral registers), all estimates record a decline in turnout from previous years with many voters abstaining.

This indicates widespread disillusionment that not only manifested itself in the form of voting abstinence but also in terms of a protest vote and the decline of traditional alignments. The elections were characterised by high electoral volatility, party system fragmentation and the severe weakening of the two-party system. A number of small parties benefited, including the radical left SYRIZA, which witnessed its support rise from 4.6% in 2009 to 16.8% in May and 26.9% in June 2012; the newly-formed ANEL, which gained 10.6% and 7.5% respectively; and the Golden Dawn, which as indicated in Table 1 increased its support from 0.29% to 6.97% and 6.92% respectively. Unlike most other parties, between May and June 2012 the party experienced very low levels of electoral volatility with a large percentage of its May voters opting for it again in June.

The Golden Dawn received votes from across the Greek party system. Its voters originated from both the right and the left. 57.2% of its May 2012 voters came from the mainstream PASOK and New Democracy. 20.9% came from people who were voting for the first time. The least support came from voters traditionally aligned with the radical left<sup>25</sup>. Confirming

<sup>24</sup> C. Vernadakis, "Εκλογές και αποφάσεις της 'τελευταίας στιγμής'" (Elections and 'last minute' decisions), Hot Doc, 21 June, 2012, available at: <http://www.vprc.gr/articlex.php?cat=155>

<sup>25</sup> V. Georgiadou, V., "Greece" in R. Melzer, S. Serafin, editors, *Right-Wing Extremism in Europe: Counter-strategies and Labor-Market Oriented Exit Strategies*, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2013.

the “angry white men”<sup>26</sup> hypothesis, the largest percentage of Golden Dawn voters in both May and June 2012 were men. Gender appears to be a clear signifier of Golden Dawn support. Other socio-demographic characteristics however do not reveal clear patterns of support. Regarding education, the initial expectation that the overwhelming majority of Golden Dawn voters would originate in those with low levels of education is not confirmed. Instead, the bulk majority appear to be voters with an intermediate education, i.e. school leavers and/or those who have graduated from a further education institution. Interestingly, the Golden Dawn received more support from those with a higher education degree (26 and 27% in May and June respectively) than from those coming from low educational backgrounds, i.e. those with only a primary school education (11.5 and 13.5% in May and June respectively).

Regarding occupation, private sector employees as well as the self-employed and the unemployed are the three biggest Golden Dawn support groups. Again, the result is interesting, in terms of the sequence: although the unemployed are those in most precarious condition as a result of the crisis and hence one of the highest risk groups, more support came from the private sector (25 and 22.5% in May and June respectively) and the self-employed (18 and 18.1% in May and June respectively). Contrary to most expectations, a notable support, i.e. 11.2 and 13.5% in May and June respectively, came from the public sector.

In terms of age, the expectation tends to be that it is the younger generations who tend to opt for parties such as the Golden Dawn. This is to some degree confirmed, though most of support came from the ages of 25-34 and 35-44; the sec-

<sup>26</sup> R. Ford and M. Goodwin, “Angry White Men: Individual and Contextual Predictors of Support for the British National Party”, *Political Studies*, vol. 58 (1), 2010, pp. 58: 1-25.

ond age bracket being least expected. It is also interesting that fewer than 20% of the voters came from the age groups of 55+. For a detailed analysis of the socio-demographic characteristics of Golden Dawn supports, please see table 2 below.

**Table 2, Demographic characteristics of Golden Dawn supporters in May and June 2012**

	May GD	May Exit Poll Sample	June GD	June Exit Poll Sample
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	72.8	55.0	75.9	57.0
Female	27.2	45.0	24.1	43.0
<b>Education</b>				
Low	11.5	18.7	13.5	20.3
Intermediate	61.8	48.0	58.5	46.1
High	26.0	32.2	27.0	32.4
<b>Occupation</b>				
Agriculture	7.0	5.2	6.9	5.5
Self-employed	18.0	14.1	18.1	14.1
Public Sector Employee	11.2	12.2	13.5	11.6
Private Sector Employee	25.0	20.6	22.2	20.9
Unemployed	14.1	10.8	15.6	10.9
Student	7.4	5.4	6.8	5.0
Housewife	4.1	7.4	4.1	7.1
Pensioner	10.0	21.7	9.1	22.8
<b>Age</b>				
18-24	16.0	9.2	13.9	8.5
25-34	20.9	15.6	27.4	16.3
35-44	25.4	20.0	23.7	20.1
45-54	19.0	19.4	16.4	20.3
55-64	9.6	16.8	11.0	16.8
65+	9.0	19.0	7.5	18.0

Source: Exit Poll, May and June 2012

## Conclusions: policy implications and the future of democratic politics

The rise of the Golden Dawn, its popular endorsement and potential consolidation in the Greek political system raises a number of questions regarding the nature of democratic politics. The legitimization of the Golden Dawn and its ability to function within the confines of parliamentary rule has managed to shift certain debates – and by extension the policy agenda – in Greece on a number of issues and has had significant policy implications with regard to issues of toleration, immigration, violence and law and order.

In a country where ethnic nationalism prevails and religion is hardly decoupled from politics, the boundaries of tolerance are precarious<sup>27</sup>. The progressive entrenchment of the Golden Dawn has revealed the weak foundations of tolerance and pluralism in Greece, pushing those boundaries further. During 2012 there were a number of incidents that revealed the degree to which the Golden Dawn may manipulate these boundaries. For example, following a Golden Dawn motion in the Greek parliament, a 27 year old man was arrested and charged with blasphemy for publishing satirical comments about a Greek holy man, Geron Paisios on Facebook. Another example is the shocking incident of the Hytirio theatre. During the premiere of the Greek version of Terrence McNally's play "Corpus Christi" in central Athens, a number of Golden Dawn members and religious groups gathered outside the theatre to protest against the play's moral agenda. The rhetoric was highly conservative defined by religion and nationalism: anything counter to strict orthodox doctrine should be considered as "anti-Hellenic" and offensive and thus should not be tolerated. The event was marked by violence with Golden Dawn

<sup>27</sup> Halikiopoulou, cit.



members verbally and physically abusing people and issuing death threats to the actors. Although the police stood nearby, they failed to intervene and establish law and order. Eventually the premiere was cancelled and the play was withdrawn.

Three points are particularly interesting regarding these developments. First, the deeply intolerant message directed against a number of groups, including homosexuals, people with left-leaning attitudes, members of other religions and foreigners; second, the support for the message of intolerance by some Greek Orthodox Church clerics; and third, the inability or unwillingness of the police to intervene, alluding to potential links between the Golden Dawn and the Greek Police Force. According to unofficial sources, this is common knowledge. An article published in the newspaper *To Vima* in June 2012 revealed that significant numbers of policemen voted for the Golden Dawn in the May and June elections<sup>28</sup>. If we understand the police force in Weberian terms, i.e. as a body that exercises legitimate violence on behalf of the state, then the potential link between the Golden Dawn and the Greek Police Force has significant implications for the nature and future of Greek democracy.

The extent to which intolerance comes to be pursued through violent means reflects the failure of the state to maintain law and order in a society where the police force is at best inefficient and at worst linked with the extreme right. Following the Golden Dawn's election, the country has experienced the occurrence of large numbers of violent incidents, including beatings and stabbings against immigrants and minorities, clashes with anti-fascist demonstrators and left-wing groups. According to the United Nations Racist Violence Recording Network (2012)<sup>29</sup> 87 incidents of racist violence were

<sup>28</sup> *To Vima*, "Οι αστυνομικοί ψήφισαν και πάλι μαζικά Χρυσή Αυγή" (The Police Force opted again for the Golden Dawn), 2012, available at: <http://www.tovima.gr/society/article/?aid=463063>

<sup>29</sup> United Nations Racist Violence Recording Network (2012) Racist Violence

recorded in Greece during the period January-September 2012. Examples include attacking market vendors of non-Greek origin in the town of Rafina to numerous attacks against minorities on public transport and the streets. A shocking incident was the murder of 27 year old of Pakistani origin in January 2013 by two Greek men in whose dwellings the police recovered 50 or so Golden Dawn leaflets together with a variety of illegal weapons. Since the election of the Golden Dawn violence has escalated and become increasingly legitimised. Violent incidents against pupils of non-Greek origins are proliferating in Greek schools. This indicates that the Golden Dawn is attempting to reach young groups who are vulnerable and easily persuaded. This strategy, if successful, will ensure more votes from a generation that will become of voting age in the near future.

The government has attempted to address the issue of the rise of extremism, but often this has entailed shifting the policy agenda to more conservative and stricter laws, for example tightening immigration and citizenship. The introduction of the policy “Hospitable Zeus” in 2012 aimed at decreasing the numbers of illegal immigrants in Greece, which are estimated as very high, by securing Greek borders and deporting those with no legal right to remain in the country. However, given the problems associated with enforcing law and order in Greece, the implementation of the policy has been tainted with racism and violence. In January 2013, the BBC<sup>30</sup> reported incidents of tourists being assaulted on racist grounds and held by the police as illegal immigrants as part of the operation “Hospitable Zeus”. Over 60,000 people have been detained since the launch of the operation but less than 4,200

ence Recording Network Findings (1.1.2012-30.9.2012), available at: <http://www.unhcr.gr/1againstracism/racist-violence-recording-network-findings/>

<sup>30</sup> BBC, “The tourists held by Greek police as illegal migrants”, 2013, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-20958353>

have been arrested on the grounds of illegal stay. As such the operation has become the target of a number of human rights groups that have accused the Greek police of racism and brutality<sup>31</sup>.

The ability of the Golden Dawn to operate within the confines of parliamentary politics has significantly impacted on Greek society, both directly and indirectly. Beyond shifting the policy agenda and legitimising exclusionary and conservative policies, it has also revealed the deeply ingrained intolerance and propensity towards violence especially in a society riven by crisis. One of the potential remedies for the Golden Dawn phenomenon discussed in Greece is the Constitutional outlawing of the party. But such a solution can only be at best temporary and at worse could have the reverse effect of increasing its support. A country in which the Golden Dawn was elected by over 400,000 citizens and whose support is currently estimated at 14 percent of the vote needs longer-term policy solutions. What Greece needs is the cultivation of a more tolerant political culture facilitated by educational reform and civic engagement.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

# IRELAND

## HOSTAGE-TAKERS AND GATEKEEPERS: POPULISM AND ITS POTENTIAL IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

*David Kitching*

### Introduction

In November 2010, University College Dublin economist Morgan Kelly wrote an article in the *Irish Times* entitled “If you think the bank bailout was bad, wait until the mortgage defaults hit home”<sup>1</sup>. He dealt with the human cost for those families struggling to deal with overpriced mortgages and the economic cost for the State, which, he said, was in danger of heading for bankruptcy. Within three weeks of this article being released, the government had agreed to a bailout mechanism with the ECB, the IMF, the European Commission (hereafter Troika) and three individual member states. His final remarks, raised fears of the emergence within five years of a “hard right, anti Europe, anti-Traveller party that will, inconceivable as it now seems, leave us nostalgic for the, usually, harmless buffoonery” of the traditional, established parties. In

<sup>1</sup> M. Kelly, “If you think the bank bailout was bad, wait until the mortgage defaults hit home”, *Irish Times*, November 8, 2010.

a country that has never had a strong hard right tradition, such a prospect raised serious concerns not only for Irish political culture but also for similar potential developments elsewhere in Europe.

By his own prediction, it is still too early to say whether his fears could reflect reality. Given the absence of enduring far right parties in Irish history since independence, there is sometimes a tendency to compare Ireland to “the Finnish exception”<sup>2</sup>. However, the growth of the True Finns in that country has shown the danger of unwarranted complacency. As the Republic of Ireland struggles through persistent economic recession and political disenchantment, it is worth assessing the potential for a new populist onslaught in Irish politics.

In the interest of comparative utility, this paper will look at potential areas of encroachment for parties of the populist radical right, and other political tendencies with significant counterparts in Europe and North America. It will therefore be necessary to examine whether there are factors in Irish constitutional design and political practice that encourage the growth of populist movements or that mitigate and absorb such tendencies. In a society that has undergone considerable social flux in the past quarter century, the analysis will examine if circumstances have changed enough to provide new opportunities for political actors of this kind. This will involve an examination of nationalist discourse among the major political parties and the relationship between voters and their liberal democratic institutions.

The paper finds that, thus far, there are two types of actors worthy of scrutiny in the coming years. The first are the “hostage takers” who mainly participate indirectly in the electoral system but who mobilise around referenda and hold

<sup>2</sup> D. McDonnell, “The Republic of Ireland: The Dog That Hasn’t Barked in the Night” in D. Albertazzi and D. McDonnell, editors, *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*, Palgrave/Macmillan, Basingstoke/New York, 2007, p. 199.

politicians to ransom on specific issues. Secondly, there are “gatekeepers” who attract the votes of the populist radical right but who have not behaved like them thus far.

## Irish society and political practice

It has sometimes been considered a foolhardy endeavour to attempt to place Irish party politics in comparative perspective relative to the rest of Europe. The endurance within party politics of the divisions established during the Irish Civil War, along with the paucity of explicitly class-based left-right politics, have given Ireland an isolated position in comparative politics as her geographical position in Europe. Prof John Whyte applied Lipset and Rokkan’s typology<sup>3</sup> of the conflicts that form party systems to the Irish context but concluded that the Irish party system was “*sui generis*”<sup>4</sup>. Thus, in the lack of direct counterparts to the British National Party or Front National, it is not the first time that Ireland has been seen as a political outlier in European terms.

However, Irish society has witnessed considerable change in recent decades. The dominance of the Roman Catholic Church has waned amid institutional disgrace and rapid secularisation. Added to the investigations into Church indiscretions, a series of tribunals of enquiry exposed significant corruption and endemic dysfunction in the political system. Throughout much of this period, Ireland experienced its most significant economic boom, as free market values overrode

<sup>3</sup> S. Rokkan and S. M. Lipset, “Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives” in *International Yearbook of Political Behavior Research*, Free Press/Collier Macmillan, New York/London, 1967.

<sup>4</sup> J. Whyte, “Ireland: Politics Without Social Bases” in R. Rose, editor, *Electoral Behaviour: A Comparative Handbook*, Free Press/Macmillan, New York, 1971, p. 650.

religiosity, and as the social and economic effects of globalisation displaced traditional forms of authority.

Of course, Irish politics has always had outside influences, from the clerical to the (post-) colonial, but the pace of social change that coincided with Ireland's highly globalised economy has been remarkable. Of the various approaches to globalisation, the "hyperglobalist" thesis holds that we are dealing with a primarily economic phenomenon. The political upshot is that, as the borderless economy and institutions of global and regional governance develop, the nation-state is to experience a terminal decline. The rising interdependence wrought by global capitalism moves the locus of real political decision-making away from the nation-state, sometimes laying the ground for nationalist counter-reactions<sup>5</sup>.

The Celtic Tiger economic model had an overarching focus on attracting Foreign Direct Investment, which invariably affected other aspects of domestic policy. The state's capacity to provide public services came to depend on duties from an over-inflated property market and the real economy became beholden to a volatile financial sector. While there was evidence of emerging "modernisation losers" during the boom years, the concomitant drop in national cohesion left the state vulnerable to potential upheaval should things go wrong.

Duncan McDonnell wrote in 2007 that "Public anxiety about a downturn in the economy and an increase in the salience of the secular/clerical cleavage could facilitate the rise of populism and, again, both of these are liable to happen in the next decade"<sup>6</sup>. It was not long before this became the lived experience and Irish society was able to test his proposition. Ireland's implementation of harsh post-bailout austerity measures came at the same time as constitutional debates over issues such as

<sup>5</sup> M. Guibernau, "Globalisation and Nationalism" in M. Guibernau, and J. Hutchinson, editors, *Understanding Nationalism*, Polity, Blackwell, Cambridge, 2001, p. 242.

<sup>6</sup> McDonnell, cit., p. 215.

abortion, marriage equality for the LGBT<sup>7</sup> community, and religious patronage in education. In both cases, there is a perception of elites acting with impunity against the interests of ordinary people and there has been a certain level of organised opposition appealing to anti-political sentiment.

## The political landscape and its opportunity structures

These wider societal trends leave space for several manifestations of anti-Establishment populism evident in Europe and/or North America: the populist radical right, populist Euroscepticism, religious reactionary movements and broader anti-politics. Whether this grows to become a wider and more dynamic phenomenon depends on factors of history, political landscape and organisational structure. Of the aforementioned phenomena, that which has garnered most attention is the rise of the populist radical right in Europe. The broadest possible definition of this family is that they subscribe to a nationalist worldview. We will define nationalism using John Breuilly's definition:

“The term ‘nationalism’ is used to refer to political movements seeking or exercising state power and justifying such action with nationalist arguments. A nationalist argument is a political doctrine built upon three basic assumptions:

- (a) There exists a nation with an explicit and peculiar character.
- (b) The interests and values of this nation take priority over all other interests and values.
- (c) The nation must be as independent as possible. This requires at least the attainment of political sovereignty”<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.

<sup>8</sup> J. Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1993, p. 2.



This typology of nationalism aids our understanding of the nation's self-identification through time and the socio-political circumstances in which a given nation finds itself. Breuilly's thesis focuses predominantly on cases of oppositional nationalism and can be usefully applied to the oppositional discourse of far right parties. In the Irish context, it offers particularly useful parameters as throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even nationalists in power adopted an oppositional posture in their discourse. Breuilly also outlines a series of "classes of nationalism", among which irredentism and a drive for unification are prominent<sup>9</sup>. Given the irredentism of official state nationalism in Ireland up until relatively recently, this presents a potential platform for the Populist Radical Right during a period of crisis.

Yet nationalism alone is an insufficient definition and the somewhat post-colonial character of much of official Irish nationalism has given the term a more banal connotation than is the case elsewhere in Europe. Cas Mudde makes use of a concept mainly used in American literature but which has utility sharpening our focus for European analyses: "nativism".

"An ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ("the nation") and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state. The basis for defining (non) "nativeness" can be diverse, e.g. ethnic, racial or religious, but will always have a cultural element"<sup>10</sup>.

In many respects, the "cultural element" to which Mudde refers was embedded in the struggles that bore the Irish Free State. In its earliest formation, independent Ireland emerged from four bitter conflicts: Irish and English; Catholic and Prot-

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> C. Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/New York, 2007, p. 19.

estant; constitutional nationalists and separatists; and, “Treatyites” and Republicans<sup>11</sup>. The state that exists today is primarily a product of the first two conflicts as independence from the United Kingdom coincided with the partition of Ireland into a predominantly Protestant North and Catholic South. While many nationalists genuinely claimed to be guided by pluralism and civic republicanism, the net result was a conception of Irish national identity that was distinctly Catholic and Gaelic.

In the southern state, the third and fourth conflicts offer an interesting dynamic that still has a bearing on the potential for populist and anti-parliamentary discourse. The “constitutional nationalists” to whom Fitzpatrick refers were the “Home Rulers” of the Irish Parliamentary Party who sought incremental independence by parliamentary means through Westminster. They faced stiff internal opposition from the militant secessionists of Sinn Féin. As an oppositional force, Sinn Féin challenged the position of the Irish Parliamentary Party as the single voice of Irish nationalism, arguing that it had become too normalised in the British political system to adequately represent Irish identity. This critique, drawn from cultural nationalist ideas purported that “As it ossifies, political nationalism not only reflects the norms of the dominant state, but it also lays a dead hand on the national community, attempting to stifle any extra-parliamentary movements outside its control”<sup>12</sup>.

This type of political practice adheres to Mudde’s description of populism as it divides society into “two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt

<sup>11</sup> D. Fitzpatrick, “Commemoration in the Irish Free State: a chronicle of embarrassment”, in I. McBride, editor, *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 186.

<sup>12</sup> J. Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation-State*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1987, p. 282.

elite’”, and argues that democratic politics represents an expression of the general will of the people<sup>13</sup>. Having stoked the flames of anti-parliamentarianism and populism, the descendants of early Sinn Féin were placed in the awkward position of attempting to govern while stifling subsequent extra-parliamentary movements. The Anglo-Irish Treaty, the terms of which brought the break with Great Britain, was to cause Sinn Féin to split and led the country into Civil War. This division crystallised to form the Irish party system, as the parties of the split, Fine Gael (pro-Treaty) and Fianna Fáil (anti-Treaty), went from undermining the pre-independence elite to becoming the post-independence Establishment. The centre-left Labour Party has been the only other permanent participant in Irish parliamentary democracy, while other parties have appeared, only to again disappear or become absorbed in the pre-existing system.

Fianna Fáil holds a particularly paradoxical position in the system. Since their entry to the Irish parliament, and up until recently, they have dominated political life while still playing to anti-political and anti-parliamentary sentiment. The party exemplifies what Canovan and McDonnell describe as “politicians’ populism” and this has permeated throughout the Irish party system<sup>14</sup>. The inconsistency inherent in being both populist and Establishment has meant that subsequent non- and semi-parliamentary actors, ranging from Saor Éire to the present day incarnation of Sinn Féin, have regularly challenged the dominant parties. Some of these movements and parties claim to be the genuine political descendants of those who fought in the War of Independence and hold that the contemporary Establishment has become ossified just like the pre-independence Irish Parliamentary Party.

The third main characteristic outlined by Mudde in his as-

<sup>13</sup> Mudde, cit., p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> McDonnell, cit., p. 199.

assessment of the Populist Radical Right is authoritarianism, mainly as a by-word for law and order issues<sup>15</sup>. For a long time this was also embedded in Irish political practice, in part due to the challenges wrought by non-parliamentary actors on the system, with successive governments dealing harshly with republican nationalist challengers<sup>16</sup>. Added to this, post-independence Ireland came to be dominated by the Roman Catholic Church in a manner that reflected sociological realities from before independence. The main parties acquiesced in this and the outsourcing of civic moral authority to a religious institution has left the political system in poor shape to deal with many of today's challenges in a healthy manner. The Church's downfall amid scandal and institutional self-preservation has left a vacuum and the absence of sufficient secular support systems leaves the Republic of Ireland vulnerable to political entrepreneurs.

Structuralist arguments link the shape of the Irish political landscape to the electoral system, which is based on Proportional Representation by Single Transferrable Vote (PR-STV)<sup>17</sup>. While brokerage and patronage existed in Irish politics since the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>18</sup>, it is argued that the patron-client relationship fostered by PR-STV exacerbates the localism and paro-

<sup>15</sup> Mudde, cit., p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> D. Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland: 1900-2000*, Profile Books, London, 2005, p. 419.

<sup>17</sup> Under PR-STV, you vote for candidates in order of preference. You mark the ballot paper by putting 1 opposite the name of your first choice candidate and, if you wish, 2 opposite the name of your second choice and so on. What you are saying is: "I want to vote for candidate A. If the situation arises where A does not need my vote because he/she has been elected or excluded from the count, I want my vote to go to candidate B." And so on. You can choose between candidates of different parties or non-party candidates and you can order your preferences, as you wish. For a more detailed account of the process, visit: <http://www.environ.ie/en/Publications/LocalGovernment/Voting/FileDownload,1895,en.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> M. Gallagher, "Does Ireland need a new electoral system?" *Irish Political Studies*, Vol. 2, 1987, pp. 27-47.

chialism of political life. This has had a constant effect of undermining the practice of party politics. Clientelism mitigates socially minded political organisation and serves as an impediment to the aggregation of demands or mobility in horizontal associations for the prosecution of such demands<sup>19</sup>. Furthermore, it causes political and ideological development to stagnate within political parties. While this might appear to further facilitate populist pretenders, it combines with localism to engender a particularistic form of political organisation. This system can facilitate independent public representatives but it makes it difficult for new mass organisations to enter the system. Multi-member constituencies and candidate-based elections offset the potential for a new party to grow quickly under a charismatic leader, as might be the case in a list system.

We have seen, thus far, how historical circumstance and political practice have limited the scope for the evolution of new populist parties. The catch-all nature of the two historically dominant parties, their localism, their invocation of principles of nationalism and adherence to Church authority absorbed many of the elements that might otherwise facilitate the growth of dedicated populist movements. However, the fall from grace of the pillars of society has allowed for openings that might not previously have been in existence. Political conflict has a dramatic effect on the manner in which a system forms and re-forms. Some conflicts become intertwined and bound up in other relationships. The linkage between social and economic change and EU membership has a significant impact on the discourse adopted by oppositional actors. Several borrow from the tactics employed by Eurosceptic populist movements elsewhere in Europe.

<sup>19</sup> M. D. Higgins, "The Limits of Clientelism: Towards an Assessment of Irish Politics", in C.S. Clapham, editor, *Private Patronage and Public Power: Political Clientelism in the Modern State*, Pinter, London, 1982, p. 92.

## Potential openings for populist movements

In the time since Professor Kelly made his dire warnings about the emergence of new actors on the “hard right”, there has been some evidence of three strands of populism with counterparts elsewhere in Europe and in North America.

1. The fallout from rapid secularisation and the recent re-emergence of significant “Culture Wars” (to borrow from the term used in the US) have refocused attention on reactionary religious organisations operating at the margins of mainstream Irish Catholicism.
2. Harsh austerity measures – imposed by the Irish State at the behest of the Troika – have created space for Euro-sceptic reaction, both from the right and the left. While left-wing opposition comes from a familiar narrative that stretches from Keynesian to Marxist perspectives, this paper is more concerned with right-wing manifestations. In comparative terms, they have more in common with the anti-statists of the Tea Party in the United States, or with the 5-Star Movement in Italy.
3. Economic displacement, social flux and demographic challenges also provide the potential for Populist Radical Right parties based on Mudde’s typology.

Voters of parties like those populists mentioned in strands 2 and 3 above tend to be the most alienated from the liberal democratic political system and much of their discourse revolves around efforts to lay claim to the definition of “real democracy”. In this sense, they seek a radical regeneration of democratic institutions; a “hyperdemocracy” which regularly uses referenda and open lists, and removes moral and political legitimacy from elites<sup>20</sup>. The PR-STV system offers a level

<sup>20</sup> M. Guibernau, “Migration and the rise of the radical right: social malaise and the future of mainstream politics”, *Policy Network*, 2009, p. 10.

of proportionality akin to an open list in a PR-List system but in comparatively small, discrete constituencies. It offers plenty of opportunities for Independent parliamentarians. However, for a new political party to succeed, each candidate needs to build his/her profile over time, embedding him/herself in local social structures in each constituency. A charismatic leader of a new party might win his or her own seat but the task of building a party is a long-term one.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that populism only rears its head through direct participation in the party system. While Church influence has been on the wane, lay religious organisations have still been vocal on the so-called Culture Wars. Most mainstream lay Catholic organisations behave just like other civil society actors in a liberal democracy, but there is a rump of dangerously reactionary organisations that correspond to strand 1 above. Although they operate on the margins of society, they have been effective in adapting to the structures of the political system for their specific interests. Thus, since the 1980s, proposed legislation to liberalise divorce, contraception, reproductive rights, LGBT equality etc. has been met with highly organised campaigns of opposition. Given the personalist nature of politics fostered by the PR-STV system, groups like the Life Institute, C oir and Youth Defence individually target public representatives in their localities. Their tactics often involve severe intimidation and threatening behaviour. In June, Prime Minister Enda Kenny (himself a conservative Catholic) spoke of letters sent to him written in blood, and branding him a murderer, as a result of his agreement to ratify limited legislation on abortion when a mother's life is in danger. One parliamentarian even received death threats<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> C. Gleeson, "TD receives death threat over abortion views", in *Irish Times*, June 14, 2013, accessed September 4, 2013. <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/td-receives-death-threat-over-abortion-views-1.1429464>

Irish law requires a referendum to ratify any amendment to the Constitution, *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, including every EU Treaty. While the referendum has often been a useful democratic instrument for the purpose of citizen engagement in important decisions, it has sometimes been usurped to raise concerns that have nothing to do with the issues being voted upon. This has especially been the case with EU Treaties but populist organisations have utilised referenda to mobilise their activists for other votes too. Religious reactionary groups (strand 1) have their most effective mobilisation campaigns around referenda and it is evident that they are well organised and well resourced, with some evidence of funding from like-minded organisations in the US<sup>22</sup>.

Interestingly, they have often mobilised around EU Treaty referenda under the guise of specific Culture War issues. For example, during the Lisbon Treaty referendum campaign, the Cóir (who identify as a “patriotic, religious and socially conscious” organisation)<sup>23</sup> argued that its ratification would empower the EU to force Ireland to change its laws on “legalization of abortion and euthanasia; homosexual marriage and adoption; freedom to teach and practice religion; and, legalization of prostitution and hard drugs”<sup>24</sup>. While they have only a fringe appeal, they could still play to fears of unknown or unidentified elements in the treaties. They instrumentalise their populism to direct it towards target issues which they

<sup>22</sup> A. Nagle, “Why American Pro-Life Dollars Are Pouring Into Ireland”, *The Atlantic*, January 2013: <http://www.theatlantic.com/saxes/archive/2013/01/why-american-pro-life-dollars-are-pouring-into-ireland/266981/>

<sup>23</sup> M. Minihan, “Anti-treaty Cóir may register as political party, says spokesman”, *Irish Times*, October 5, 2009. Accessed: September 5, 2013. <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/anti-treaty-coir-may-become-political-party-says-spokesman-1.750912>

<sup>24</sup> “Coir Leaflet – ‘Lisbon: A Step Too Far? – 4 Things You Should Know About The Lisbon Treaty’”. Last modified September 21, 2011. <http://irishelectionliterature.wordpress.com/2011/09/21/coir-leaflet-lisbon-a-step-too-far-4-things-you-should-know-about-the-lisbon-treaty/>



consider elitist, in this case the European Union and what they see as aggressive liberal secularism.

EU referenda also provide useful avenues for mobilisation of more anti-statist groups, similar to the US Tea Party or the Italian 5-Star Movement (strand 2). Parallel to C oir, the organisation Libertas emerged from out of nowhere to oppose the Lisbon Treaty. Headed by a wealthy and articulate businessman, Declan Ganley, Libertas succeeded in raising enough red herrings to defeat the first referendum. For instance, Ganley cited the reduction of the College of Commissioners in the original draft as an attempt by elitist, faceless Brussels bureaucrats to reduce the influence of the member states. Thus, the second time round, the legislation included a Commissioner for each member state, ironically increasing the attendant Commission bureaucracy. Interestingly, Ganley describes himself as a Euro-federalist but he is prone to simplistic analyses of certain aspects of EU legislation. However, the convoluted nature of much EU legislation greatly facilitated his efforts in the referendum campaign.

After that campaign, Ganley reconstituted Libertas as a European political party to run in the 2009 European elections. In doing so, he highlighted the vast chasm between running a negative referendum campaign and finding success as a political party. He came within respectable distance of winning a seat in the Ireland North-West constituency but none of his other Irish candidates even came close. Following the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty in the re-run referendum, Ganley stepped out of political life for a time to focus on other interests. However, he has reemerged during recent debates on the aforementioned abortion legislation. In Libertas and C oir, we see that there is some crossover between organisations from strands 1 and 2.

There has been a more recent phenomenon of groups that borrow from anti-statists elsewhere in Europe as well as Anglo-American conspiracy theorists. Direct Democracy Ireland

made headlines in a recent by-election in the Meath East constituency when its candidate and leader, Ben Gilroy, pushed into fourth place, ahead of the Labour Party. There are several points of comparison with Italy's Beppe Grillo and the 5-Star Movement. Both oppose austerity but also the traditional means of opposition to it. Direct democracy activists, and organisations linked to it, have disrupted anti-austerity demonstrations organised by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, hijacking it to demand opposition to the proposed property tax. They advocate Swiss-type recall referenda as a means to greater accountability. Their economic views are largely orthodox, while their constitutional and legal perspective is chaotic and confused<sup>25</sup>.

Their political allies include UKIP leader Nigel Farage but it is their links to the Freeman of the Land movement that is most novel. The Freeman movement is based on several pseudo-legal conspiracy theories "such as the belief that birth certificates create a legal fiction in your name" and legal premises purporting that "simply by declaring themselves to be 'free men on the land', they are removing any vestiges of consent to be governed by the Government of Ireland, thus obviating the necessity of obeying statute-based law"<sup>26</sup>. The ideology originated in Canada before spreading to the United States, the United Kingdom, and Ireland. There is little or no chance of them penetrating the party political system beyond occasional flashes in the pan for the likes of Ben Gilroy. However, their danger emanates from the false hope they offer to people in mortgage distress or at risk of home repossession through their bizarre constitutional fantasies.

We have seen how the Irish electoral system and political

<sup>25</sup> F. Connolly, "Gilroy – Irish for Grillo?", *Village Magazine*, May 2013. Accessed September 4, 2013. <http://www.villagemagazine.ie/index.php/2013/05/gilroy-irish-for-grillo/>

<sup>26</sup> K. Rooney, "Land of the Free, Home of the Deluded", *The Law Society Gazette*, April 2012, p. 12.

landscape make it difficult for organisations like those in strands 1 and 2 to penetrate party political life to any great extent as frontline participants. However, they manipulate the system through targeted pressure and intimidation of public representatives in a highly personalised environment. Further to this, they make ready use of referenda to mobilise their well-organised activists. The case of Libertas shows the vast difference between running a referendum campaign and mobilising as a serious electoral prospect against the existing parties and their political machinery. The opportunity structures indicate, however, that there is space for a populist radical right party as described in strand 3 of the division above.

Many commentators point to the present-day incarnation of Sinn Féin – the political wing of the Provisional IRA, who were central to the conflict in Northern Ireland – as the most obvious Irish contender for entry into the pantheon of European populist radical right parties. Some of this is based on conjecture surrounding its mix of nationalism and eternally oppositional economic perspective – “If it walks like a duck, swims like a duck and quacks like a duck, then it must be a duck” – while others point to their historical trajectory as a more extreme manifestation of nationalist phenomena already embedded in the Irish party system. Their recent elevation in political status (14 seats in parliament; second largest opposition party) has brought them greater attention. From a comparative perspective relative to elsewhere in Europe, Sinn Féin occupies the position of potential populist radical right challengers. Its voters tend to be young, on lower incomes, with low levels of political knowledge and trust, as well as a low sense of their political efficacy<sup>27</sup>.

They have enormous organisational and financial resources, and have been embedded in communities for long enough to have a sufficient grassroots network to make them

<sup>27</sup> McDonnell, cit., p. 204.

serious challengers in the political system. Added to this, they have been able to effectively exploit discontent with the other main parties on issues ranging from the economy to the European Union. They have opposed every EU Treaty since it became a requirement to hold a referendum for their ratification. Sinn Féin have projected an image of the EU as beholden to a distant, self-serving elite<sup>28</sup>. In the context of harsh austerity measures in post-bailout Ireland they can point to the EU compromising Irish economic interests. In addition, they put themselves forward as the true descendants of the early revolutionary leaders.

Media outlets and other political parties have regularly accused Sinn Féin of populism in their anti-austerity utterances but their strategy has been to face this head-on and reappropriate the word. As such, their main ideologue and strategist Eoin Ó Broin recently wrote an article “In Defence of Populism” in the *Irish Left Review*. The elite conception of populism, he argues, is based on an unstated prejudice, which “betrays a worldview that is deeply distrustful of public opinion” and “pits the rationality and expertise of the expert against the irrationality and gullibility of public opinion”<sup>29</sup>. Ó Broin quite effectively presents Sinn Féin’s approach as a viable alternative to the crises facing the EU, its technocratic institutions, and its discredited elitist politics. Their entire political project “is populist, and unashamedly so”. While acknowledging that populism can be progressive or reactionary, democratic or authoritarian, Sinn Féin’s brand is “democratic, egalitarian and progressive”<sup>30</sup>.

There is nothing novel about populist parties presenting themselves in more palatable form for public consumption.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 207.

<sup>29</sup> E. Ó Broin, “In Defence of Populism”, *Irish Left Review*, January 2013. Accessed September 4, 2013. <http://www.irishleftreview.org/2013/01/03/defense-populism/>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

The litmus test must be whether they combine the political practice of populism with the authoritarianism and nativism of populist radical right parties. Sinn Féin would completely deny any relationship to the radical right on the basis of their avowedly left-wing economic positions. However, it is not unusual for populist radical right parties to instrumentalise left-wing economics for temporary gain, sometimes even using economics as a tool to attain support among their perceived “in-group” while excluding outsiders. Therefore, in this context, the left-right spectrum reflects one’s perspective on (in)equality, seen differently by left and right<sup>31</sup>. Sinn Féin have shown a tendency to pick and choose ideological positions depending on the exigencies of the moment. Their Members’ Training Programme differentiates between “ideology” which can be “flexible and constantly evolving”, and “principles”, which are held as “fundamental truths” and include the core nationalist and irredentist aspirations of the party<sup>32</sup>.

According to Duncan McDonnell, Sinn Féin, rather than presenting a major risk of developing into a populist radical right party, acts as a bulwark against others entering the system. He argues that:

the main obstacle impeding the emergence of a new populist party is the recent success of the left-wing nationalist party Sinn Féin which, while unwilling (and unable) to embrace anti-minority or anti-pluralist positions, not only displays many of the characteristics of populism, but has occupied much of the political and electoral space where a populist challenger (of the Right or Left) would seek to locate itself<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> See D. Kitching, “Facing Down the Far Right in Europe: A challenge for progressive politics”, Foundation for European Progressive Studies, FEPS, Brussels, 2011. [http://www.feps-europe.eu/en/news/71\\_facing-down-the-far-right-in-europe-a-challenge-for-progressive-politics](http://www.feps-europe.eu/en/news/71_facing-down-the-far-right-in-europe-a-challenge-for-progressive-politics). 2011, p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> A. Maillot, *New Sinn Féin: Irish Republicanism in the Twenty-First Century*, Routledge, Oxford, 2005, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> McDonnell, cit., p. 199.

Sinn Féin has rejected anti-pluralist, anti-immigrant, racist and homophobic positions often associated with populist radical right parties. However, some commentators have pointed to a disparity between policies promoted by the leadership with regard to immigration and the views of their grassroots membership. They therefore have the potential to appeal to xenophobic discourse *sotto voce* when electioneering. This also raises the possibility that a change in leadership could potentially change the party's direction on such issues.

This leads us to a rather odd conclusion, that in Irish politics, Sinn Féin acts as a "gatekeeper". Their composition as an All-Ireland party mitigates the temptation to appeal to nativist discourse as to do so in the Republic of Ireland might damage their position in Northern Ireland. They are in a peculiar position, governing in a power-sharing executive in the North while appealing to populist tendencies in the South. Just as they claim the legacy of the revolutionary generation from constitutional nationalists in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, their participation in parliamentary politics has coincided with the growth of extremist dissident groups who did not accept the 1997 Peace Agreement. Thus, "Republican Sinn Féin" and the 32 County Sovereignty Committee, along with their respective paramilitary groups, the "Continuity" IRA and the "Real" IRA, hold more sectarian and nativist views and still have the potential to cause huge upset and violence. These groups are currently more active in Northern Ireland but have members and aspirations in the Republic too. The republican-socialist group Éirigi also bites at Sinn Féin's heels in the Republic. The manner in which Sinn Féin navigates the political process will have a significant bearing on the success or failure of dissident republicans as well as more comparatively European style Populist Radical Right parties.

## Conclusion

If “opportunity structures” consist of short-, medium-, and long-term variables, which capture the openness and accessibility of a political system to would-be political entrepreneurs<sup>34</sup>, then Ireland is certainly susceptible to populist growth. We have seen how long-term variables have been absorbed into the system through the exigencies of historical context, the mores of political practice, and the exhaustive requirements for high levels of local political organisation.

In Ireland, the short- and medium-term variables derive from a type of discourse around elitism more comparable to the rest of Europe. The Celtic Tiger boom era saw the practices of old rural brokerage politics writ large. Those who were left behind amid Ireland’s rapid modernisation saw a particularly close and inappropriate relationship between banking and the state and its agencies as senior politicians, civil servants, business interests and bureaucrats rode the waves of good fortune<sup>35</sup>. In tandem with this, religious conservatives felt left behind amid social modernisation as Ireland shed the vestiges of its clerical dominated past. The main parties converged around particular areas of consensus and, when the economic crash happened, the system was left open to serious upheaval.

Conservative religious reactionaries have attempted in the past to enter the party system but with little or no success. They have found themselves better served by pursuing single-issue referendum campaigns and, where applicable, bullying and harassing elected representatives. While they represent a

<sup>34</sup> K. Arzheimer, “Contextual Factors and the Extreme Right Vote in Western Europe, 1980-2002”, *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 53, No. 2, 2009, p. 261.

<sup>35</sup> F. O’Toole, *Ship of Fools: How Stupidity and Corruption Sank the Celtic Tiger*, Public Affairs, Dublin, 2009, p. 52.

minority viewpoint, they are well organised and capable of holding the system hostage from time to time. This is an unfortunate side-effect of the PR-STV electoral system. The most novel strand has been the anti-statists, ranging from the Euro-sceptics to the Irish “Grillini”. These groups are not sufficiently embedded in Irish society to mount a serious challenge. They might occasionally upset a referendum campaign or emerge as flash-in-the-pan electoral successes but until they manage to organise at constituency level beyond their leaders’ strongholds they have little future.

Sinn Féin is the only party with the resources and organisational capacity to mount a serious populist challenge. Yet in spite of themselves, by virtue of their participation in the peace process, they are part of the system. Indeed, they are the gatekeepers to it. Their actions will do much to determine the ability of other actors to enter.





# ITALY

## THE DEMISE OF MULTI-PARTY POLITICS AND THE RISE OF POPULISM

*Michele Prospero*

### 1. The passion for all things new

Over the past twenty years, the Italian political system has been a test-bed for unconventional institutional experiences, featuring the partial penetration (a Europe-wide trend), or, indeed, the absolute triumph, of the paradigms of populism. The pursuit of unorthodox forms of collective action, and the rejection of political representation in the name of the indeterminately “new”, cultivated by many groups and movements that refuse the label of “party”, are the hallmarks of today’s populism. Refusing the political party format for movements bringing together informed citizens free of organisational ties, aspiring to claim back the lost sceptre of sovereignty, based solely on their own devices, fuels the myth of “newness” as a regenerating value in itself, and the emphatic celebration of civil society as a forum for authenticity contaminated by conventional politics<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> S. Lupo, *Antipartiti*, Roma, 2013.

This passion for all things new in politics, which can be called “newism” (from the Italian “nuovismo”) is a belief that has been besieging politics since the early Nineties, depicted as a dark bulwark of parasitism, corruption and uselessness. By representing the political sphere in terms of degeneration, as a sort of excrescence, a tumour or a disease, certain forces, seeking a late romantic experience of “absolute newism”, have first of all won over mass support and then either gained direct access to power, or otherwise become strong enough to start demolishing the edifice of traditional politics. From simple marginal deviance, or a feeling of hostility towards politics as a profession, cultivated by politically alien minorities, alien to the paradigms preferred by the political establishment, this sentiment of newism – with its anti-political stance – acquired enough real strength to unravel the current system and impose a different set of rules in the political playground.

During the last twenty years the existing political elites in Italy have been all but swept away, in two separate operations. In no other Western country has there been so high a rate of political turnover as in Italy (approaching 70% in both the 1994 and 2013 parliamentary elections). Yet the official ideology of the populist movements continues to depict the Italian political system as made up of an elite barricaded inside an impregnable fortress. The generalised turnover of political personnel (with exponents of civil society with no prior political experience) does not necessarily entail an improvement in the quality of the political class, nor, for that matter, the enhanced effectiveness of government. The reiterated dogma whereby political parties are a disease and efficient political executives can only be drawn from civil society, far from the wranglings of power, inevitably leads to superficial behaviour and the loss of touch with reality. The enfeebled parties have given up trying to construct social representation and are themselves obliged to headhunt among civil society,

possibly by resorting to the wonders worked by marketing. However, a party cannot build the efficient political class needed to govern a developed country simply by drawing its members from civil society, on the sole basis of the lack of political experience. An effective political party system creates a political elite with an autonomous culture, mobilises it through political struggle and reproduces it through the organisation of a set of past experiences and of projects for the future. Anti-politics, when it becomes dominant and, to a certain extent, overpowering, severs precisely this delicate function of parties: the formation of consistent leaderships, recognised as reliable and with a disposition towards change.

At the general elections held in February 2013, the sum of first generation (Pdl, Lega) and second generation (M5S) anti-politics exceeded 55% of the votes cast. This is clearly an exceptional situation, fuelled by a number of power brokers that view the downfall of the system as an opportunity. The political bodies too, by voting for anti-system forces, whose political platforms consist of little more than sweeping away the traditional parties, can choose suicide and reject any leading role entrusted to authoritative power elites. And when “newism” triumphs, as the result of the most radical forms of political alienation, by claiming to wipe the (political) slate clean and start afresh with improvised political leaders taken from civil society, the civic resources and the leadership that are necessary to suitably tackle competitive innovation and the great historical emergencies of our times will disappear for who knows how many years to come. What populism advocates, to kick-start this instant process of ethical and political regeneration, is to turn to incompetence and to throw it into the workings of the machine of government as an invigorating breath of fresh air and spontaneity. But triumphant civil society has no long-term concerns and Beppe Grillo’s evergreen slogan “Let’s send them all home” destroys the basic conditions for a competitive democracy.

## 2. A crisis of legitimation

In a scarcely consolidated democracy, such as Italy, anti-politics is the card recurrently played by shady power brokers, who are very influential in the media but not as good at building consensus. The mainstream press and almost all the TV channels (but not the Web, according to a superficial interpretation, which maintains that Grillo's electoral success is due to his skilful exploitation of the new interactive media) have strived to ensure an anti-political outcome to the Italian political crisis. Their furious opposition to the political elites – the legitimacy of which has been suddenly questioned, in favour of the “new” spirit opposed to any form of compromise – generally begins by mobilising all those who demand that the public spaces for political action be delivered from the threadbare apparatuses of “partitocracy”. In their wake come those who propose to complete the operation with a macabre show of strength of triumphant populism (which features an entire repertory of *dramatis personae*, including the comedian), which celebrates the (re)discovery of arcane practices of personal dominion, of gestures, of symbolic rebellion. Each time a systemic crisis approaches, we need to forestall the intertwining of the spasms of politics with social malaise, and the influence that certain cultural expressions and leaders can easily acquire, by peddling deceptive symbolic places and enchanting with the magical rites of power contracted out to charisma. This strategic failure by the left-wing parties leaves a void, which is filled in by populism, overturning the existing arrangements and altering power relations.

Feeble political systems engender historical phases in which the often unpolitical and superficial views of writers, businessmen, newspapers and actors produce a huge political impact. In the name of civil society, of legality, or of generic ideas of fighting against privileges and corruption, “men of let-

ters, taking the direction of public opinion, temporarily occupy the position which, in free countries, belongs to party leaders”<sup>2</sup>. This scenario, described by Tocqueville, emerged in Italy when influential managers, big publishers, constitutional scholars, writers, entrepreneurs, showmen call rallies, launch referendums, announce the formation of political movements and delegitimise the established powers. The enlightened bourgeoisie takes centre stage and, with its huge amount of ammunition, manages to influence the outcome of the face-off as it pleases. But what is the enlightened bourgeoisie? Once again, in Tocqueville’s words, “an active aristocracy, for which directing its business is not enough; it also wants to direct opinions, influence writers, endorse principles and ideas”. This great aristocracy issues a (legitimate) interdiction, to the point of conditioning political parties and influencing their internal workings, but is not strong enough to build a customised party of its own. In periods of transition, it circulates intransigent ethical sentiments, which generally disorient the reformist parties and foster leaps into the unknown, in the pursuit of all things new, with no strings attached. There is nothing shady in these sorties, everything is done in the open and under the (complacent) spotlight of the media. Gramsci would probably say that they are just ordinary episodes of the passive revolution<sup>3</sup>, which exploits the services of a certain ethicistic radicalism, thrown into the fray to weaken the parties through the weapons of divine intransigence, against the very idea of a compromise with one’s political opponents. If the left-wing parties are unable to govern the mobilisation of the intellectual and business middle class, populism steps in and fills the void as a mass phenomenon.

If over half the electorate is won over by *mots d’esprit*, and the propaganda slogans of two comedians like Grillo and Ber-

<sup>2</sup> A. de Tocqueville, *Scritti politici*, Torino, 1969.

<sup>3</sup> A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, Torino, 1975.

lusconi, it is obvious that the large networks of cultural connections typical of a modern civil society are no more. Large swaths of people act in the public arena as though they were the victims of flights of fantasy, as if each risk of regression could be exorcised with the misleading remedy of a snigger and by regressing to the farcical grammar of myths. Faced with the mortal danger of the explosion of the entire framework of the State, a big slice of society believes that it will be able to save itself simply by shutting its eyes, blotting out the nightmarish scenarios surfacing with the return to power of the right, or with the typical stalemate of an ungovernable regime imposed by the comedian. The State has been killed by this culture of “newism”, through which civil society, beguiled by the populist movements, has penetrated the political system, altering its very nerves and sinews and finally annihilating its capacity to operate.

Italy, today, is very close to a huge crisis of legitimacy, accompanying an obscure transition. Everything can just collapse and fall through when these two elements combine: the sense of bewilderment of the economic forces, when they lose solid contacts, the disorientation of layers of society that lose positions of wealth and prestige, showing a great deal of resentment towards the political establishment, seen as responsible for their decline, the appearance and emergence of non-conventional political metaphors amplified by the media, the paralysing crisis of the traditional stakeholders<sup>4</sup>. A veritable tsunami appears on the horizon, which then shatters the long-consolidated but now hopelessly inadequate balances of power, evoking solutions that are only apparently such, hinging as they are onto the primitive fascination for charismatic

<sup>4</sup> Concerning the need to combine political and social content, when analysing populism, see E. Laclau, *La Razòn Populista*, Buenos Aires, 2005, p. 20. On the different types of populism throughout the history of Italy, see M. Tarchi, *L'Italia populista*, Bologna, 2003, and, on a different note, N. Tranfaglia, *La transizione italiana*, Milano, 2003.

leaders. In the current situation, a lacerating social crisis – which might represent a vent for the desperate rebellion of the masses – nevertheless cohabits with the dismembering of the two-party, personalistic political edifice erected two decades ago.

The template of the twisted conflict between politics and anti-politics resides in the weak integration skills of the political players. When the left accepts and adopts austerity as the economic benchmark of government, and then dismisses the representations of the social malaise caused by the crisis as the most deleterious manifestations of populism, it reveals its inability to act as a check, to reassure the working classes. The sterile opposition between a technical bureaucratic government, and the mounting dissatisfaction within society, produce a strong unbalance, because “the *polemic* dimension, when thrown out of the system, reappears between the system itself and its enemies”<sup>5</sup>. When crises occur that can harm the stability of the State, what is needed, above all, is a political leadership capable to promptly understand the roots of social malaise and insecurity. The entirely improper exchange between the stigmatisation of all forms of populism (viewed as a rancorous and primitive expression) and the effective roots of the real disorientation of the people (which can be contrasted by the supposedly superior virtues of a purely technical approach, unconcerned with social differences), is at the core of the crushing defeat of the left.

Anti-political resentment appears like an ideological mask, the sole use of which is to justify the transfer of power to the wealthy. The economic elites, once they have freed themselves from political control, can steer government without too much concern for social consensus and mediation between different interests. Anti-politics can build a block of (economic, media and cultural) forces and attain hegemony,

<sup>5</sup> P.A. Taguieff, *L'illusione populista*, Milano, 2003, p. 13.



by breaking social differences and the distinctions between left and right. By exploiting the arms of anti-politics new formations can seize power without, however, having to demonstrate their capacity to produce genuine innovation. Each time, employing the worst expressions of power, they unleash new forms of rebellion against politics, which in most cases is the old anti-politics in the meantime become institutionalised. Thus the circle of anti-politics is closed. The anti-politics in power unleashes new formidable kinds of anti-politics, which hinder the rise of reformist candidacies. The crisis of the state, the collapse of civil society, the agony of the political parties deliver a now defenceless system.

### **3. The adventures of a mediator**

When, in a State governed by political parties, the framework of which has been (re)built by them, and the basic civil structures of which have, to a large extent, been modelled on them, the key players of organised politics collapse and several new problems arise affecting the general stability of the whole and involving, together, both the State itself and society. The deconstruction of the party format entails the tentorial dissolution of the form of the State, which, in its collapse, can bring the structures of civil society down with it, allured by the supporters of anti-politics. The eclipse of the political party system is then accompanied by the simultaneous erosion of the very social conditions underpinning democracy. The whole interlocking structure of public and private, general and particular, interests and rules collapses, resulting in the de-politicisation of the public sphere and the increasing hyper-politicisation of sectors of the private domain.

A regime that is without firm foundations in civil society is condemned to choose its policies within an institutional frame-

work that lacks lasting support. “The political parties – writes Lipset – should be considered the most important mediators between the citizens and the State. And a key element of any stable democracy is the existence of large parties with significant grassroots support”<sup>6</sup>. When the foundations become precarious, and all sense of loyalty towards the current institutional setup becomes evanescent, the political conditions capable of forestalling the metamorphosis of the failures of government into a failed regime disappear. In these conditions, the rebellion against politics takes the place of a physiological change of the ruling classes, and this is precisely what seals the alliance between anti-politics and populism.

The party is the form of mediation between political decision-making and social action. In the past, this co-existed with the manifestations of a structured consensus (formed in alliance with social organisations, interest groups, trade unions). Rather than the monopoly by the party in the control of mediation, it was the supremacy of the party over all the other expressions of the social fabric, which contributed to mobilisation and representation. But when the function of mediation disappears, with it disappear the elements of a political system that can check, support and govern civil society. When the floodgates that hold back the destructive forces, when the forces that can translate issues into rules, break down and collapse, what emerges is self-representation (by local areas, businesses, individuals and professions) and the personalisation of power. Due to this prolonged deconstruction of the multiple functions exercised by the political parties, the crisis presents itself, simultaneously, as a crisis of the State, of civil society and of the forms of mediation.

It is the destiny of mediation to extinguish itself in a long-drawn-out process, but among democratic systems Italy alone stands out due to the lightning-speed disappearance of the

<sup>6</sup> S. M. Lipset, *Istituzioni, partiti, società civile*, Bologna, 2009, p. 344.

mediator. This entails the disorderly onset of the here and now. Other subjects appear on the side of institutional power (now donning the garb of a self-referential device capable of resisting outside pressures), which precisely in virtue of their private origin aspire to playing the role of influential directors of public policies. The de-politicisation of power – which has reached the point of prolonged phases of so-called technical or special-purpose government – and the politicisation of the private sphere, are the consequence of the disappearance of the mediator, that is, of all those mechanisms that filter the expressions of the social sphere into the public arena, and bring into real life the reasons that support the need for change.

In this situation, an atypical party with a suspended identity, expression of a multiplicity of cultures that are unable to mix and blend together, with inconsistent organisational models, targeting different social groups, with roots going back to different histories, can only explode. First of all, we need to establish what's really important, agree on a list of priorities, otherwise the party as a loose coalition is destined to flee discipline and embrace transience. Without a party and without structured social players a leader counts for nothing in the process of real government. The leaders expressed by the convoluted procedures of the old parties were much stronger than the leaders anointed with power by the millions of people voting at the primaries. When the leader was just a *primus inter pares*, and his authoritativeness was recognised by an equally prestigious group of party leaders, then he could effectively rule and influence decision-making. Today leaders appear like solitary decision-makers, their muscles bulging, bloated by the primaries, but the only show they can put on is one of impotence. When the leader received his charisma from the prestige of the party, the sense of leadership was tangible. Now that charisma is instilled by the media, it is weak and destined to burn out fast.

## 4. The alternatives of civil society

When a system breaks up from the bottom, because a volatile vote overflows the river banks, the risk of gross demagoguery increases. The mortal danger is that novelty translates into the vacuous cult of improvisation, which de-structures the management of the State activity. Following Hobbes, we need to counter the view of political inexperience as a value and of simplicity as a myth, with the logic of complexity as inseparable from good politics. We cannot govern a political system, which, in the *Leviathan*, is self-reflective, like an automaton, without understanding its regularities. In order to innovate legislation, we need to decipher the secrets of the machinery of government through analysis and study. For Hobbes, the rules that govern politics are not the same as those governing tennis, which can be quickly learnt, with a little practice. Therefore, alongside the contribution of individuals from society, we cannot do without the political leadership of the executive, called on to decide the collective goals. According to Hobbes, besides the civic skills, the intentions of the “Artificer” must also be clearly visible, namely, the values selected by the political decision-maker. Nonetheless, Western political rationality seems to be on the wane in a country – such as Italy – that has handed power to civil society.

In any case, knowledge alone of the cogs and wheels of government is not sufficient, and the system collapses if politics proves unable to grasp popular malaise giving it representation. The very lack of political mediation can foster the emergence of two non-communicating societies. On the one hand, in urban areas, the spread of ad-hoc committees resulting from the social capital accumulated through fiduciary, cognitive networks and associative channels: the radicalism of rights with its diverse mobilisation on single issues (schools, kindergartens, roads, traffic, noise). This alternative to politi-

cal parties built from the bottom by temporary players from civil society (“an ambit of dialogue and discussion that is extraneous to both politics and the market”<sup>7</sup>), is capable of mobilising the public on single-issue campaigns, perpetuating itself through the activism of values-linked groups and other opinion movements, but is unable to effectively perform the complex task of mediation. Committee-based politics, the cognitive mobilisation on single needs, however, involves significant sections of a mostly urban, opinion-based electorate.

The Italian Democratic Party (PD) has chosen to be a light hyper-democratic party instead of a hierarchical party, run like a business, with resources and a disciplined staff (which was in any case different from the top-down bureaucratic party of old). Through primary elections the PD confides in the individual members’ ability to raise funds, find money and sponsors in companies interested in certain issues. The ensuing asymmetry is quite striking and will deepen further after state funding to all political parties – as announced – is slashed. Silvio Berlusconi’s party is not an ephemeral personal party, it has a huge apparatus made up of professional politicians, and its organisation and propaganda machine are run along the lines of a large corporation, with an intense media presence, the hegemonic vocation of scores of militant journalists, the dedication to the cause of vast numbers of local government personnel and in-house intellectuals. Created as the political arm of a private business, it now calls for the abolition of state funding to political parties as part of its new anti-political stance, pandering to the electorate of Beppe Grillo’s 5-Star Movement. While a number of “political parties created by wealthy individuals, who then use the party to further their own political and business ambitions”<sup>8</sup> have appeared, ordinary parties, by deciding to give up their state fi-

<sup>7</sup> C. Crouch, *Il potere dei giganti*, Roma-Bari, 2011, p. 180.

<sup>8</sup> Crouch, cit., p. 193.

nancing, are increasing the importance of the link between wealth and politics and, therefore, further strengthening the political clout of big business. Furthermore, when financial resources are unequally distributed inside parties as well, the mechanisms of concentration connected with the financial sources tends to become ossified and the capacity of raising of funds become a strategic political asset, which influences the power balance, determines the supremacy and, ultimately, the leadership. What is needed is a leader capable of transforming his superior fund-raising capacity into political supremacy. Businesses tend to invest in the leader who has the greater skills to swing the intra-organisational relationships in his favour. Besides political parties run like businesses, there are also parties set up by business, and this weakens the functional autonomy of the political sphere.

No other sphere, other than political parties, can better define the leadership of a modern country. According to Weber, when a businessman takes on a leading role in politics this inevitably leads to the darkening of a crucial “political horizon of the state”, which remains the hallmark of the peculiar functional differentiation of the modern era<sup>9</sup>. For Weber, the party set up by a businessman is a clear denial of the state-focused projection of politics and, therefore, signals the opening of the floodgates towards a deep civil regression, leading to a narrow corporatist attitude and to a form of “patrimonialism” based on archaic principles. The functional reasons defining the modern era, according to Weber, should encourage the strong rejection of any attempt to enclose “great politics” within the confines of a purely technical approach. The latter, in fact, is qualified solely to define the most suitable means for achieving an end, it can intervene with regard to the most appropriate means for attaining an objective viewed as a value, it can express an opinion on the

<sup>9</sup> Max Weber, *Economia e società*, Milano, 1980.

instrumental adequacy and appropriateness of a solution. But politics is first and foremost an explicit conflict that gathers the forces in favour of privileging certain ideal goals against others. At the heart of the political struggle engaged by political parties to achieve consensus, Weber places a defining principle, which he draws from a popular saying: “Each individual knows if his shoes are too small for him”. This criterion, which postulates that each individual is the best judge of the interests behind the struggle between competing political ideals, constitutes the very foundation of the principle of reality, which nobody can truly remove with the arcane forms of a limitless enchantment. When populism imposed by a charismatic leader purports to have the consent of the masses, it is because political mediation has failed.

## 5. Rebuilding mediation

The historical myth claiming that political parties are impossible nowadays has prevented a full understanding of the crisis of politics caused by its self-destruction and of the organisational and political choices which would be required. It is useless – according to one line of thought – to challenge the era of hypermodernity and fluxes, which has made irrelevant the old relationship between industrial factory and political party, between Fordism and organised politics<sup>10</sup>. With the age of fluxes, mass society – with its solid political spaces, in which the large factories were at the core of relational experience – has come to an end. And also political parties as an instruments of collective mobilisation, enjoying strong grassroots support, are on the wane. The problem, however, is that these claims are the result of an imaginary identification of

<sup>10</sup> M. Revelli, *Finale di partito*, Torino, 2013, p. 103.

the supposed historical-causal links. Political parties, in Italy, whether left-wing or Catholic, are not born in the factories; rather they are rooted in the land, in the conflict between servitude and dominion, farm labourers on the one hand and landowners on the other<sup>11</sup>. The large class fault-line (salaried farm workers against landowners and *rentiers*) springs from agricultural production; it antedates industrial production and only afterwards enters the factories where it develops a new dimension of the struggle for possible rights in the age of modernisation.

Any belated claim to pursue, in some form or other, the re-establishment of solid bureaucratic and professional parties, with functional specialisation and a recognisable hierarchy, encounters an insurmountable obstacle. This does not mean that the only available alternative for managing a complex society is a lightly-structured or “liquid” party. In Germany, parties still have abundant resources, with local clubs, regional delegates, a collegial life: the political system shows a better capacity to withstand the onslaught of populism. In Italy, the process of going beyond traditional political parties has now reached a limit, in which all channels of organised political life have been demolished. Of course all this is to the advantage of populism, which tends to take roots in a political landscape bereft of the skills of organised parties. The party rooted in society is a laboratory for filtering the demands arising from the general population and for ensuring the growth of a competent political class. It is a collective entity that has all but disappeared in Italy, but which still operates as an effective institutional conflict solver in all major established democracies.

In places where the party continues to have a certain degree of influence over the electorate, where it is still rooted – albeit to a lesser degree than before – there are still examples

<sup>11</sup> F. Anderlini, *Il voto, la terra, i detriti*, Bologna, 2013.



and experiences of integration managed by the traditional organisations and associations (the unions, cooperatives, grass-roots clubs, party festivals). However, the threat of abolishing the mediator, represented as a mere apparatus of power, is rapidly gaining ground, even in these old strongholds, and serious cracks are beginning to appear in what was once a very compact base. At the beginning, Grillo's movement reaped huge gains precisely in the regions dominated by this left-wing subculture, where the PD had still some remnants of its ancient sway: large and influential membership, control of local governments, a great number of political clubs. Overall, the PD is not a solid party, organisationally speaking, but nor is it a rootless and purely opinion-based party, totally in the hands of the local oligarchs. In any case, there are more voters than there are active members, whose permanent presence on the stage has been gradually discouraged. Ideology here is replaced by procedures, and the formation of competent party leadership has been weakened by the myth of generational turnover.

With its current emphasis on hyper-democratic procedures (generalised primaries) – entailing a rather weak organisational network – the left has accentuated its profile as an actor engaged in interpreting all the issues of post-modernity, which, however, in a climate of crisis does not guarantee channels of ascent, but spreads a sense of asphyxiating precariousness. The identity of a party, however, is not the medium (for Grillo the legendary Web – which actually conceals the role of the hidden persuaders, or for the PD the mechanisms by which it organises primary elections). When a given procedure (primaries, the Web) is used for improper purposes, then the relevant cultural and identity issues remain unresolved and become insurmountable for any form of organised politics. What we need is a shared political culture; instead we are setting our stakes on the divinatory powers of communication and on the all-inclusive power of primary elections. But a party cannot develop solely from the horizontal

ties that characterise the more educated parts of society, it also requires a function of political representation by the elites capable of establishing the premises for what Gramsci called an emotional relationship with the masses. Parties are not born, or reborn, from the bottom, through the self-representation of cultured and informed civil society, which is generally little inclined to the routine of organisation and the discipline of militancy. Parties require identification with – and endorsement of – the projects developed by the elites, who must be aware of their national responsibility and do not content themselves with the perspective that Beck calls “sub-politics” (horizontal, reflective, fiduciary) – a type of political activity entrusted to the educated middle class, who always gets excited about specific problems and then spends its time uselessly in the discursive procedures of deliberative democracy. The promise of re-founding politics starting from the periphery of civil society is but a mirage.

Populism proliferates as a result of the suppression of the function of political mediation, which leaves communities defenceless and the marginalised social classes disorientated. In order to bring populism back to size and loosen its grip on politics we need to restore political mediation. Thus, scattered cognitive qualities are not sufficient in addressing the marginalised sections of society more susceptible to simplification: we need forms of organised politics inside the critical fault lines of society. Simple post-materialist values are hardly sufficient to hold a party together. This also requires political passion, as well as identity and an effective rooting in the social conflicts of our times. The party as an institution, the determined contender in electoral competitions, must be developed together with the party as expression of society, the party as a collective intellectual, finally the party that does not dissolve the forms of organisation, rather remodels them, albeit with a lower number of professional political cadres.

The endemic weakness of the mediator transforms the cri-

sis of the political agenda and the moral, as well as political disrepute of government forces, into a more general systemic crisis, premise to the further deterioration of crucial aspects of the State. In order to set up barriers against this impending avalanche, political systems must rely on parties truly distinct from one another. The Italian bi-polar political system, despite its history of alternating coalitions in power, has not prevented the eruption of a general crisis, because it was grounded on a rootless party system, devoid of the necessary links to society that could have stopped the surge of destructive anti-political forces. The play of alternation did not develop the necessary force for preserving the roots of systemic loyalty, because the coalitions – key features of the political landscape of the so-called Second Republic – were not strong enough to ensure the penetration and, indeed, the resistance that are typical of a structured party. After more than two decades of economic slowdown, the political stability realised through a well-functioning party system has remained a mirage; and despite the concoction of new electoral laws and parliamentary rules designed to protect a lifeless bi-polar system, the Italian republic has unravelled under the onslaught of populism.

The party-as-institution, obsessed with rules and procedures, has been unable to guarantee the stability of the system. For this it was required, first and foremost, the mobilising capacity of the party-as-society, which reassures and gives meaning to the erosion of older party ties. As a result of this lack of integration, the crisis has struck both the State and society, rapidly advancing in their dissolution and, at the same time, swelling the ranks of anti-politics. It is not possible, especially at times of crisis and systemic de-structuring, to intervene on the sole procedural components of the system (competition for the leadership, designation of the party of the elected, myth of generational turnover), at the expense of the representative functions (conflict-resolution, management of the many causes for social anger which have been transformed

into a general metaphysics of rebellion)<sup>12</sup>. Behind the evaporation of the PD there is not too much party, but a lack of inventiveness, both organisational and of political culture.

From a widespread organisation that acknowledges competence and rewards it through turnover, we are moving towards candidates who apply for office in the name of certain skills developed in fields other than politics. Merit struggles with the political elite to win itself a role, to open up to civil society, which, in the name of competence, does not tolerate party officials and professional politicians, who perpetuate themselves following their own logic. The PD presents itself as a lightly-structured party, with a presidential vocation in its national leadership and as a federation of local oligarchs, where self-promotion, co-optation, the expectation of or clamour for a candidacy prevail. It is difficult to build a party on the quicksands of competition for office, at both central and local level. In any case competition for office is not socially neutral. It entails the construction of a party in which, in mobilising for elected office, merit can prevail over the persistent organisational chains, over the grassroots, over the popular component (work, in whatever form). Therefore, we have reached the paradox whereby we have parties with a high density of widespread intellectual content, with networks sensitive to cognitive mobilisation around a set of values, but lacking any political culture whatsoever.

## 6. Frozen divides

Liquid or solid, the PD is unable to bring about the much needed stability to the system, while it accompanies the dis-

<sup>12</sup> Regarding the transition from distrust to the practice of counter-democracy see P. Rosanvallon, *La politica nell'era della sfiducia*, Enna, 2009. On the cohabitation of Berlusconi's populism alongside the hyper-democratic populism of the web in a party-less Italy see A. Lanni, *Avanti popoli!*, Venezia, 2011.

solution of the old political system. With a 25% drop in the vote for the traditional parties, in February 2013 the bipolar system collapsed, overcome by protest and disaffection. Without the so-called “useful vote” (in order to stop the right vote for the party most likely to attain a majority), the PD conducted a silent electoral campaign, unable to dramatise the competition, eventually being overwhelmed by a catastrophic avalanche, especially in the south of the country. After the elections, the PD broke up, revealing itself to be a fragile party, capable of nihilistically shattering itself into a thousand fragments, like crystal. The “liquid” party explodes, despite the party’s reliance on the primaries, conceived as a foundation myth capable of unifying a plural entity.

With its primaries, the PD has fuelled the illusion of providing a quick fix to the problem of bridging the gap between politics and society. But the deficit of integration that accompanies a social crisis cannot be met by hypertrophic procedures. Two rounds of primaries, the first to select the candidate for prime minister and the second to designate parliamentary candidates, has heightened the organisational exhaustion and fuelled already weak illusions. The primaries have heightened the disorienting role of the internal enemy and the new catchword for political turnover – “*rottamazione*” – which essentially means sending the old career politicians into forced retirement – has swept away traditional party loyalties and undermined the old spheres of influence. It proved a short step, from the call for “rejuvenation” to the electoral tsunami invoked by Grillo, to scrap the entire political establishment (his M5S party came first in 50 provinces and 52 provincial capitals). Especially the second round of primaries for selecting PD parliamentary candidates at the local level appeared like an arrangement between the old oligarchs capable of controlling limited portions of loyal electors and the new talents engaged in elbowing their way forward, in the name of merit, competence, civil society and generational turnover.

A party leader selected in primary elections by the crowds that turned up at the makeshift polling stations, who coexists alongside the local political oligarchs and power-brokers undermined by the reflective middle classes impatiently jostling for an opportunity to climb the social ladder thanks to politics, are the symptom of the disappearance of mediation, swept away by the dual quest for the *status quo* and a generic “newness”. Alongside the lightness of the leader who rides warm metaphors of participation and caresses hyper-democratic suggestions for his investiture, we find dreary local oligarchs intent on safeguarding their small local kingdoms, challenged by the call for a generational turnover, by the invocations of merit against a system “dominated by the worst”, by the grass-roots mobilisation to “occupy” the local Democratic Party clubs.

The primaries, overburdened by their excessive formalism and disputes about procedural rules, can confer no effective power on the leader, being merely ephemeral expressions of a will to command, which pathetically fails at the first stumbling block. This projection towards the external electorate, which is necessary to settle otherwise irreparable internal rifts, is useless for supporting the prospect of an authoritative leadership. Direct contact with the electorate has proven unable to bestow on the primary winners actual control of the party machine and an acceptable degree of loyalty by elected members. The second primaries, those for the parliamentary candidates, have encouraged a certain attitude of “everybody for himself” in parliament and amplified the trend towards the loss of control on the MPs by the weakly organized party. The weakness of the party encourages inconsistent voting in parliament by many MPs against the leadership’s instructions, a phenomenon due also to the sensitivity shown by the MPs to the pressure of various minuscule groups of activists, at the local level, who exercise influence through text messages; so that the individual member tends to become the spokesper-

son for any such causes. But then, a leadership lacking organisational redoubts, with party oligarchies deprived of a specific role, loses any real power, and only speeds up the process of rapid dissolution of command. Friendly fire follows each leader as he then drifts aimlessly.

Behind the populist wave that is engulfing the party system something is missing: the leader of a presidentialist party neglects all forms of mediation and conceals the very functions of representation. The Italian political system has ossified the generational fault-lines, the territorial differences and the legal and moral divides, pushing back towards the edges the old capital/labour polarities (workers now vote for Grillo, before they preferred the Northern League, not the reformist nor the radical left, which has become a haven for the educated middle classes). When a party uproots social conflict from its code it becomes dominated by non-negotiable profiles of action. In the context of an absolutist form of politics, which refuses fine tuning and compromise, there is ample space for populism to proliferate, with the diffusion of media and political forces that preach their radical aversion for the much denigrated compromise called *inciucio*, in other words, a surrender, or, worse, a betrayal. The non-negotiable conflict on values (legality), the dispute on territorial identity mobilises the urban middle classes and the peripheral (local) working classes and easily fuels forms of rebellion that quickly fill any and all the political spaces left empty and unguarded. The right and Grillo find their identity glue in populism, in the expectation for a new order and in anti-politics, which announces a revolt against all the institutions of representation. The left is unable to recover a function of integration, it fails to (re)motivate those who have demobilised, and, ultimately, is defeated.

Without a shared leadership, arising from the convergence-divergence of the more influential oligarchies, a party structured like a coalition can hardly be held together and breaks up, incapable of exercising what Gramsci called “the discipli-

nary strength". Leadership, if it is not explicitly acknowledged within a structure (that nevertheless preserves the traces of oligarchies with beliefs grounded on plural sensitivities and influences) is nothing but impotent. Ambushes, score settling, are all part of the same political problem: what is there to keep the elected members of parliament together in a non-party, where loyalty is a rather ephemeral concept? The myth of one man at the helm certainly does not solve the real problems posed by leadership. The immediacy of a leader who shows himself to the people is not itself sufficient to salvage mediation. Although focused on the personal qualities of the mayoral candidates, the recent local elections nevertheless saw a drop in turnout, which, in some cases, fell to below 50 percent. The decline of organised politics tends to discourage participation and commitment. Between the leader and the electorate there is no stable intermediate layer capable of organising and maintaining the beliefs of the masses. Therefore, the debate in the PD about a strong leadership, as opposed to a solid party, is entirely abstract and indeterminate. No one can produce a leader in a test tube, based on media approval; if there's an authoritative leader then he or she will prevail in the political and cultural arena, otherwise it's just a mirage that will rapidly fade away. In a non-personalised party the leadership needs to win the support of the oligarchies, which recognise merits, capabilities, influence, command skills. Personal parties (such as those set up by Di Pietro, Dini, Mastella, Segni) disappear with their founders. The leadership of a non-personal party must necessarily take into account the leverage and conditioning of the oligarchies, and engage in a cultural battle to express a function in a certain historical time, to build a suitable central and local ruling elite<sup>13</sup>.

An effective leadership is inconceivable without an explicit

<sup>13</sup> For a comparative analysis of the "presidentialisation" of parties, see T. Poguntke and P. Webb, *The Presidentialisation of Politics*, Oxford, 2007.



convergence of the many power centres that cohabit within a party, however lightly-structured it is. The original weakness of the party format with a presidential stance cannot be replaced by the “magical” qualities of a strong leadership. There can be no strong leader without an apparatus that shares a common political identity, project and culture. The authority of the leader is tied to the prestige of the party, the recognisability of a political culture is not a quality that can be asserted based on personal traits only. The primaries, in fact, coexist with low levels of loyalty, with conspicuous examples of disobedience, with a certain contempt for the activists and their selfless commitment, with a suspended identity. The success of populism is clearly the result of a symptomatic absence. Italy, in fact, is the only European country that lacks a party that recognises the ancient divide between capital and labour as relevant, not only to its historical memory, but also to its present identity as a force rooted in society. Lipset writes “the lack of connection between industrial relations and politics”<sup>14</sup> prevents the social conflict from taking on a political form. The identity resources thus shift towards value-related issues, in which, however, the mobilisation of the cultured classes coexists with the apathy of the more marginal social classes. The secret of the penetration of populism lies precisely in the metamorphosis of the left, from the party of a *part* of society to the party of leftist values (civil rights, political participation, meritocracy).


The existence of a pure electoral market that goes beyond the class divide and is based solely on differences of opinion, where victory lies in winning over the mythical median elector, who can be convinced by presenting him with rational political choices, is at the core of the idea of a party based on primaries. A federal party, loosely structured, must seek the support of an indistinct public opinion in order to break up

<sup>14</sup> Lipset, cit., p. 484.

pact-mongering habits, but it is precisely this total openness towards the broadest possible electorate that makes the party a non-institutionalised, fluctuating, boundless entity no one can govern and with no recognisable social roots. The consequences of going beyond the social divides are the rise of inequality in income distribution, a drop in the purchasing-power of wages and in consumers' expectations, greater social vulnerability and – finally – the dissociation between social class and voting behaviour. Without a clear polarisation between right and left, between public forces and private entities, populism has a greater chance of penetrating the popular classes left without representation and public policies. This is why organised politics is a prerequisite for holding back the populist onslaught, especially in a country – such as Italy – where businessmen enter politics with their own specific parties and entrepreneurs promote their own electoral lists. “The organisational strength of the lower classes of society is decisive in creating opportunities for the more disadvantaged people”<sup>15</sup>, observes Lipset. Rising inequality reveals a close link between the lack of politicisation of the social divides (along the left-right fault-line) and the emergence of pseudo-divides (centre-periphery, old-new, system-anti-system), as vehicles for the populist assault on the forms of representation.

Populism cannot be held back without rethinking the integrating function of the party, its ability to produce spaces for cohesion, its organisational substratum. The temptation to appoint, alongside the two comedians of populism, another entertainer at the helm of the PD is hardly a good response to the rise of anti-politics. Media experimentation and sophisticated advertising strategies aimed at enhancing the leader's image and likeability are no more than pseudo-charismatic events that can deflate as fast as they inflate. When a would-

<sup>15</sup> Lipset, cit., p. 505.



be leader plays at dissimulation and pretending to be an outsider (while he is part of that very same organisation), then you enter the domain of the theatrical and of the fictitious. It is very hard to build barriers (grounded on analyses and political solutions) against fundamentalist populism, which is nothing more than the endeavour, by a political leader, to build a “direct” relationship with his followers, without any form of mediation. A populist response to populism could destroy a more complex response, requiring the reformulation of constitutional democracy, the rebirth of social cohesion and the search for new forms of sovereignty in the European experiment.

# THE NETHERLANDS

## THE DIFFERENT FLAVOURS OF POPULISM IN THE NETHERLANDS

*Koen Vossen*

For a long period of time, the Netherlands made headlines only because of its royal family, its dikes or its talented soccer-players. Within Europe the small, densely populated and affluent nation seemed to be a haven of stability and tranquillity. However, since the turn of the century things seem to have changed. The Netherlands witnessed two political killings (in 2002 political maverick Pim Fortuyn and in 2004 filmmaker Theo van Gogh), the unforeseen rejection of the European treaty in a referendum in 2005, and the spectacular rise of various new parties. The most important of these are: the Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF), the Party for Freedom (PVV) led by Geert Wilders and the Socialistische Partij (SP), which was originally founded in 1972, but which made a rapid progress after 2000, growing from 1.4% in 1994 to 16.6% in 2006. Below is a table with their results in the national elections.

	2002	2003	2006	2010	2012
List Pim Fortuyn (LPF)	17.0	5.7	–	–	–
Party for Freedom (PVV)	–	–	5.9	15.5	10.1
Socialist Party (SP)	5.9	6.3	16.6	9.8	9.6

Both the LPF and the PVV managed to have a direct influence on government policies. In 2002 the LPF was a partner in a short-lived coalition, while the PVV supported a minority government in exchange for a say on government policy. One of the main outcomes of this arrangement was the implementation of more restrictive immigration and asylum policies. This minority government stayed in power for 18 months, after which Wilders decided to withdraw his support in protest at the austerity measures being imposed on the Netherlands by the European Union. Up to the present the SP has always been an opposition party at the national level. However, at the local and provincial levels the party is sometimes part of governing alliances. In this chapter, I will portray and analyse these three parties from the theoretical perspective of populism. To begin with, the concept of populism will be discussed.

## Populism: basic ingredients and “flavour” enhancers

Most scholars agree that populism arises from the perception of current politics as an irreducible conflict between two homogenous and antagonistic groups – a virtuous people vs. a malicious elite – and on the aspiration to build a polity in which the will of the virtuous people prevails<sup>1</sup>. The denunciation of the elite as the incarnation of evil or at least as the embodiment of corruption and incompetence, on the one hand, and the glorification of the people as the embodiment of all good virtues, true wisdom and authenticity, on the other, may therefore be considered the basic hallmarks of populism. This core feature of populism entails some other

<sup>1</sup> D. Albertazzi and D. McDonnell, *Twenty-first Century Populism: the Spectre of Western European Democracy*, New York, 2008; P. Taggart, *Populism*, Buckingham, 2000; C. Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist” in *Governance and Opposition*, 39 (4), 2004, pp. 542-563.

closely connected features which reinforce and highlight the core concept, or, to use a culinary metaphor, these other features are the “flavour enhancers” that enhance the taste of the basic ingredient. In populism these flavour enhancers are: an inclination towards conspiracy theories, a popular and folksy style, a strong voluntarism and a preference for both plebiscite-based democracy and charismatic leadership<sup>2</sup>.

The inclination to utilise conspiracy theories might be regarded as a logical consequence of the aforementioned perception of the elite as both a homogeneous and corrupt group. Indeed, the populist concept of elites is open and vague enough to include all kinds of different elites – political, cultural, media, academic and economic – thus giving the impression that they are all in cahoots with one other. Moreover, this supposed coalition of elites is often accused of knowingly favouring a clearly identified minority group that is not part of the “real” nation. Whereas conspiracy theories like this emphasise the anti-elitism of populists, the use of a folksy popular style serves the purpose of underscoring the populist glorification of the people. By adopting simple and direct language, filled with anecdotes from every-day life, straightforward undecorated emotions and references to common wisdom and popular culture, populists not only mark their distance from the murky world of politics, they also express their closeness to the common people.

Another feature used to highlight the anti-elitist and, even more so, the pro-people element of populism is a strong voluntaristic approach to politics. Populists have high expectations of the power of politics based on the will and wisdom of the people. To them the complexities and the compromises of modern politics are not the logical consequence of the many

<sup>2</sup> K. Vossen, “Populism in the Netherlands after Fortuyn”, in R. Verdonk and G. Wilders, *Compared Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, Volume 11, No. 1, April 2010.

interests involved in the decision-making process, and of constitutional and economic restraints. Rather, they are the result of the incompetence and fecklessness of the elite, whose only ambition is to maintain the status quo. Since populism aspires to redesign democracy in order to let the people express and impose their will without any limitations or impediments, the introduction of various methods of direct democracy is also a recurrent theme of its political approach. Not only do many populists advocate the introduction of referenda, forms of recall and direct elections for political office at the national level, they also often attempt to present their own movements as the platform and mouthpiece of the “common people” by stressing their efforts to listen to their concerns. Another recurrent theme is strong confidence in a charismatic leader as the embodiment of the will of the people. The populist confidence in charismatic leadership is paradoxical since it is grounded in the belief in a leader who is expected both to lead and to embody the people, who in turn are portrayed as being fed up with existing leaders. Populist leaders solve this paradox by presenting the image of reluctant politicians, blameless outsiders without any deeply-felt need or aspiration to get involved in politics<sup>3</sup>.

## Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF)

The List Pim Fortuyn was founded by and named after Pim Fortuyn, a sociologist who until 2001 was a relatively well-known columnist for a conservative magazine and the weekly commentator in a television show<sup>4</sup>. In November 2001 For-

<sup>3</sup> Taggart, cit..

<sup>4</sup> T. Akkermans, “Anti-immigration parties and the defence of liberal values: the exceptional case of the List Pim Fortuyn”, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, October 2005, 10 (3), pp. 337-354; D. Pels, *De geest van Pim. Het*

tuyn became the leading candidate for Liveable Netherlands, a newly formed collection of local parties. However, already in February 2002 he left the party as a result of an interview in which he called Islam a “backward culture” and in which he proposed to put an end to all Muslim immigration. With his own hastily assembled party Fortuyn continued his – by Dutch standards – startling campaign. Opinion polls showed his growing popularity, which was based on a combination of anti-establishment sentiment and discontent with immigration and multicultural society. As a result, some of his political opponents placed Fortuyn in the same category as Jörg Haider of Austria and Jean-Marie Le Pen of France. However, it is difficult to recognise genuine far-right themes in the party platform or in Fortuyn’s books. Moreover, LPF included various candidates of non-Dutch origin in its lists (among others, a Muslim woman and a black CapeVerdian businessman); it even nominated a junior minister of Surinamese origin, who was the first black junior minister in Dutch history. Also, two days before his death, Fortuyn advocated a general pardon for a large group of former asylum seekers in the Netherlands.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2002 – nine days before the election – Fortuyn was assassinated by an animal-rights activist. His assassination notwithstanding, the elections went ahead as scheduled and even without its leader LPF became the second party with 17% of the votes: by far the best electoral debut ever in the Netherlands. LPF was then invited to join a centre-right coalition with the Christian Democrats and the Liberals. Without its leader, without a solid organisation and with a group of members of parliament hastily lumped together, LPF was destined to fail. After 87 days the coalition fell and in January 2003 new elections were held, in which LPF lost most of its votes (dropping from 17 to 5.7%). In the following years

*gedachtegoed van een politieke dandy*, Amsterdam, 2003; P. Lucardie and G. Voerman, *Populisten in de polder*, Amsterdam, 2012, pp. 91-136.



LPF's small parliamentary group was repeatedly plagued by conflicts and the party organisation collapsed rapidly. In 2006, various political heirs of Fortuyn participated in the national elections, but none succeeded in winning a seat in parliament.

Because he was the first to break the electoral monopoly of the established parties, Fortuyn is often considered as the godfather of Dutch populism. Some of the main features of populism, as discussed above, are indeed easily recognisable in his pronouncements and political activity. To begin with, since his days as a newspaper commentator in the 1990s, Fortuyn was already a fierce critic of the Dutch political elite. In his opinion the Dutch elite had become an almost inaccessible caste of professional politicians and *apparatsjiks* without any real vision or aspiration, besides that of clinging to power. He even introduced two nicknames to indicate the Dutch elite, which both proved to be highly influential: "Our Kind of People" (*Ons Soort Mensen*) and the "Church of the Left-Wing" (*Linkse Kerk*). Whereas the first nickname hinted at an alleged tendency by the Dutch political and administrative elite to share the spoils among "our kind of people" (e.g. by appointing only members of the "right" parties to important offices), the term "Church of the Left Wing" was meant to describe the alleged monopoly on Dutch public opinion of the *intelligentsia* of the left, who did not tolerate any criticism of their "sacred cows", such as the welfare state, multiculturalism, development aid and a progressive education.

Obviously, this analysis of the behaviour of the elite comes close to a conspiracy theory according to which the various elites conspire among themselves to their own advantage. Certainly many of Fortuyn's followers have interpreted it in this way, even attributing his assassination to deliberate bashing of his figure by the Church of the Left-Wing ("the bullet came from the left", as one of Fortuyn's close friends stated). However, to put his conspiracist anti-elitism in some perspective, Fortuyn himself had at the same time secretly

concluded a strategic non-aggression pact with the Christian-Democratic Party, the main party of the opposition and until 1994 the incarnation of Dutch political elites.

Still, we can affirm that anti-elitism, enhanced by conspiracy metaphors, is a clear feature in Fortuyn's political outlook. However, it is more difficult to find in his pronouncements the other main ingredient of populism, i.e., a certain degree of glorification of the people as the embodiment of all good virtues. More in accordance with a liberal view, he preferred to speak of free, emancipated citizens pursuing their own interests. At most one could argue that Fortuyn had a tendency to perceive Dutch culture – or more broadly Western culture – as a homogeneous entity, which must to be considered superior to all others. Though perhaps, at the same time, we should admit that the glorification of a homogeneous culture is hardly the same thing as the glorification of a homogeneous people.

More importantly, Fortuyn's opposition to existing elites was not based so much on the conviction that the elite should listen to and follow the will of a superior people, or even reflect the will of the people; rather on his idea that elites are supposed to lead and educate the people. As he elaborately discussed in his most ambitious work, bombastically entitled *The Orphaned Society: a Religious-Sociological Treatise* (1995), since the 1980s Dutch elites had failed to fulfil their role as leaders and teachers, and as a result Dutch society had become "orphaned". This problem of a lack of leadership became more pressing as Fortuyn, inspired by Samuel Huntington's conception of the clash of civilizations, began to fear the advance of Islamic culture within the weak "orphaned" Dutch society. To overcome this threat the country was in need of a new inspiring and caring elite: leaders who would serve as role-models guiding the nation with their vision, ambition and pedagogical skills. Consequently, Fortuyn never advocated the introduction of forms of plebiscitarian democracy, though he asked for the direct election of some official positions to break

the monopoly of the old elites. At the same time he did not believe in democratically organised responsive political parties as a means to satisfy the concerns of the people. In his view parties were at most the instrument of the political leader, a position he reinforced by creating his own electoral list named after him and devoid of any organisational structure. Ultimately, in Fortuyn's opinion, democratic politics should be a struggle among unbounded, outspoken and daring political leaders with the people as enthusiastic spectators. He repeatedly expressed his contempt for "lack of class" of the Dutch political elite, ridiculing for example the parliamentary speaker because of her "vulgar" accent and the prime-minister because of his ordinary suits and his use of soccer-metaphors. Living in his Palazzo di Pietro with a butler and two lap-dogs (cocker-spaniels), wearing highly expensive, dandy-like outfits, talking openly about his nightly adventures in gay-bars and publishing several rather pretentious books filled with sociological jargon, Fortuyn could hardly be described as a politician who tried to imitate the common Dutch citizen. He viewed charismatic leadership as a political necessity: "A competent leader is father and mother at the same time. He is the law-maker and protector of the cohesion of the herd. The competent leader is the biblical Good Shepherd. He defines values and builds bridges. He is strict and merciful. He is inaccessible and understanding. [...] Let us prepare ourselves for his arrival, so we can give him a warm welcome"<sup>5</sup>.

It is fairly safe to assume that Fortuyn perceived himself as the embodiment of this new charismatic leader, making him, in the opinion of many commentators, the prototype of the narcissistic personality on the political stage.

The murder of Fortuyn – the first political assassination in the Netherlands in 350 years – led to an unprecedented out-

<sup>5</sup> P. Fortuyn, *De Verweesde Samenleving. Een religieus-sociologisch tractaat*, 1995.

pouring of public emotion, with “seas of flowers” and spontaneous shrines where thousands left messages, in which many expressed a sense of personal affinity with the deceased<sup>6</sup>. In the media many people stated, using almost the same words, that “Fortuyn dared to say what I myself think”, with reference mostly to Fortuyn’s criticism of multiculturalism and immigration policies. For this reason Fortuyn became for many a “people’s politician”, and consequently for others he was the populist politician *par excellence* who exploited primitive popular feelings (in the Netherlands distinctively called “underbelly sentiments”). Nonetheless, both qualifications are puzzling, since one can hardly find in Fortuyn a discernible concern for the opinions of the common people, let alone an urge to represent their will. Rather, he may better be viewed as the advocate of a more elitist democracy: most of his thoughts seem to be focused on how the elite should behave and act in order to lead and guide the people. At the same time one cannot entirely ignore the fact that both his followers and many (if not most) of his opponents perceived Fortuyn as a leader who had the ability to express popular feelings, or at least to convince “the people” that he dared to speak aloud what so many of them thought. Therefore, understanding Fortuyn’s populist dimension means, above all, focusing on the charismatic component of his outlook; that is, on the specific bond between followers and followed.

## The Party for Freedom (PVV)

Since Fortuyn’s death and the disintegration of his party in the following months, various new parties have attempted to step

<sup>6</sup> P. J. Margry, “The Murder of Pim Fortuyn and Collective Emotions. Hype, Hysteria and Holiness in The Netherlands?”, *Etnofoor*, no. 16, 2003, pp. 102-127.

into what was at the time perceived as a political vacuum, using the same kind of language on Islam and its alleged threat to Dutch liberties. By 2006 Geert Wilders and his Party for Freedom (PVV) proved the most promising candidate for filling that vacuum<sup>7</sup>. After the PVV had made a modest electoral debut in the 2006 national elections (5.9%), Wilders succeeded in attracting an enormous amount of national, as well as international, media attention by offering a whole range of spectacular storylines and performances, such as the release of his anti-Muslim movie, *Fitna* (March 2008), and his detention at Heathrow Airport, a consequence of the British Home Secretary's ban on him entering the country (February 2009). In the 2010 national elections the PVV more than doubled its support (15.5% of the votes) and the party became a serious player in coalition formation.

The attempt to classify the PVV in ideological terms has puzzled many observers both in the Netherlands and abroad. Whereas before 2002 most commentators were often inclined to classify a new party appearing on the political scene as belonging to extreme right, there is now a remarkable reluctance to use such a label for the PVV. Undoubtedly this reluctance is a result of Pim Fortuyn's assassination by a political activist, which some considered a direct consequence of the campaign of "Fortuyn bashing" conducted by left-wing parties and the press. Since the assassination of filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a radical Islamist in November 2004 Geert Wilders is living under permanent police protection. Looking at the party platform and language, however, it is not difficult to discern various characteristic features of populism. To begin with, we see – as in the case of Fortuyn – much evidence of strong anti-elitism, mingled – in the case of Wilders – with an apocalyptic

<sup>7</sup> M. Fennema, *Geert Wilders. Tvenaarsleerling*, Amsterdam, 2010; Lucardie and Voerman, *Populisten in de polder*, cit., pp. 151-186; K. Vossen, "Classifying Wilders: The ideological development of Geert Wilders and his Party for Freedom", *Politics*, vol. 31 (3), 2011, pp. 179-189.

conspiracy theory in which his two main enemies go hand in hand: Islam and left-wing politics. For Wilders, Islam is not a religion but a totalitarian ideology, which after the demise of communism and fascism poses the third great threat to Western modernity. Following Bat Ye'or's infamous Eurabia theory and Solomon and Al Mahdiqi's Al Hijra-theory, more than once Wilders has denounced Muslim immigration as the integral part of a deliberate strategy to Islamise Europe. This, it is argued, was allowed by left-wing political parties who hoped to gain a new loyal constituency after the loss of their old one.<sup>8</sup> Referring to the Islamic precept of *taqqia*, which allows Muslims living in non-Muslim countries to hide their true beliefs, Wilders repeatedly doubted the sincerity of Muslims apparently willing to assimilate in their host countries. To him the only right approach is the complete marginalisation of Muslims who, because of their reliance on *taqqia*, are by definition untrustworthy. Examples of this "rejectionism" are his request that the Koran be banned, his proposal for a "head rag-tax", but also his infamous remark that millions of European Muslims who do not adhere to Western values should be expelled from Europe.

At the same time Wilders has identified "the elite" more and more as a broad leftist coalition, in which almost all Dutch parties and politicians, but also of large parts of the media, the courts, the universities and the bureaucracy are involved. In his view, leftist politics represent above all a mentality, a post-material, progressive and permissive attitude that has spread out like an inkblot through Dutch elites since the 1960s to become solidly rooted in all vested Dutch political parties. Following a strategy of depoliticising political issues, subsidising instruments that spread progressive opinions (such as the

<sup>8</sup> B. Ye'or, *Eurabia. The Euro-Arab Axis*, New York, 2005; S. Solomon and E. Al Maqdisi, *Modern day Trojan Horse: Al Hijra, the Islamic doctrine of migration, Accepting Freedom or Imposing Islam*, 2009; G. Wilders, *Marked for Death: Islam's War against the West and Me*, 2012.

often criticised public broadcasting service) and tabooing and demonising contrasting opinions, this progressive, politically correct class managed to “hijack” Dutch democracy and governance. Though Wilders might also have been inspired by American neo-conservative theories (such as Irving Kristol’s new class theory), the main inspiration for his elite-criticism seems to be Pim Fortuyn’s Church of the Left-Wing metaphor, which he elaborated and enhanced together with the Eurabia Theory. As a result, Wilders has moved a few steps further than Fortuyn with regard to Islam, as demonstrated by his proposals to ban the Koran, to introduce a “head-rag” tax and to expel non-integrated Muslims. One could argue that Wilders considers Islam more dangerous to Western civilization than Fortuyn did and that therefore he advocates more radical measures to protect democracy. Whereas his battle against Islam initially seemed to be a personal crusade, Wilders more and more began to refer to the common people as his allies. “Henk and Ingrid”, as he has named them, are fed up with Moroccan street gangs, headscarves and Islamisation and ask for immediate action. To this end Wilders demands more direct forms of democracy such as referenda and directly elected mayors, police commissioner and even judges. “Not the political elite, but the people should have the opportunity to express more often their will, because together the people know better than the left-wing clique”.

From the perspective of populism, however, it is more difficult to perceive Wilders as the archetypical populist politician, rather than as the reluctant outsider. Operating in the House of Parliament since the 1990s, Wilders might better be characterised as a passionate professional politician who (as he himself has often stated) “enjoys parliamentary politics” and who knows all the ins and outs of parliamentary procedure, conventions and informal networks. Indeed he acted quite effectively as a substitute for the parliamentary speaker. The PVV parliamentary group, specially selected and thor-

oughly coached by Wilders, thus far gives the impression of competence and professionalism, especially when compared to the chaotic performance of most of the other new parties in parliament. Because of this non-populist feature, Wilders managed to escape one of the pitfalls of populist parties: rapid disintegration as the result of political amateurism.

## **Socialistische Partij (SP)**

Whereas Fortuyn and Wilders are usually positioned (and position themselves) on the right of the political spectrum, the Socialistische Partij (SP) is usually positioned on the (far) left. Nonetheless, in the Netherlands the SP could also be considered a populist party, although of a left-wing populist strand<sup>9</sup>. Formed in 1972 by a group of Maoist dissidents who had broken away from the Communist Party, the SP was for a long time a small, tightly organised, energetic group of extremely devoted members who, because of their door-to-door campaigning, were nicknamed the “Red Jehovah’s Witnesses”. Most of the early SP activists were middle-class students who had dropped out of their universities to work in factories and who identified strongly with working-class interests, tastes and life styles. Their campaigning in working-class districts and on factory floors and their attempts to imitate working-class culture were a result of their Maoist ideology and, more specifically, of Mao’s so-called mass-line which stated: “Go to the masses and learn from them, synthesise their experience into better-articulated principles and methods, then do propaganda work among the masses and call upon them to put

<sup>9</sup> Lucardie and Voerman, cit., pp. 37-70; L. March, “From Vanguard of the Proletariat to Vox Populi: Left-Populism as a Shadow of contemporary socialism”, *SAIS-Review*, no. 1, 2007, pp. 63-76.



these principles and methods into practice so as to solve their problems and help them achieve liberation and happiness”.

The “masses” however initially gave the SP a cold shoulder. Despite all its efforts to reach and behave like the masses, the party was probably still too much associated with spiritless leftist theoretical disputes and 1970s student radicalism. In the early 1990s, after five unsuccessful attempts to be elected in the national parliament, the SP changed its course under the leadership of Jan Marijnissen, who in his hometown Oss (a small factory town in the south-east of the country) had established a relatively popular and active branch. With the help of a few congenial journalists and public relations managers, Marijnissen attempted to establish an image of the SP as “a party of doers” with a strong contempt for intellectual waffling and a penchant for direct action. At the same time the SP positioned itself as the party of general protest against a political system in which all other parties (including the Labour Party and even the Green Party) had to some extent embraced the anti-state, neo-liberal agenda. For this purpose the SP adopted a new catchy slogan: “Vote Against: Vote SP” and a splattered tomato as symbol. The new course paid off and for the first time in 1994 the SP entered Parliament.

In the 1990s Marijnissen, as the party’s figurehead, successfully established himself as the only real outsider in a political culture characterised by strong consensus, technocratic belief in smart governance and decreasing political participation. In a number of interviews, in parliamentary speeches and in two books he published in the 1990s, Marijnissen painted a picture of a rather homogeneous neo-liberal money-obsessed political elite, made up of almost identical parties and politicians who had lost any connections with the concerns and tastes of “the ordinary people”. Working in the House of Parliament meant for Marijnissen (and for his only other parliamentary group member) a daily struggle against arrogant and selfish people, who – in his opinion – spoke an incomprehen-

sible jargon and had devised all kinds of procedures and gimmicks to shut out outsiders. Besides these more general accusations of deliberate exclusion and discrimination, from time to time Marijnissen imbued his anti-elitism with some elements of the old left-wing conspiracy theory (hidden dominance of multinationals corporations, international bankers and American military interests), but he also criticised professional welfare workers and elitist left-wing intellectuals who attempted to impose their multicultural, cosmopolitan and libertarian worldviews on the working-class<sup>10</sup>.

In contrast with this “phoney left” who kept aloof from ordinary people, Marijnissen still adhered to the old Maoist mass-line: it was the elite who had to listen and learn from the people, not the other way around. In most of his public statements of the 1990s Marijnissen referred in some way or other to the ordinary people as the *raison d’être* of the SP. In nearly all his interviews he stressed his background as a welder in a metal factory and expressed his preference for the honest, altruistic, sometimes raw company of his old working-class mates in his Brabant hometown. “By simple intuition” many of these uneducated and despised people “knew right from wrong and a wise from a false decision”. On the one hand the party’s commitment to the cause of ordinary people was stressed by the altruist and energetic mind-set of SP members, symbolised by the much-publicised renunciation of all political earnings in exchange for a working-class salary. On the other hand the SP stressed its direct communication with ordinary people by establishing an emergency telephone number and consulting hours, through which anyone could ask for assistance or submit a complaint (often resulting in parliamentary questions), and of course by the presence of the party in all kinds of protest demonstrations.

<sup>10</sup> J. Marijnissen, *Tegenstemmen, een rood antwoord op Paars*, 1996; J. Marijnissen, *Effe dimmen. Een rebel in Den Haag*, 1998.

Besides these efforts to present itself as the collector of grievances and as the mouthpiece for the common people, the SP also advocated the introduction of elements of direct democracy within the political system as a whole, such as referenda, forms of recall and direct election to political office at the national level. However, these initiatives of institutional reform have been eclipsed by the party's emphasis on its role as a channel of communication with the ordinary people. From an organisational point of view the SP was a tightly organised, almost old-fashioned mass-party with over 50,000 members – in sharp contrast with the loosely organised movement of Fortuyn, not to mention the one-member party of Wilders.

In 1999, after five years of successful opposition, the SP changed again its strategy and course, adopting a new program and a new campaign strategy. To symbolise the change of course and strategy, the SP chose a new more proactive slogan: "Vote for, vote SP", instead of the previous "Vote against, vote SP". Of course, by emphasising its eagerness to "really change things", the party implied that it intended to pay more attention to the framing and elaboration of a solid and detailed platform, while at the same time dropping old dogmas which stood in the way of cooperation with other parties, such as opposition to the monarchy and to NATO and its advocacy of nationalisations. At the local level the SP had already taken up governing responsibility, showing its ability and willingness to compromise whenever necessary. Its paradigmatic model has now become the old and still respected Dutch Labour Party and its march to power in the 1920s and 1930s. Behind its new proactive slogans the SP had now converted to a more incremental approach to politics<sup>11</sup>.

Of course, its emphasis on *regierungsfähigkeit* and its new attitude as a party of government implied for the SP partially shedding its image as the party of protest and the direct

<sup>11</sup> P. Lucardie and G. Voerman, cit., pp. 37-70.

mouthpiece of the “ordinary people”. Though we can still find some expressions of anti-elitism and glorification of the people, it is not difficult to discern a marked change in tone and style in Marijnissen’s speeches. Instead of criticising “the whole lot” with the usual blunt words, he now clearly finds a difference between “the good, the bad and the ugly”, disapproving at the same time of Wilders’ totally negative attitude. Politics is above all getting things done for the people, even when it means making compromises and cooperating with former enemies. One can also discern a less folksy and more thoughtful intellectual tone in Marijnissen’s repeated appeals for a cultural and moral regeneration which in his view is necessary to counter the shallow hedonism and dulling of the population. In terms of electoral growth, the change of strategy and course proved highly successful: within twelve years the SP grew from 1.32% to 16.6% of the popular vote. However, shortly after the victory of 2006, the limits of this new course also became clear: despite its emphasis on a positive governing attitude, the SP was not prepared to make the compromises necessary to participate in a new government. Having also lost its role as the most vocal anti-system party to Wilders and his PVV, the SP found itself struggling to find a new role as a government opposition party. Tensions within the party increased as a result of Marijnissen’s resignation from the leadership in 2009. His successor, Agnes Kant, proved a failure and after only a year was succeeded by Emil Roemer. This primary-school teacher was able to strike the same chords as Marijnissen, although Roemer apparently was more eager to enter government. During 2011 and in the early months of 2012 the SP was very successful in opinion polls and seemed to be heading for a place in the government coalition. However, in the ensuing electoral campaign the Labour Party, lead by Diederik Samsom, made an unexpected come-back at the expense of the SP, which again was excluded from government formation.

## Different flavours of populism

Because of the disappointing results of both SP and PVV, the 2012 national elections have been interpreted by some commentators as the demise of Dutch populism. There are indeed enough good reasons to use the populist label for both the PVV and the SP, as well as for the LPF. At the same time, the label does not fully cover the different ideologies and styles of these parties. Since populism is a “thin” ideology, it is generally found in combination with another ideology<sup>12</sup>. Within the SP the ideological partner is a specific version of socialism; in the PVV it’s a mixture of nationalism and strong Islamophobia; in Pim Fortuyn’s list it’s a cocktail of populist, liberal and elitist ingredients. As a common denominator, populism may therefore be misleading. Whether Dutch populism has actually begun to decline is far from certain. At the beginning of 2013, both PVV and SP were again on the rise in the surveys. Though it is unlikely that in the near future either party will become the most powerful political party of the Netherlands, their game is certainly not over.

<sup>12</sup> B. Stanley, “The thin ideology of populism”, *Journal of political ideologies*, 13(1), 2008, pp. 95-110.

# ROMANIA

## POPULISM IN ROMANIA

*Gheorghe Lencan Stoica*

Populist tendencies started to appear widely in Romania shortly after the political events of 1989-90. Generally speaking, two decades ago “populism” appeared on the scene along with the well-known “minieriade”<sup>1</sup>, as a result of the severe delays in the introduction of “reforms”, and erupted in the form of sporadic nationalist demonstrations, with certain tragic consequences. During the following two decades populism took hold in the larger parties in association with certain political personalities, whose notoriety has crossed the borders of the country: Corneliu Vadim Tudor, George (Gigi) Becali and, above all, Traian Basescu (the incumbent Romanian president).

It can be said that Romanian populism is similar to that of South America (particularly Venezuela), although this political phenomenon cannot be strictly confined to Romania and has spread in the course of time to other countries in the European Union (Berlusconi in Italy, for example). In fact, the Ital-

<sup>1</sup> The miners’ strikes and revolts against Ceausescu’s Communist regime.

ian weekly *L'Espresso*, with an article by Tommaso Cerno, has even attempted to demonstrate a parallelism between the two cases. In his article "I am Romania"<sup>2</sup>, he highlights how, in actual fact, the Romanian president is a populist, arrogant and nepotistic demagogue, who rules the country like a dictator, for which reason he is called "the little Berlusconi of the Balkans".

This study is an endeavour to present a general picture of the key features of Romanian populism and its specific forms of expression, with regard to the political parties, personalities and leaders. The results of an in-depth research on this topic have recently been published in Romania under the title *The Populist Parties and Personalities in Post-Communist Romania*, edited by the European Institute of Iasi. This book will often be referred to below.

First of all, mention should be made that one of the essential traits of Romanian populism is nationalism. In this part of the world (South-East Europe), so-called national values, patriotism, the cult of heroes, etc. can be viewed as permanent fixtures of the political landscape, both in the period between the two world wars (the Legionary Movement or Iron Guard), and during the Communist era (Ceausescu's regime was decidedly national-communist). After the events of December 1989, populism was fuelled by both these traditions and can now offer an interesting range of contents.

In his review of some of the effects of populism, Philippe Schmitter emphasizes how it destroys party loyalty and the very possibility of making rational choices between the different political platforms without, however, replacing them with a message of its own<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, populism recruits uninformed people, who lack well-defined political beliefs and

<sup>2</sup> T. Cerno, "La Romania sono io", *L'Espresso*, 24 June 2010, p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> P. Schmitter, "A Balance Sheet of the Vices and Virtues of Populisms", *Romanian Journal of Political Science*, 7(2), 2007, pp. 5-11.

ask of politicians an emotional response to their urges, rather than concrete political proposals. Populist politicians make promises and create expectations that cannot be fulfilled, pointing the finger at foreign countries – and foreigners in general – as scapegoats for their own failures. Schmitter also argues that populists are able to alter the rules of democracy through their reliance on the armed forces and law enforcement bodies, for which reason they cannot be replaced at the country's helm through peaceful means.

Populism often uses political parties as electoral vehicles, ultimately in order to discredit all other institutions, such as parliament and government. By doing so, populist leaders present themselves as brave fighters against the democratic system as a whole, which is invariably painted in derogatory terms, such as the “established political class”. Populism thus promotes and exacerbates political extremism, ultimately achieving its basic aim, which is the destructuring of the democratic system. In Romania, this has determined a considerable drop in popular support for EU membership: only 20% in 2010, compared to 50% in 2007.

Corneliu Vadim Tudor, founder of the *Greater Romania Party*, promotes a “radical” brand of populism<sup>4</sup>; the party has the same name adopted by Romania during the interwar period. The choice of this name – which harks back to a golden past when the borders of the country reached the Dniester to the east and the Carpathian Alps (close to Poland and Czechoslovakia) to the north and included the “Quadrilater”, a large area on the Black Sea, to the south – is clearly an appeal to nostalgia. Founded in 1991, when the influence of the *minieriade* on the recently established democratic order was still strong, the Greater Romania Party (PRM) holds together

<sup>4</sup> S. Soare, “Genul și speciile populismului românesc”, in S. Gherghina, S. Miscoiu, editors, *Partide și personalități populiste în România postcomunistă*, Editura Institutului European, Iași, 2010, p. 104.



both those nostalgic of the former Communist regime and people attracted by the cult of the Heroes of the Nation, especially those fallen during World War II. The national “hero” most celebrated by C. V. Tudor’s party magazine (which bears the same name as the party and, indeed, around which the latter was formed), as well as by all party members, is Marshal Ion Antonescu, the leader of the Anti-Comintern Pact, a close ally of Hitler’s. For over two decades, C. V. Tudor has styled himself the “tribune” of a new order, opposed to an extremely corrupt political class, promising to build prisons for the perpetrators of the controversial privatisation processes, and at the same time stressing that the Greater Romania Party has never been in government. The language used by this leader is very composite. Tudor is generally very aggressive towards his political opponents; sometimes he presents himself as a radical, always protecting “the interests of the people” against “those who sell them to foreigners”. In setting forth his “conspiracy theory” he primarily targets the Hungarian and Jewish minorities, as well as the United States. The solutions proposed by Vadim Tudor are simple, but radical, ranging from the need for a spiritual renaissance to “government with a machine gun”<sup>5</sup>.

The main tool for the dissemination of his populist ideas is the press: the magazine *Greater Romania*, first and foremost, followed by *The Tricolour*, are the principal vehicles for transmitting his “orders” and his “programme of struggle”; it is mainly thanks to these two magazines that the Greater Romania Party has been able to win seats in the Romanian Parliament since 1992. Tudor, in fact, has been elected Senator in all four consecutive Parliaments up to the elections of 2008. But his real moment of glory came during the presidential elections of 2000, when he challenged Ion Iliescu, although he was defeated in the second round. This occurred two years

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 113.

before Jean-Marie Le Pen's unsuccessful bid to beat Jacques Chirac in the second round of the French presidential elections. In the European Parliament Tudor sat in the same group as Le Pen and the neo-fascist Italian Alessandra Mussolini, eventually contributing to the dissolution of that group. In any case his party is deeply critical of the "establishment": he himself proposes an "adaptation" of Romanian democracy, albeit not a complete overhaul of the system<sup>6</sup>. In 2008, Tudor failed to win seats in the Romanian Parliament due to the first-past-the-post voting system, but also to the dimming of his political star and the declining trend of his party. At present he sits in the European Parliament after having been elected in 2009.

Another similar figure in Romania is Gigi Becali, whose populism features strongly messianic overtones. He presents himself to the people as a "warrior of light" and guiding figure of the "New Generation – Christian Democrat Party" (PNG-CD), which fuses nationalism with mythology. Owner of the Steaua Bucuresti football club, Gigi Becali always looks to his model, Berlusconi, who also owns a famous football team (Milan). Despite his limited education and atypical origins, he has become a millionaire real-estate businessman, also as a result of several rather shady business deals with the Romanian Army. His oratorical skills leave something to be desired, his speeches promote a nationalist ideology with irrationalist overtones, inspired by the Iron Guard fascist movement of 1930s and 40s. He has become widely known because he often goes to watch his team play at the stadium, indeed using his football connections as a stepping stone for a political career. He is also involved in charitable causes – he funded the rebuilding of a large number of houses in a village destroyed by catastrophic floods – and likes to assume the image of "saviour of the nation". The historical figures he mentions

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

most frequently in his speeches are the “national heroes” of Romania, such as Vlad the Impaler and Marshal Antonescu. His New Generation-Christian Democrat Party (PNG-CD) – which is considered an expression of grassroots populism – is a family-run personal party: it hands out money to all and sundry to obtain votes at the elections, although, to date, it has failed to win seats in the Romanian Parliament. The PNG-CD is considered a typical example of Romanian populism, a blend of both nationalism and religious conservatism, exemplified in the slogan “I am in the service of the Cross and of the Romanian people”. Becali has been successful in building up a symbolic political capital in a relatively short space of time, which has made him both omnipresent and, to a certain extent, invincible. Becali associates his political image with celebrated historical figures much cherished by the Romanian people, such as Michael the Brave, whom he exploited in the 2004 election campaign. Furthermore, his frequent reference to religion strengthens his political capital, because it purports to represent a common cultural ground between himself and the people<sup>7</sup>.

Becali goes to great pains to appear like “a common man”. His party is family-run, a “personal party” in the words of Mauro Calise, built like a machine to serve his interests. Although he is a millionaire entrepreneur he speaks like the man in the street, sometimes even using coarse language; he frequently criticizes the “elites” and anyone trying to get in his way. He says traditional jokes, uses colourful expressions and makes simplistic claims, such as “God is on my side”, to distinguish himself from the “political class”, thereby cultivating an image of closeness to the people.

A frequent user of populist buzz words – such as “patriotism” – Becali is also an active advocate of the cult of martyrs.

<sup>7</sup> A. Marinescu, “Prin mit, la realitate: discursul populist din Romania”, in S. Gherghina and S. Miscoiu, cit., p. 138.

Romania's cultural background, based on the legendary birth of the Romanian people as a Christian people, is inextricably linked with the Orthodox Christian tradition. This is obviously seen, by populist politicians like Becali, as a source of legitimacy that reverberates with the masses, and is the reason why they use frequent religious imagery in their political language. Not surprisingly, he has made financial contributions for the construction of many churches; he likes to be seen attending mass on religious holidays and associating himself with prominent members of the Church hierarchy. The important thing for him is to be associated with the institutions in which Romanians mostly place their trust. In this regard, Gigi Becali invariably refers to the theme of "the salvation of the Romanian people", which is very much advertised by the country's mass media. His posturing and speeches have a major impact on the rural population, which is much impressed by his activities to the point of worshiping him as a benefactor.

The most successful year for Gigi Becali was 2009. During the Easter holidays of that year he was imprisoned in connection with certain criminal dealings in which he was allegedly implicated. Suspected of having organised the abduction of the thieves who had stolen his car, he was sentenced to 29 days in jail. A great opportunity, which the "populist" Becali twisted to his own advantage. Acting for the entire period of his incarceration as if he were the reincarnation of the Legionary Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, Becali was even visited in prison by the devotees of the Maglavit Monastery (founded by Codreanu), who assembled there to pray for his release. Inside the prison, with TV cameras permanently following him in his every move, Gigi Becali – a novel Messiah – meditated on salvation. All these qualities of religious saviour and folk hero served to boost his image as a "Warrior of Light". The days spent in prison were presented as an intensive and uplifting experience, tantamount to the Easter Passion. As high-

lighted earlier, this “reality show” resulted in a veritable media bonanza, which Gigi Becali exploited to the full, establishing a parallel between his life and sufferings and the concomitant religious festival<sup>8</sup>. His release from prison, thanks to the efforts of his lawyers, was made to coincide with the Resurrection and a parallel was drawn with the fate of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu (who died in prison during the dictatorship of King Charles II). On the same occasion Becali decided to run for the European Parliament elections. His words were: “There is a judge in heaven who judges the magistrates on Earth [...] however, what I am interested in is the hand of God. I have thanked Him in my prayers for bringing me here to collect my thoughts”. In an interview he gave to the TV channel Realitatea, he revealed how he spent his time in prison: “I slept, I read the Bible, I meditated on my salvation. I played chequers but then I stopped because my cellmates were no good”. On his release (which was broadcast live on TV and much exploited by the press), Gigi Becali offered a “public confession of the mistakes and the good things I’ve done. I think the nightmare that the authorities illegally put me through has actually been a blessing for me, for my salvation, but enough is enough [...] no one can destroy a Christian family simply because the prosecutors feel offended”. As we pointed out earlier, two months later his sufferings bore fruit: Becali was elected among the Romanian representation to the European Parliament<sup>9</sup>. His party, the PNG-CD, was too small to hope to gain seats in the European elections and he himself would not have made it either, so Becali accepted an offer by Tudor to run together with the Greater Romania Party. Together the two populist parties considerably increased their chances. Evoking the spectre of the communist past – always portrayed as a threat and an unalloyed evil – Becali gave credibility to his

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

invectives counting on the fact that his family had been persecuted by the former regime. Values such as the family and religion are always foremost in his ideology. Becali looks like a good man, a strong and credible leader, claiming to have the support of Providence.

The Italian political scientist Ilvo Diamanti says that populism is a trait not only typical of political parties or movements, but also of important leaders, of forceful personalities, like Sarkozy in France or Berlusconi in Italy. "Generally speaking", he says, "populists are leaders who tend to invest heavily in direct communication with the people, with *their* people, reducing to almost zero, or (according other points of view) magnifying the weight and the role of the party and of the institutions. Of course, this is the reason why Silvio Berlusconi can also be considered a populist. He exemplifies a specific category of great importance today, that of "media personalisation"<sup>10</sup>.

Another leader of this kind with strong populist and authoritarian tendencies, is Traian Basescu, the current President of Romania. He does not directly own any media, but he does control almost the majority of them, through specific forms of what can be defined as "institutionalised corruption". He entered politics over twenty years ago, soon after the political changes of 1989 and 1990. Bold and uncompromising with his former colleagues and companions, an experienced wheeler-dealer, with a murky past in the intelligence services in Antwerp (Belgium), after which he became first a member of parliament and then minister of transportation in the new democratic governments. Suspected of shady deals in the sale of the Romanian commercial airline (an important asset of the country under Ceausescu), he resigned from his seat in Parliament only when he thought this could usefully draw atten-

<sup>10</sup> I. Diamanti, "Populismo: una definizione indefinita per eccesso di definizioni", *Italianieuropei*, 4, 2010.

tion onto himself. This is the ideal behaviour of a populist, for example it is typical of Latin America's populist regimes. As minister of transportation he introduced new taxes he claimed were necessary to improve the Romanian road network, with no significant results. Today, despite the huge amounts of money spent (more than 20 billion euros), Romania has the worst roads in Europe. In any case, as minister, Basescu never failed to attract media attention, using "populist" slogans such as "this is where your money goes", in an attempt to emphasize the fact that he had full knowledge – and therefore could guarantee – how the money was being spent. Yet, the new roads have remained unused, dramatically potholed and even lacking the necessary asphalt finishing of a modern highway. In the past 20 years only 200 km of motorways have been built in Romania, during which time Traian Basescu – or someone very close to him – has been in charge of transportation. He has always blamed others, even when the responsibility was his.

Elected mayor of Bucharest in 2000, Traian Basescu has pursued his ultimate ambition: obtaining the top job in Romania, that of President of the Republic. As mayor of the capital he won the support first and foremost of the most disadvantaged layers in society, claiming that he alone was "fighting" those who were against the "good of the city" (the members of the political nomenklatura and the so-called "anti-reformists"). He placed the emphasis on a number of highly mediated issues, such as the removal of stray dogs from the city streets, a very controversial measure that raised waves of protest from animal support groups and culminated in a meeting with Brigitte Bardot. Another example was the removal of thousands of illegal kiosks set up by small traders. At the time Basescu had become much of a media darling; he used the exposure to his advantage to gain a majority in the city council, as he needed to cultivate his image as a popular and credible leader, essentially a springboard for his presidential

ambitions. In 2001, his manoeuvring was eventually crowned by success when he managed to get himself elected chairman of the PD, defeating his old friend Petre Roman (the former prime minister of Romania). By 2004 he had created the conditions for imposing a new kind of “informal” populism, so to speak, a strategy that helped transform “populism from a relatively marginal phenomenon into the cornerstone of the Romanian political system”<sup>11</sup>. Basescu would stop at nothing to accomplish his goal, rallying “the people” with anti-corruption metaphors and slogans to fulfil their greatest expectations, and for the improvement of their living conditions. “May you all live well!” was the stirring greeting used by this “sea commander”, whose sole aim was to sweep away the “disgraceful system” once and for all. Demagoguery moved up to the top of the political agenda: when he announced his decision to run for president, he actually shed tears in front of the crowd, whining and lying; intellectuals are very familiar with the figure of the demagogue who pretends to cry to attract voters (see the figure of Nae Catavencu in I.L. Caragiale’s comedy “A lost letter”).

Basescu transformed the 2004 election into an anti-corruption crusade, promising to punish – symbolically at least – the corrupt cliques of the Iliescu/Nastase regime of 2000-2004. For example, the “pales” in Victory Square were used by him to remind people of the principal form of capital punishment at the time of Vlad the Impaler (count Dracula), a figure still very dear to the “people”. And as a champion of the people he appealed to “those at the bottom” who could look up to him for assistance in time of need.

The main target of his criticism were the “discredited political parties”, along with the whole of Parliament, which Basescu defined as the stronghold of “corruption” and “reaction”. An accusation that generally comprised all those who

<sup>11</sup> S. Soare, cit., p.138.



hindered his actions and obstructed his desire to dominate the entire political system. A threat he would often make, soon after Romania joined the European Union, in his “appeals to the people”, promising to rid the country of its (and his) opponents (essentially, the MPs on the left side of the political spectrum). Today he can no longer use the slogan of “back to the people”, because his standing in the polls is no longer good as it was and he is haunted by the prospect of losing office.

Basescu’s second term as president coincided with a climax in his populism. Meanwhile, it should be stressed that he owes his election primarily to the votes of Romanians living abroad – in Italy, France, Spain and the Republic of Moldova – while a majority of the resident population preferred his opponent, the Social Democrat Mircea Geoana, to him. The previous government was simply the President’s paper-pusher, governing by emergency decree and it relegated Parliament to a subordinated role in the decision-making process. The approach is similar to that of other populist regimes in Latin America and of the post-communist regimes of the early 90s, which implemented a program of “reforms” exacting sacrifices from the population by presenting them as necessary for the good of the country, the utility of which could not be fully understood by “ordinary citizens”<sup>12</sup>. Basescu always presents himself as the leader who strives to give “the real decision-making powers” back to the people, struggling to exclude from the political arena all those who have taken power away from them.

Unquestionably, Traian Basescu is a prime example of a populist leader, whose basic traits are revealed in discrediting all other parties and state institutions considered “unfit” to govern, directing his political messages against the influential and fortunate elites that control the media and blaming the country’s economic and political woes on a range of institutions,

<sup>12</sup> G. Ziglau, “Stim despre ce vorbim? O perspectiva teoretica asupra populismului”, in S. Gherghina, S. Miscoiu, cit., p.75.

parties or people, who lack the required competence, while at the same time taking personal credit for every success<sup>13</sup>.

There are other examples that characterize President Basescu as a populist capable of outperforming, in this respect, even the most populist leaders of Latin America, including some of the worst cases of nepotism and cronyism. In the country where Ceausescu intended his son to succeed him as head of state, Basescu imposed his daughter among the most electable candidates for a seat in the European Parliament. Barely able to speak good Romanian and incapable of carrying on an intelligible conversation, thanks to the support of Basescu's party she was nevertheless elected as an independent (for the first time in Romania after 1990). No independent candidate, in fact, had ever before been elected to the national Parliament. Consequently, Elena Basescu was elected to the European Parliament. The institutions responsible for monitoring the fairness of the elections did very little. This was a very curious occurrence, possibly unparalleled even in some Latin American countries. One of Basescu's favourite practices is to sidestep Parliament every time that an important decision for the country has to be taken. The former Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, Roberta Anastase, a political crony of the President, was renowned for her vote-rigging in pursuance of her boss' interests. On 15 September 2010, for example, she was responsible for the pension law vote fraud, which she pushed through the lower House with an alleged majority of 170 votes, while only about 70 members were actually present, which was not even a quorum. Despite the vote being clearly invalid, this had no repercussions whatsoever on the political scene. Likewise, Basescu's party, the Democratic Party, suffered no consequences when in 2005, after winning the elections as a left-wing party (a member of the Socialist International), it unexpectedly crossed

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

the aisle and turned into a centre-right party, to join the European People's Party, simply because EPP held at the time the majority in the European Parliament.

Today, Traian Basescu's favourite slogan is "modernising the state", which essentially means amending the Constitution so that it can no longer be an obstacle to his quest for absolute power. He aims to reduce the number of deputies to 300 and have only a single chamber of Parliament so as to make it easier to pass his decisions.

His primary aim is to undermine the social responsibility of the State. It is no accident, in fact, that his proposed reductions primarily affect the right to education, culture and health. One of the purposes of this constitutional overhaul is to cut back on the welfare state. Basescu's outlook, which is essentially populist in its approach to modernisation, stresses the need for a more "efficient" government, which is a constant of political and economic Neoliberalism. The cult of efficiency is linked to the "management deceit" in the public sector, especially in the fields of education, culture and health. "Management deceit" manifests itself through the adoption of certain specific organisational practices modelled on private companies and the dependence of many activities on "project-based financing". The most dramatic of these projects is the Education Act, which excludes broad swathes of the Romanian population: an issue of great importance that radically aggravates the already serious problem of illiteracy, turning the clock back to the period between the two world wars.

The results of these "populist" policies have been disastrous. Romania, in fact, has sunk into debt and the crisis now seems almost impossible to overcome. The style of government imposed by this "president-juggler" has enabled Basescu to stay within the limits of the Constitution at the same time meddling in almost all the areas of social, economic and political life. But faced with the disastrous results of his "juggling" he has shrugged off all responsibility.

The same thing has happened with respect to the decision regarding Romania's admission to the Schengen Agreement<sup>14</sup>. Faced with several clear signs that Romania's inclusion was opposed by twelve EU countries, the populist president lost his nerve and announced the possibility of sanctions being taken against such member states, as if Romania were in a position to dictate how other countries should behave. Memorable, in this regard, is his televised speech in which he declared that "We cannot tolerate to be treated like scum. Many try to reassure us by saying 'stay calm because it's the great states of the European Union', but 22 million Romanians have the right to be respected [...] we are worthy and honest and therefore we are not allowed into the Schengen Area". This probably marked the highest point reached by President Basescu in his populist proclamations and has much in common with the fictional Latin American dictator in the novel by Alejo Carpentier *Reasons of State*, who "declared war on Hungary" in order to distract the attention of his people from the real problems of the country.

As recalled in a recent study by Michele Prospero, populism today has "devastating effects". The case of Romania is further proof of this: "The long-term effects of the populist cycle, however, are devastating. As a practice of government, populism adopts the mild form of the narrative to escape the verifiability of its proposals and reports. The fallacious logic of simple things leads to the exaltation of the leader, who decides without discussion, and to the disappearance of the timeline and procedures typical of any complex government decision. Competence, analysis and familiarity with the machinery of government all disappear before the artful fable of a leader who, in the name of rapid unencumbered decision-making, leads his country to an inevitable decline, due to the lack of the actual capacity to take decisions and implement choices"<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> The daily *Evenimentul zilei*, 8 January 2011, no. 6075, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> M. Prospero, "La strategia seduttiva del populismo", *Italianieuropei*, 4, 2010.



# UNITED KINGDOM

## ANTI-MUSLIM POPULISM IN THE UK: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ENGLISH DEFENCE LEAGUE

*Joel Busher*

While parties hailing from various hues of the far right have become an established part of the political landscape across much of Europe, in the UK the far right has continued to struggle to gain any significant electoral purchase. Even the supposed breakthrough of the British National Party (BNP) was short-lived and was restricted to local and European elections where low voter turnout can favour marginal parties. However, what has taken place in the UK – and in particular England and Wales – has been the emergence in recent years of two alternate strands of broadly nationalist populism, both of which have sought in one way or another to create distance between themselves and the more traditional far right. One of these has comprised the rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), a political party that has campaigned on a platform of staunch euro-scepticism, strong anti-immigration rhetoric and the usual populist claims about the failings of the current political elite to listen to the voices of ordinary people. Although UKIP is yet to gain a parliamentary seat, it has enjoyed strong showings at European and local elections, gaining 23% of votes cast at local

elections in May 2013. The other strand has comprised for the most part of a wave of street protests with a predominantly anti-Muslim focus, much of which has centred on the activities of a group called the English Defence League (EDL). It is the development of this second strand of populism – what I refer to as anti-Muslim populism – and the challenges that it might or might not pose that I focus on in this chapter.

Since the EDL first emerged, concerns have been expressed about the possible impacts of the group across a number of policy areas: how it might further exacerbate extant community tensions; contribute to a rise in racially or religiously motivated hate crime; represent a significant and costly public order issue; emerge as a natural and more effective successor to the BNP – freed at least to some extent from the “racist” and “fascist” epithets that have been so damaging to the BNP’s public support; or even contribute to an escalation of political violence through processes of “tit-for-tat radicalisation” or “cumulative extremism” involving the EDL and some of the most radical Islamist groups. However, detailed analysis of the precise nature and extent of these possible challenges has been hindered both by a relative scarcity of detailed empirical research on the EDL and by the speed at which this fairly unstable social movement has evolved since it first appeared. What I aim to do in this chapter therefore is facilitate such analysis by examining three core questions about the development of the EDL, particularly since its initial period of expansion, and the wider wave of anti-Muslim populism to which it has been central. These are: (1) To what extent might the EDL and the wider anti-Muslim populist movement be described as being in decline?<sup>1</sup> (2) To what extent has the EDL or

<sup>1</sup> I wrote this chapter prior to the killing of a British soldier by two Islamist extremists in Woolwich, London, on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2013. Not surprisingly, this event prompted a series of mobilisations by the EDL. Prior to these events, however, there had been widespread and well-founded discussion in policy, practitioner and academic circles about the decline of the EDL.

one of its off-shoots sought to mobilise around a broader far right populist platform than the group's initial narrative about the threat of "militant Islam"? (3) To what extent has the tactical repertoire of anti-Muslim populism evolved beyond the formal street demonstrations that characterised the EDL's early period of growth (a) towards involvement in more conventional channels of political action, or (b) towards the adoption of increasingly radical protest methods?

The discussion that I present here is informed by 16 months of ethnographic research into EDL activism in London and the Southeast of England<sup>2</sup> carried out between February 2011 and May 2012. Throughout this time I conducted overt observation before during and after EDL street demonstrations, meetings, and social events. I also carried out biographic narrative interviews with 18 activists, took part in innumerable informal conversations with grassroots activists and spent many evenings observing interactions between activists on the EDL forums and divisional Facebook pages.

## The emergence of the EDL

Before discussing the development of the EDL and anti-Muslim populism, it will be useful to sketch out the emergence of the

(N. Lowles, *Where Now For the British Far Right?*, 2012, Extremis Blog, 21/9/2012). Although I have edited this chapter since these events, I have not changed the shape of the discussion presented here because these events do not appear to substantially challenge the argument that I make.

<sup>2</sup> There are regional differences within the EDL in terms of the support base on which the group has drawn, the extent to which organisers restrict the use of overtly racist language, and activists' preferred protest tactics. It is worth noting that, in comparison with some EDL activist groups elsewhere in the country, the activist community in and around London has tended 1) to be particularly insistent about the EDL's opposition to the BNP, and 2) to be less dominated by people from a background in organised football-related public disorder.



group. The EDL was formed during the spring and early summer of 2009. On 10<sup>th</sup> March 2009, at a home-coming parade for British soldiers returning from a tour of duty in Iraq, a handful of activists from a group called *Ahlu Sunnah wal Jammah* waved placards and shouted abuse at the soldiers. On the day, an angry reaction from some of those who had gathered to welcome the soldiers was contained by the police. However, these events sparked a series of mobilisations. First, a local ex-soldier called James Yeomans sought to organise a “Respect Our Troops” march in Luton for March 28<sup>th</sup>. Although this event was subsequently abandoned by the organisers amid concerns that the event would attract far right groups, within two weeks a crowd of approximately 200 people took part in a “Ban the Terrorists” march in Luton, and over subsequent weeks further demonstrations followed around similar themes. These events were organised under the banner of United People of Luton and through a loose coalition of individuals from football casuals<sup>3</sup> groups, small patriot groups, and the rather nebulous “counter-jihad movement”. As the networks of people involved in these mobilisations expanded, the nascent group adopted the name of the English Defence League, with the first EDL demonstrations taking place in June and July.

There was initially considerable scepticism both among public authorities and observers of the far right about whether the EDL would either expand or endure for very long<sup>4</sup>. This was not the first time that there had been mobilisations against “militant Islam” by groups with their roots in the subculture of football-related public disorder. In 2004, a group called United British Alliance had carried out a series of demonstrations outside Finsbury Park mosque against the radical

<sup>3</sup> The football casuals are a strand of the UK’s subculture of football-related public disorder.

<sup>4</sup> Personal communications with police intelligence officers and with leading academic analysts of the British far right.

cleric Abu Hamza, and although this group even garnered coverage in the national media, these protests never escalated into a major or sustained series of mobilisations<sup>5</sup>. In addition, there was a quite reasonable expectation that either the truces between the various rival football groups would soon break down or that many of those involved in the EDL would make their way back to football-related disorder once the new football season arrived in mid-August. On top of this, the EDL soon found itself subject to considerable opposition both from various anti-racism groups and from much of the mainstream media who balked at the EDL's claims that it was neither a racist nor a far right organisation.

Yet the truces did largely hold and relatively few activists went back to football. By building its protest narrative around socially embedded discourses about a supposed clash of cultures between the West and Islam<sup>6</sup> rather than the more symbolically toxic theme of race, and by persistently asserting its organisational distinctiveness from the BNP and other traditional far right groups<sup>7</sup>, the EDL also managed to attract individuals who did not self-identify as far right or racist and would not have been willing to associate with organisations like the BNP. In fact, the EDL soon started to look and feel very much like a serious social movement group. It made effective use of new social media to build and communicate with its support base, and in spite of the drinking, the football-

<sup>5</sup> Groups from the far right have been seeking to recruit among football supporter communities since at least as early as the late 1950s. G. Macklin, *White Racial Nationalism in Britain*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> See A. Adib-Moghaddam, *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilisation: US and Them Beyond Orientalism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2011 for a discussion of how a "clash mentality" has seeped into the very heart of public and political discourse.

<sup>7</sup> A story that London-based EDL activists told me on multiple occasions was of how they had ejected Richard Barnbrook – until about 2010 one of the leading lights in the BNP – from one of their EDL London Division meetings.

esque chants and the occasional instances of public disorder, it became evident that its public protests were not just groups of “hooligans” taking to the street as a rabble: they were organised demonstrations with all the trappings of contemporary street-protests – appropriate permissions obtained from local authorities, speeches, songs, minutes of silence, placards, and teams of stewards clad in their fluorescent bibs coordinating proceedings. Through the autumn of 2009 and throughout 2010 the EDL held more than one demonstration per month, often attracting in excess of 1000 participants. Estimates put the size of the EDL’s active support at around 25,000-35,000, and at one point the EDL had a Facebook following of around 100,000.

So how has the EDL and this wave of anti-Muslim populism developed since this initial period of expansion?

***Support for the EDL: To what extent might the EDL and the wider anti-Muslim populist movement be described as being in decline?***

In order to answer this question in a satisfactory manner, it is first necessary to note that ever since the EDL emerged, it has been difficult to generate a reliable assessment of the scale of its support. As the EDL is not a membership group, its boundaries have always been somewhat fuzzy. One way of estimating support has been to look at the number of people “liking” its Facebook pages, but these estimates are rather unreliable: since 2011, EDL Facebook pages have been taken down on various occasions, meaning that the group’s Facebook support has been artificially reduced; Facebook “likes” give little indication of how active the support might be; and there is the problem of knowing whether the people on the EDL’s Facebook pages are actually supporters or whether they are in fact opposition activists, police, or academics trying to keep an eye on the group.

What is clear is that since around mid-2011 the EDL's capacity to mobilise large numbers of people to participate in street demonstrations has by-and-large deteriorated. In February 2011, the EDL was able to attract approximately 3000 people to a demonstration in Luton, and activists were talking excitedly about the prospects of an even larger and symbolically more significant demonstration in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets – home to one of the largest Muslim populations in the UK. However, in spite of an extensive publicity campaign, the Tower Hamlets demonstration only attracted around 1200 participants. Two months later another supposedly major demonstration in Birmingham attracted only around 500 activists, and since then the EDL has struggled to attract even these kinds of numbers to their demonstrations. Even in the immediate aftermath of the killing of an off-duty British soldier by two Islamist extremists in Woolwich, London, on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2013, the EDL was unable to attract more than 1500 activists to a demonstration in Newcastle on 25<sup>th</sup> May or more than 1000 activists to an event held in central London on 26<sup>th</sup> May<sup>8</sup>. The following week, a much-hyped<sup>9</sup> national day of action proved to be a damp squib, with almost all of the local EDL gatherings attracting no more than a handful of supporters.

What is also clear is that the anti-Muslim populist movement has become considerably more fragmented since early 2011. One of the first major splits to take place within the movement came to a head in April 2011 when rival factions clashed at a demonstration in Blackburn, resulting in the separation of the North-West Infidels from the EDL. Since then other groups like Casuals United and March for England

<sup>8</sup> It is of course possible that the EDL does manage to build further momentum from these events, but these turnouts do illustrate that the EDL's capacity to mobilise large numbers of people for street demonstrations had waned at the time of writing this chapter.

<sup>9</sup> By the EDL, but also by anti-EDL groups and some commentators in the media.

who had operated alongside and often under the banner of the EDL have been more assertive about their independence from the EDL, and several influential regional and local leaders within the EDL have also challenged the national EDL leadership, leading to the formation of further splinter groups.

It might therefore seem that this wave of anti-Muslim activism has lost some of its initial energy and that any prospects of an imminent recovery are undermined by intra-movement factionalism. However, there are at least three reasons why, for the time-being, we might remain cautious about making claims regarding the decline of anti-Muslim populism.

First, there is little evidence that the EDL's core protest narrative about a threat posed to an imagined English/British/Western way of life from "militant Islam" has lost its resonance. Certainly, the decline in active support for the EDL has had little if anything to do with activists harbouring doubts about the core narrative. During the time that I was in regular contact with activists, there were multiple factors that did move individuals towards disengagement from EDL activism: disagreements over protest tactics; personal fallings out; being unable to support the financial costs of attending demonstrations up and down the country on a regular basis; other events in their lives – ill health, work, romance – that meant that they could no longer invest so much energy into the EDL; banning orders that prohibited them associating with other EDL activists; and the simple fact that the initial excitement of attending demonstrations had started to wear off. Even in the rare cases where an activist did cite ideological issues as their main motive for leaving the EDL, these issues were about the specific parameters of the protest narrative (see below) rather than about the core message.

There is also scant evidence that anxieties about a cultural clash between Islam and the West have subsided among the general UK public. Even though 85% of respondents in one recent YouGov survey said that they would never consider join-

ing the EDL, 29% said that they agreed with the values of the group, whilst in another YouGov survey only 24% of respondents agreed that “Muslims are compatible with the British way of life”.

A second reason to be cautious of claims about the demise of anti-Muslim populism is the persistence of the networks of individuals, *groupuscules* and cultural practices that have developed out of this wave of mobilisation – what in social movement parlance are called “abeyance structures”. Regardless of what happens to the EDL as an organisation over the coming months, the EDL’s mobilisations have contributed to the creation of an extensive and lively social movement scene. EDL activism has given rise to new friendship networks and spawned local activist groups. For many individuals, involvement with the EDL has also meant an introduction not only to new ideas but also to new sources of information and “truth”, with most activists becoming increasingly distrustful of mainstream news media such as the BBC and turning instead to esoteric sources of information such as the various “counter-jihad” blogs and web forums.

Disengagement from these wider cultural and social networks lags a long way behind disengagement from participation in EDL demonstrations. For example, on leaving the EDL, several “former-activists” moved on to events organised by other campaign groups who mobilise around a slightly different agenda or adopt slightly different tactics but recruit from a similar pool of support; others have continued to be regular contributors to online discussions with current EDL activists; and even where activists have made quite clear that they no longer consider themselves part of the EDL, their friendship networks within the EDL activist community are usually sustained for some time after “leaving” the group<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Here there appears to be some difference between the EDL and more clandestine far right groups where exit from the group often entails breaking off all social ties with activists. Cf. T. Bjørge, *Entry, Bridge-Burning*

A third reason is that it is possible to overstate the degree of fragmentation taking place within the wider movement. There have undoubtedly been very public fallings out between the leaders of the EDL and its various off-shoots. However, in practice these groups continue to overlap. This is particularly the case at the grassroots of the movement where activists attend the demonstrations of multiple groups, none of which demand exclusivity from their activists. At the time of writing there are also cross-group talks taking place among the movement's various leaders, and in the wake of the attacks in Woolwich there were calls from across the anti-Muslim populist scene for unity<sup>11</sup>.

***The protest narrative: To what extent has the EDL or one of its off-shoots sought to mobilise around a broader far right populist platform than the group's initial narrative about the threat of "militant Islam"?***

Although the EDL initially mobilised around a narrative about the threat posed by "militant Islam", as is often the case in relatively young social movement groups, ever since these first mobilisations took place its activists have been engaged in an on-going process of negotiating and renegotiating the parameters of this protest narrative. For example, activists exchanged differing views over what constitutes "militant Islam", whether they should in fact be protesting about all forms of Islam, who was to blame for the "Islamification" of Britain, who is in a position to do something about it, what the root causes were of this perceived problem, and so forth.

*and Exit Options: What happens to young people who join racist groups – and want to leave*, in J. Kaplan and T. Bjørgo, editors, *Nation and Race: The developing Euro-American racist subculture*, Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1998, pp. 231-258.

<sup>11</sup> Even Nick Griffin, the leader of the BNP, has reached out to the EDL, although the EDL leadership not surprisingly has shown little interest in any such collaboration.

As the group has developed, this on-going negotiation has contributed to some broadening or loosening of the protest narrative. Perhaps most obvious has been a diminishing of efforts to draw a distinction between “moderate” and “militant” Islam. Whilst this has not been universally accepted across the activist community – I met three former EDL activists who cited this drift in focus as one of the main reasons for disengaging from the group, and four current activists who expressed concern that this loosening of the narrative meant they risked spreading their campaign resources too thinly – this trend has been widely adopted, and some activists have even embraced the usually derogatory “Islamophobic” label as something of a badge of honour when it has been flung at them during arguments with opposition activists on social media sites or during demonstrations.

Another area where there has been a noticeable broadening of the EDL narrative concerns a growing focus on responding to and confronting “the lefties” – activists from groups such as Unite Against Fascism or Hope Not Hate. This expansion of the narrative has been rooted in part in historically embedded lines of argument about how the “the left” is colluding in or at least unwittingly facilitating the demise of the British way of life, but also in deeply personalised animosities acquired by activists through the course of their own or their fellow activists’ experiences of arguments and even physical confrontations with individuals from various anti-fascist groups who for most EDL activists have come to symbolise “the left”.

However, these exceptions aside, there has been little move from within the activist community to mobilise around issues that would widen their protest narrative further. Although more generalised anxieties about issues such as immigration and Britain’s relationship with the EU resonate very strongly with much of the activist community, there has been little indication of an appetite to hold street demonstrations



around these issues. When activists have sought to do so, they have usually received embarrassingly little support – for example, a demonstration against the UK’s foreign aid policy and membership of the EU by the British Patriot Society, a group largely comprised of EDL or March for England activists, that took place in London on August 20<sup>th</sup> 2011 attracted fewer than 100 supporters, many of whom left the demonstration early to go to the pub rather than listen to speeches in the rain. Much of the reluctance to mobilise around a broader set of issues appears to be due to a view among activists that these are “political issues” – issues that are better addressed and are being addressed through established political parties such as BNP or UKIP.

There has also been particular reticence about any moves to mobilise around issues associated with race, with most established activists acutely aware of how damaging accusations of racism are for the public image of the EDL<sup>12</sup>. Concerns about associations with racism were for example one of the main reasons why some activists were hesitant about the EDL playing any role in the vigilante groups that emerged in response to rioting in London in the summer of 2011. Even forays into campaigning on the issue of “anti-white racism” – a theme that has long been a feature of the wider backlash against the politics of multiculturalism – have met with a mixed reaction from the activist community. For example, when a demonstration was called in Leicester in February 2012 amidst claims that a case of alleged anti-white racist violence had not been prosecuted as a racially aggravated incident due to the effects of the dreaded “political correctness”, several activists from London and Southeast England chose not to attend, saying that whilst

<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that all activists’ aversion to mobilising around race-related issues was purely tactical. It was also a matter of movement identity – the vast majority of core activists in London and the Southeast held a quite sincere view that the EDL was not about race and therefore should not protest on race-related issues.

they had some sympathy with the cause they did not see anti-white racism as “an EDL issue”.

***Protest tactics: To what extent has the tactical repertoire of anti-Muslim populism evolved beyond the formal demonstrations that characterised the EDL’s early period of growth?***

When the EDL first emerged it did so as a street protest group. The use of demonstrations to “reclaim” the streets has been integral to the symbolism of the EDL, and demonstrations themselves were also very much part of the allure of the EDL for many people who became activists, offering multiple rewards that ranged from the more fleeting pleasures of protest – the adrenaline rush of encountering the opposition or the camaraderie engendered by marching shoulder-to-shoulder with fellow activists – to more prolonged and profound rewards – feelings of empowerment, forging a positive or even a “heroic” self-image, or a sense of striving for a meaningful life.

However, by early-2011 there were growing calls from across the activist community for the EDL to rethink its protest tactics. Many activists started to question whether this kind of protest was really sustainable (see above), and also whether these demonstrations were having any tangible impact – were demonstrations really the most effective way to make their voices heard? How often had they actually contributed to planning permission for a new mosque being withdrawn?

***(a) Towards involvement in more conventional channels of political action?***

The possibility that the EDL might move towards involvement in electoral politics was raised in the news media and by some segments of the activist community at least as early as the beginning of 2011, and in November 2011, in the back room

of a pub in West Bromwich, the EDL leadership did eventually announce a pact with the British Freedom Party (BFP). Tommy Robinson and Kevin Carroll<sup>13</sup> would sit on the BFP board, and EDL activists would be able to stand as BFP electoral candidates under appropriate circumstances.

Those activists in favour of such a move saw this as a logical next step if the EDL was to become a more effective campaign group, and in November 2012 when Kevin Carroll stood as a BFP candidate in the Police and Crime Commissioner elections for Bedfordshire, he gained a not unrespectable 8,675 votes (10.6% of votes cast). However, few if any people either observing or involved with the EDL would describe the EDL-BFP alliance as having been a success – from the beginning, the move received scant support from grassroots activists and in October 2012 Robinson himself left the BFP<sup>14</sup>. Rather, the story of the EDL-BFP alliance has served to highlight at least two underlying obstacles to the electoral ambitions of some segments of the EDL activist community.

First, this ill-starred foray into electoral politics made clear just how difficult it would be for the EDL to forge a political alliance that would meet with the approval of the activist community. The alliance with the BFP was unpopular in part because it was with the BFP. Even by the standards of the British far right, the BFP is a political minnow – established in 2010, with the exception of Kevin Carroll's campaign the BFP has only ever fielded 6 candidates in local elections, polling between 0.6% and 4.2%. As such, most EDL activists were rightly sceptical that this alliance would achieve anything in electoral terms, and several expressed concern that it would simply

<sup>13</sup> The main spokespersons for the EDL. Tommy Robinson's official name is Stephen Yaxley-Lennon.

<sup>14</sup> Although Robinson claimed that he had chosen to leave the BFP in order to concentrate on the EDL, rumours circulated among EDL activists that he had been asked to leave the BFP because he had come to be seen as a public-relations liability.

“split the nationalist vote”. Due to an expectation that the British public would simply perceive the BFP to be a new version of the BNP, some activists were also concerned that an alliance with the BFP would undermine their efforts to distance the EDL from the far right and rebuff accusations of racism. Far more popular would have been an alliance with UKIP<sup>15</sup>. However, UKIP has repeatedly made clear that it does not want any form of association with the EDL, even including a phrase in the terms and conditions of its membership form stating that a person could not join UKIP if they had formerly been a member of the EDL<sup>16</sup>.

What the attempt to build an EDL-BFP alliance also highlighted was that this kind of move towards engagement with electoral politics actually clashed with many activists’ sense of the EDL’s organisational identity and of their own personal identities as activists. Most activists saw the EDL as “a single issue group” and themselves as movement activists – as “the feet on the street” – not as part of a political party. Much of activists’ hostility towards the EDL-BFP alliance was associated with a feeling both that the EDL was turning into something that they had “not signed up to” and that this new strategic direction represented a move by the national leadership towards an increasingly top-down form of leadership with which they were uncomfortable.

### ***(b) Towards increasingly radical protest methods?***

There have also been some indications of a move in another tactical direction that would have quite different implications for the kinds of the challenges that anti-Muslim populism

<sup>15</sup> T. Stanley, “English Defence League Leader Endorses UKIP. This is a nightmare for Nigel Farage”, *The Telegraph*, 4 April, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Although there have been instances in which EDL activists and supporters have become UKIP activists. M. Hookham and D. Gadhler, “UKIP Candidate Barred Over His Far-Right Links”, *The Sunday Times*, 2013.

might pose – a move towards the adoption of increasingly radical protest methods.

For some time, part of the activist community has been pushing for EDL demonstrations to become more aggressive and hostile, either for tactical reasons – some activists claimed that this was the only way they could get people to take notice of the EDL, or because they felt demonstrations had lost some of the excitement of the earlier events when groups of activists did break out of police cordons and managed to brawl with some opposition protestors. There have also been moves within parts of the activist community to shift the protest effort more generally away from formal demonstrations and towards increasingly radical forms of action. For example, since late 2010 some activists have been keen to stage “flash demonstrations” which, unlike formal demonstrations, are not carried out with appropriate permissions from or liaison with the relevant public authorities and tend to be more likely to result in physical confrontations. There have also been several instances of groups of EDL activists attempting to use force to disrupt meetings or events being held by what they consider to be their Muslim or left-wing opponents. In the most extreme cases, some individuals associated with the EDL have been convicted of involvement in religiously or racially aggravated criminal actions, such as vandalising or carrying out attacks on mosques.

However, here again divergence from the EDL’s more established tactical repertoire of formal street protest has met with resistance from within the activist community. A large proportion of the activists whom I spoke with did not want their demonstrations to become more hostile or violent. Throughout 2011 and the first half of 2012 I listened to lengthy discussions during local EDL meetings about strategies for actually minimising violence, drunkenness and drug use during demonstrations; in the autumn of 2011, after a series of demonstrations in the Midlands were marked by greater

than average levels of public disorder, some activists I knew declared that they would no longer travel to demonstrations outside the Southeast of England; and some individuals even cited trouble during demonstrations as one of the principle motives for stepping away from the EDL altogether. There has also been resistance to the routine<sup>17</sup> adoption of other more radical protest tactics. For example, at least in London and the Southeast some local EDL organisers often discouraged the use of flash demonstrations. Even in the wake of the recent killing of a soldier in Woolwich by two Islamist extremists, whilst there was in the first instance an unruly and aggressive flash demonstration by EDL activists, the EDL soon sought to distance itself from acts of retaliatory violence: the leadership issued a statement saying that they did not condone the spate of attacks perpetrated against mosques, and much of the activist community soon moved back towards organising more socially accepted modes of protest such as memorial marches and charity fundraisers.

Activists offered a number of reasons as to why they were reluctant to see the group shift towards the adoption of more radical methods. These included concerns that a further souring of relations with the police might lead to greater restrictions being imposed on future EDL actions; concerns that it would further weaken their claims to be a legitimate protest group; concerns that more aggressive EDL activities could undermine the strategic position of other campaigns in which a number of EDL activists were involved but which were not badged as EDL campaigns – such as locally-based campaigns to oppose the building of a new mosque in their area; and in some instances it was a matter of tactical taste and a feeling that more radical forms of protest simply “are not for me”.

<sup>17</sup> Some of the activists who in general claimed to oppose the use of more radical methods did occasionally participate in actions such as “flash demonstrations”.

## Discussion: Looking forward

One must of course be cautious about trying to predict how anti-Muslim populism might develop from here, particularly given the instability of the movement. However, the EDL's evolution to date does provide some indications as to the more and less likely trajectories both of this group and of anti-Muslim populism in the UK – and those who wish might use this to inform their analyses of the nature and extent of the challenges posed by the EDL and anti-Muslim populism in the UK. Based on the discussion in this chapter, I would make four suggestions.

First, even though the EDL itself has seen its capacity to mobilise sustained support diminish since early 2011, it seems that anti-Muslim populism is likely to be part of the UK's cultural and political landscape for some time to come. What appears most likely is that groups like the EDL will continue to operate in one form or another, enjoying occasional spikes of support around critical events such as the attacks in Woolwich.

Second, whilst a wider set of issues such as immigration, euro-scepticism and even race might resonate with many of the people who have engaged with the EDL, there has been little evidence to date that the EDL or one of its immediate off-shoots would either seek to or be able to effectively mobilise substantial protest activities around these issues. Third, it seems highly unlikely either that the EDL or one of its off-shoots will either transform itself into a political party capable of achieving significant purchase at the ballot box, or will be able to form any kind of electorally meaningful political alliance.

Where the picture is least clear is in relation to the fourth point: the prospect of anti-Muslim populism moving towards increasingly radical and possibly violent protest tactics. At this stage it is difficult to assess how any fragmentation of the

anti-Muslim populist movement will affect protest dynamics – e.g. one concern would be that the declining influence of leadership structures could lead to a further decline in discipline and a heightened risk of disorder and violence. Furthermore, as the spike in anti-Muslim incidents following the killing of a soldier in Woolwich<sup>18</sup> indicates, critical events can be conducive to a wider adoption of more radical protest tactics. However, what the development of the EDL to date and the wider research on hate crime and social movements would seem to indicate is that: 1) any shift towards the adoption of more radical protest methods in the wake of critical events is likely only to be a short-term phenomenon<sup>19</sup>; and 2) whilst the adoption of more radical and even violent protest tactics might appeal to a segment of the anti-Muslim activist community, any concerted move in this direction by the EDL or one of its off-shoots would be likely to alienate a substantial proportion of the group's support base, leading to a further fragmentation of the movement.

<sup>18</sup> M. Taylor and H. Siddique, "Woolwich Murder: 200 Islamophobic incidents since Lee Rigby's killing", *The Guardian*, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> START, *Assessing the Likelihood of Hate Crime in the Wake of Boston Bombings*, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2013.





# CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

## POPULISM OF FEAR: EASTERN EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES

*Daniel Smilov*

“The Rise of Populism” has become an umbrella concept used to explain political developments in a striking variety of contexts<sup>1</sup>. The populist brand is associated with political actors as diverse as the Tea Party in the US, Berlusconi and his associates in Italy, the UKIP in the UK, Fidesz (Hungarian Civic Union) in Hungary, Smer-SD (Direction-Social Democracy) in Slovakia, PiS (Law and Justice) in Poland, and the former tzar of Bulgaria Simeon Sax Coburg Gotha and his bodyguard/successor Boyko Borissov. Therefore, it is understandable that many fear that the concept of populism is simply meaningless: at best, it might connote the existence of concerns (of different nature) about the state of democracy in different settings. As the Hungarian economist Janos Kornai put it, the fact that we are in the same hospital does not mean that we suffer from the same illness.

In this paper, against the background of mostly Eastern

<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to the phenomenon of populism see Y. Meny and Y. Surel, editors, *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, Palgrave, New York, 2002.

European examples, I argue that the concept of populism might turn out to be more substantial and more useful as an explanation of current developments of democracy. For this purpose, however, it needs to be clarified analytically by allowing for different varieties of populisms. On the basis of such an analysis, I argue that the current version of populism is essentially negative, constraining and disabling *vis-à-vis* the state, since it is an expression of growing public disbelief in the possibilities for positive collective action in the public interest. Popular majorities fear that state action could produce more harm than good, and prompted by these fears they elect representatives, who disable the instruments of the state in order to change the status quo and introduce substantial policy changes. Secondly, the current type of populism has largely abandoned the idea of political representation as an essential tool for emancipation: it does not strive to extend the scope of rights to new groups. On the contrary, it is protective and conservative in nature: it aims to guarantee largely the same level of rights and entitlements to existing majorities. Finally, the contemporary variety of populism is not essentially antagonistic to a certain version of constitutionalism, understood as a set of constraints on power. It has often been thought that populism and constitutionalism are irreconcilable in the framework of liberal democracy. Thus, the rise of populism – the expression of the will of the people – is expected to mean trouble for constitutionalism – understood as a set of constraints on the will of the majority, and vice versa. The liberal fear of the dictatorship of the majority has shaped much of the thinking on constitutionalism from Mill to Dworkin. Judith Sklar, for instance, has famously argued that the main motivation behind constitutionalism has been the fear of majoritarian abuses, and indeed cruelty<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> “The Liberalism of Fear”, in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, edited by N. L. Rosenblum, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1989.

Paradoxically, contemporary populists do not strive to create an unconstrained majoritarian democracy or to augment and concentrate state power: thus, by and large, they have not been opposed to constitutionalising constraints on majority powers. The hybrid that is born I refer to as “populism of fear”.

Below, after a more general discussion of populism (especially in the Eastern European context), I address the three main features of its present-day variety, and then discuss the political and constitutional implications for liberal democracy.

## 1. New populism in Eastern Europe

The concept of populism in Eastern Europe is used – in scholarly literature – primarily to depict the rise of democratic illiberalism in the region<sup>3</sup>. The new turn to illiberalism has been especially evident in the spread of nationalism, and in the excessive zeal in the fight against organised crime and corruption (not necessarily correlated with tangible positive results). This specific reorientation of public policy has taken place at the expense of the traditional liberal values of freedom of speech, expression, religion, right to privacy and security of personal data and communication, constitutional presumption of innocence, etc. The gradual undermining of these core liberal values has put to the test the principles of constitutionalism and the rule of law<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> G. Meseznikov, O. Gyarfasova and D. Smilov, editors, *Populist Politics and Liberal Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe*, IVO (IPA) Working Paper Series, Bratislava. Available at: <http://www.ivo.sk/5353/en/news/ivo-released-working-paper-populist-politics-and-liberal-democracy-in-central-and-eastern-europe>

<sup>4</sup> On populism as an ideology see the work of C. Mudde “In the Name of the Peasantry, the Proletariat, and the People: Populism in Eastern Europe”, in Y. Meny and Y. Surel, *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*,

Regarding the spread of nationalism, the trend is rather universal. The rise of parties such as Ataka (Attack) in Bulgaria and Jobbik (Movement for a Better Hungary) in Hungary, is of course the most visible part of it, but probably more important is the infiltration of a nationalistic agenda in mainstream parties, such as Fidesz, GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria), PiS in Poland, Smer-SD in Slovakia, and so on. The illiberal turn in this regard is evidenced, for instance, by widespread negative attitudes against ethnic and religious minorities, but also in concrete policy changes in citizenship and voting rights laws. In Hungary – hardly an exception – the very idea of constitutionalism came under attack by Fidesz in 2011 with the radical revision of the country’s whole constitutional framework, including such issues as the freedom of the media, the scope of constitutional review, the independence of regulatory agencies, etc.

The excessive zeal in the fight against corruption and organised crime is more apparent in Romania and Bulgaria, reputed to be more affected by these phenomena. But there are regional trends in this area as well; among them the attempt to denigrate and criminalise political opponents, to re-focus policy choices on issues such as personal integrity and morality, and to introduce forms of “preventive democracy”, limiting citizens’ liberties on security grounds. In terms of public policy, these have found expression in a renewed interest in “purification”. There has been widespread wiretapping and other overreaching security measures, such as the seizure of assets, which depart from the traditional presumptions of innocence and burden-of-proof standards, and the introduction of specialised courts and investigative bodies without clearly defined powers and responsibilities, and so on<sup>5</sup>.

Palgrave, 2002; “The Populist Zeitgeist”, in *Government and Opposition*, No. 4, 2004; *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> The following discussion is based on D. Smilov and I. Krastev, “The Rise

- *Populism is not “radicalism” or “extremism”*. It is not useful to conceptualise Central European populism as “political radicalism” or “extremism”. Extremism was the typical challenge to liberal democracy in the post-war period. Both Communists and neo-Nazis attacked the democratic polities of Western Europe with radical proposals for systemic change, which was to be carried out partly through violent means. Such calls for radical changes cannot be observed in the region today. Contemporary populists do not propound a political alternative to democracy. The problem is that their ideal of democracy is unattractive and dangerous.
- *“Soft” and “hard” populism*. Although populism is not the same thing as extremism, there are more and less radical versions of the phenomenon. “Soft populism” is a challenge to the existing system of representation, specifically to the existing party system. It is a symptom of the crisis of representation: it thrives on popular perceptions that the established parties are corrupt, that they are in cahoots with one another and are separated from the people, that they are too ideological, etc. “Hard populism” is characterized by more severe threats to the constitutional framework: it challenges not only the existing structure of representation, but also some of the fundamental principles of liberal democracy, such as the protection of individual and minority rights, etc. Soft-populist parties in our case studies are: Simeon II’s NMSII (National Movement for Stability and Progress) and Borissov’s GERB in Bulgaria, Orban’s FIDESZ in Hungary, Fico’s Smer-SD in Slovakia. Hard populists are more difficult to come by, but they are quite well represented throughout the region. Among the most contentious and notorious examples we find PiS, Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland, the League of Polish Families, and the phenomenon of the Kaczynski brothers more

of Populism in Eastern Europe: Policy Paper”, in G. Meseznikov, O. Gyarmasova and D. Smilov, editors, cit.

generally: their stance against minorities, their attempts to criminalise their opponents, and the disrespect for entrenched constitutional principles and foreign engagements in our view justify their depiction as “hard populists”. In the same categories are parties such as Volen Siderov’s Ataka in Bulgaria, Vladimir Meciar’s HZDS (People’s Party-Movement for a Democratic Slovakia) and SNS (Slovak National Party) in Slovakia, and other smaller parties throughout the region.

- *The dividing line between the “soft” and “hard” versions of populism is fluid and ever changing.* Since populist parties generally lack both internal party structures and discipline, as well as ideological coherence, they are prone to changes in their overall profile. Their radicalism might increase or decrease not only during elections, but also while in office. For instance, regarding foreign policy issues and minority rights Smer-SD could be described as moving towards “harder” versions of populism. Similarly, it can be argued that PiS in Poland evolved into “hard” populism throughout its term in the government. Siderov’s Ataka, in contrast, was scaling down its radical rhetoric in the 2006 presidential campaign, in the apparent attempt to attract more moderate voters.

- *Not a post-accession phenomenon.* It is often argued that the rise of populism is a specific post-accession phenomenon, caused by inflated expectations concerning EU membership and fatigue from long-lasting austerity measures. Our findings offer little support for such an explanation. Post-accession factors may have played some role in highlighting certain trends, which were already visible even before accession. The rise of populism in Bulgaria started as early as 2000-2001, when the former tsar Simeon II returned to the country. In Slovakia, Meciar’s style of hard populism was dominant for much of the 1990s. In Hungary, Orban’s politics “mainstreamed” nationalistic populism towards the end of the same decade. Poland seems to fit best the “post accession” scenario, but there too smaller populist parties existed throughout the 1990s.

- *Established liberal parties fail to attract voters.* There is a general tendency of falling trust in liberal parties. They manage to mobilise far fewer voters, and in very specific situations. There is essentially one specific situation when liberals mobilise votes: when they are perceived as a last bastion against “hard” populists coming to power. This is what happened in the 2006 Bulgarian presidential elections when Siderov (Ataka) was beaten by a large margin by the socialist candidate Georgi Parvanov. In the 2011 Polish parliamentary elections, the mobilisation behind the liberal Civic Platform took place only when PiS became perceived as a hard populist party, explicitly threatening constitutional foundations. As regards to “soft populism”, established liberal parties seem to have very few answers. Bulgaria is a case in point, where soft populism has triumphed in most of the elections in the period 2001-2007. Slovakia also illustrates the thesis that soft populists enjoy significant public confidence in comparison to other actors. In Hungary, the rise of populism in the 2000s coincided with the demise of the Free Democrats – the main liberal party of the previous decade.

- *The platforms that mobilise voters are increasingly “identity-based”.* In circumstances where the liberal parties are increasingly losing their appeal and profile (except from cases of last-ditch mobilization against hard populists), nationalism and identity politics become more and more attractive to the public. These platforms increasingly win votes. Even in countries, such as Hungary, where populism has no separate exponents but has infiltrated at least one of the major parties, nationalism and even xenophobia and anti-Semitism have become vote-winning strategies. One of the effects of the rise of populist actors in Central Europe has been that they have forced virtually all of the parties to adopt one form or another of “responsible” nationalism. It is important to note that this is not a revival of the pre-World War II nationalism. This type of nationalism seems to be induced by some of the features of present-



day politics in Central Europe. Also, it borrows quite liberally from the “identity” politics of Western European parties.

- *Not a leftist revolt of the masses.* Populism in Eastern Europe is not a revolt against neo-liberalism. Paradoxically, most of the populist parties are de facto neoliberal in economic terms (the best examples being Smer-SD in Slovakia, and GERB and NMSII in Bulgaria, but also FIDESZ in Hungary and others). Many populist parties feature calls for “redistribution” of the benefits of the transition, but these calls usually mean that certain corrupt elites should be punished (Ataka in Bulgaria, PIS in Poland, Smer-SD in Slovakia). Redistribution thus is translated not in economic policies but in “anticorruption” measures. Among populists there is no vision of different (say, social democratic) economic policies. In this sense, rather paradoxically, populism in Eastern Europe is anti-egalitarian and meritocratic: it comes as no surprise then that a former tsar was one of the first leaders of a populist force in the region. Eastern European populism is a longing for new elites.

- *Not a temporary phenomenon.* There is no evidence suggesting that populism in the region is a temporary aberration from a certain idea of “normality”. There are certain long-term changes in the political process, which seem to facilitate the spread of populism. First, politics has become much more media-centred and personalized. The importance of loyalty to ideas and programmes is diminishing because of the more efficient means of social coordination (the internet, mobile technology, cable TV and 24-hour news channels, etc.). Populist parties, with their focus on communication and personalities, are much better suited for such an environment than “traditional” parties. What I referred to as the “constitutionalisation” of politics also has done some permanent damage to the electoral chances and to the political appeal of traditional parties. In these new circumstances, people look for other channels of representation and defence of their interests. Citizens turn directly to courts and the judiciary, to EU structures,

to their governments in the case of strikes and demonstrations, and so on. Loyalty to parties and party programmes no longer seems to be the most efficient way to defend one's interests.

- *The parties are the weakest link.* Populism has most dramatically affected the concept of a political party. Parties in consolidated democracies are usually expected to be stable and programmatic. The rise of populism is a serious challenge to this theory, since it has dealt a death blow to many established parties of the transition period, and has brought to the fore a host of new players. Further, populism has not made parties more programmatic, quite the contrary: it has almost stripped of its meaning the very idea of a party platform. Is this phenomenon to be interpreted as “de-consolidation” of democracy in Central Europe? If not, what are the post-party forms of democracy, which are going to prevail in the region. Populism is indeed antagonistic to liberalism, but is it going to permanently change our idea of democracy as well?

## 2. Who are the populists?

Populism has been presented in the literature as a specific type of aberration or pathology of contemporary democracy, which affects both its ideological and organisational characters. Indeed, if we look at all the different political actors mentioned in the introduction, we see that they share a common feature: they are very light in terms of ideology and organisation. First, in terms of ideology, they are not easy to define in traditional Left-Right categories. The best we can say for all of them is that they are an exercise in ideological minimalism: they are simply strongly committed to follow the will of the people (whatever that might be). As such, they easily borrow policies across the ideological spectrum. Today this is

something rather easy – as Peter Mair observed – since a major merger of themes from the Left and the Right took place back in the 1990s with the Blair government in the UK (the Third Way) and the Clinton Administration in the US<sup>6</sup>. The populists are sensitive to shifts in the mood of the majority: they could adopt more leftist or more rightist stances depending on current perceptions, as the evolution of Robert Fico in Slovakia towards “social-democracy” demonstrates. What is important, however, is not so much the essence of the ideas, but the appeal to the majority, the claim to express the “will of the people”.

Thus, contemporary populism is a *mainstream* phenomenon: these are players who have a plausible claim to express the will of the majority. Take for instance the UKIP (UK Independence Party): at first sight, it might appear as a fringe force, but it has been able to successfully imprint its core policies on mainstream conservatives: the themes of EU membership referendum, the concerns about immigration, etc. have taken centre-stage and will determine politics in the UK over the next several years, at least. Thus, even in systems in which mainstream parties are well entrenched and guarded against new comers (as in the UK, the US and Hungary), populism has been able to infiltrate some of the existing mainstream parties. In more open party systems, such as those of Bulgaria and Poland, populists have risen (and declined) as new parties displacing some of the existing parties. In both scenarios, contemporary populism should not be confused with the existence of relatively small, radical and extremist parties on the fringe of European party systems. Although populists may use such parties to accentuate certain public fears, they themselves are *not* radicals or extremists.

<sup>6</sup> P. Mair, “Populist Democracy vs Party Democracy”, in Y. Meny and Y. Surel, editors, *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, Palgrave, New York, 2002.

Secondly, in terms of party organisation populists are very light and adaptable, providing the minimum infrastructure for the expression of public sentiments. Populist parties are essentially the secretariat of charismatic leaders, and rely much more on the media, than on traditional forms of party communication and organisation (such as membership, local structures, elaborate programmes and manifestos, party think tanks, institutionalised relationship with trade unions, NGOs, etc.). In fact, as the Italian case demonstrates, populists may come to the fore after the collapse of the traditional mainstream parties. But this is not necessarily so: they may co-exist and compete successfully with them, and may actually take over some of them, as the case of the rise of the Tea Party backed by the mighty Fox News network illustrates. The cross-fertilisation and hybridisation between political actors and media is another aspect of contemporary populism which is worth studying more closely. There have been parties emerging on the basis of TV programmes (Ataka in Bulgaria, for instance); and it would be difficult to explain the success of UKIP in the UK without the major support from the tabloid press which effectively set its agenda.

The ideological and organisational lightness of contemporary populists is probably sufficient to give substance to the concept of populism, as applied to contemporary realities. Understood in this way, it connotes a certain transformation in liberal democracy, which raises concerns for its quality. Political parties have become less programmatic and more mediated, there is a growing personalisation of politics and a diminishing difference between the platforms of political parties<sup>7</sup>. As a result, politicians have to rely much more on public relations offices, and on the media in order to mobilise voters,

<sup>7</sup> G. Toka, "Political Parties in East Central Europe", in L. Diamond, M. F. Plattner, Y.-han Chu and H.-mao Tien, *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1997.

who are increasingly convinced that voting does not make much of a difference.

It is possible to define all these phenomena under the all-encompassing term of “populism”, but then it will hardly be a very interesting concept. One of the difficulties is that defined in this way populism covers all political players – everybody becomes a populist in a certain sense. And indeed, Peter Mair has argued that the Blair’s Third Way was essentially populist. British conservatives now are affected pretty much by the same malady, and if so who then are the non-populists in the UK? The second difficulty is that the ideological and organisational lightness of political parties, and the mediatisation of politics have been well studied in their own right: it is not clear what grouping these phenomena under the populist label contributes to their critical analysis and understanding. Some of the literature on political parties, for instance, may offer a better insight by depicting them as a form of popular disenchantment with excessively cartelised party systems<sup>8</sup>. The alienation of the people from traditional forms of political representation has also been at the centre of scholarly attention for many years: rebranding this characteristic of contemporary politics as “populism” also does not carry any specific analytical value.

Thus, the conclusion from this analysis is that the concept of populism could be coherently reduced to ideological and organisational lightness of politics, but in this way it may become over-inclusive and to a large extent useless as an analytical tool. Therefore, if it is to be employed at all, it must be given further substance, which ties it closer to the will of the majority, the state, empowerment, emancipation and entitlement – the key notions which are commonly associated with it.

<sup>8</sup> R. Katz and P. Mair, “Changing Models of Party Organisation and Party Democracy”, *Party Politics*, 1/1995.

### 3. Populism and the disabling of policy change

Despite the lack of elaborate programmes and predictable ideologies, all of the parties and political actors mentioned in the introduction have advocated and pursued policies which disable the state in the sense of limiting its capacity to radically change the political course. Therefore, contemporary populism is not transformative, it is essentially constraining and conservative. Paradoxically, it claims to empower the people, to express their will, but *vis-à-vis* the state it is disempowering.

This is most visible in the area of fiscal policy. Practically all new populists are supporters of low levels of taxation, no new taxes, strict fiscal discipline, etc. In the case of the Tea Party this has been almost turned into a dogma, but probably Eastern and Central European countries – such as Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia – have gone the furthest in lowering the taxation capacity of the state. Bulgaria, for instance, collects 10% flat income tax, Hungary 16%. In Slovakia, until 2013 there used to be a 19% flat income tax, which after the “social-democratic” turn of PM Fico was increased to 23% for companies, and 25% for individuals with higher income – again levels that are comparatively rather low. Thus, new populism is not an ideology of big state – on the contrary, it tends to limit and constrain the state in terms of taxing and borrowing. New populists are not opposed to fiscal breaks, for instance. Borisov in Bulgaria, Fico in Slovakia and Orban in Hungary have all endorsed the EU fiscal compact, which introduces elaborate ceilings on budget deficits and levels of public debt. On top of that, domestically they have implemented various legal and constitutional fiscal limitations. The most striking of these was probably a proposal (which ultimately failed) by the Bulgarian finance minister to make any tax increase subject to a two-third-majority vote in Parliament. Thus, paradoxically,

new populists have a self-restraining tendency: they willingly limit the capacity of the state to collect higher taxes, take more debt, etc. This may be understandable for economies that are heavily indebted, but interestingly it applies also to countries like Bulgaria, which have levels of public debt around 15% of GDP.

Secondly, the empowerment of the people through new populism has not led to the empowerment of popularly elected bodies like the parliaments, for instance. In contemporary liberal democracy power is dispersed horizontally among a variety of bodies in the legislative, executive and judicial branch. There are independent central banks, independent prosecutors, reviewing and monitoring bodies as audit chambers, powerful independent courts, etc. All of these bodies take part in the political process, and each of them has *de jure* or *de facto* veto powers in many areas. New populism has done practically nothing to change this picture and to concentrate state power in bodies directly accountable to the people. On the contrary, this polycentric and polyarchival environment is skilfully used by them to pursue their political agenda, to block their opponents, or to shift responsibility to other actors. The Tea Party-supported challenge in the US Supreme Court against Obamacare (or the power of Congress to make health insurance obligatory) is a good case in point: generally, the Tea Party would want to limit the capacity of democratically elected bodies to pursue certain types of policies. Most spectacularly, in Hungary in 2011 Viktor Orbán carried out a major constitutional reform: the new Fundamental Law which was adopted can hardly be described as empowering the Hungarian Parliament. Together with a very long list of fiscal constraints and veto players, it features a requirement according to which all important legislation is to be passed by a 2/3 majority. Many have argued that there are strong undemocratic and authoritarian elements in this document, but at the very least, it is an attempt to sabotage

any future political majority (short of 2/3) willing to implement substantial policy changes<sup>9</sup>. From this point of view, it is quite apparent that new populism purports to disable any substantial policy changes. It is trying to achieve stability at the expense of the capacity of the state to change course.

It is hardly surprising that the rise of new populism is associated with an increasing number of political deadlocks, uneasy coalitions, reverses in the course of state action, policies which cancel out one another. This is another aspect of the incapacitation of the state which could be attributed to the rise of populism. Even if majority-based bodies in the state formally preserve their powers, they may be incapacitated by incoherent and internally contradictory majorities. Contemporary populism tends to create such majorities, since it brings together very different people unified by the charisma of a leader. (According to Weber, one of the features of charismatic leadership is the ability to create impossible coalitions.) When such leaders start to address the demands of the voters, they necessarily fall into trouble. Two scenarios are possible: deadlock and reversible experimentalism. Under the first scenario, state action becomes largely impossible, or the status quo turns out to be the lowest possible denominator: in either case, substantial changes of policy become highly unlikely. The US seems to fall now into this category largely because of developments within the Republican Party. Under the second scenario, politicians may risk introducing certain reforms which then are reversed under popular pressure: the Bulgarian government of GERB has illustrated the case abundantly.

The empowerment of the people by contemporary populism has been linked to certain instruments of direct democracy, such as referendums. These are used essentially to veto

<sup>9</sup> See the Venice Commission, Opinion 663/2012, March 19, 2012; L. Csink, B. Schanda, A. Varga, editors, *The Basic Law of Hungary: A First Commentary*, Clarus Press, Dublin, 2012.



political decisions of representative majorities. The failure of the EU constitutional referendums in 2005 (France and Holland) is a case in point: these referendums were the expression of a general distrust in politicians and their capacity to pursue meaningful political projects. Apparently, Cameron's conservatives in the UK aim at tapping exactly the same attitudes in the upcoming 2014 general elections. The likely victory could be Pyrrhic, however: it will most probably signal not a resurgent confidence in domestic democratically elected majorities, but a deeply entrenched distrust in the possibility of any positive, ambitious, politically-driven policy change.

This distrust in elected representatives and their capacity to work in the public interest has a number of other expressions in the politics of contemporary populism<sup>10</sup>. Two of the reforms that are most often advocated by populists are: the reduction of the number of MPs (put into practice by Orban in Hungary, much discussed in Bulgaria), the introduction of "imperative mandates" for MPs, forms of recall, etc. It is true that these reforms are popular in countries of generally lower political culture, but they are also indicative of the fears and attitudes brought about by populism.

Finally, it must be noted that that the disabling of policy change and the resulting incapacitation of the state in connection with new populism does not imply a triumph of small-state libertarian ideas or of Hayek's market fundamentalism. All of the states under discussion feature quite sophisticated welfare systems in comparative perspective: the incapacitation of the state to introduce major policy changes is driven largely by the desire to preserve things as they are. People are not happy with the status quo, but they fear that a change could be for the worse. Most tellingly, even in the poorer countries under

<sup>10</sup> B. Wessels, "Performance and Deficits of Present-Day Representation", in S. Alonso, J. Keane and W. Merkel, editors, *The Future of Representative Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011.

discussion – Bulgaria, Slovakia, Hungary – populists have not tried to dismantle the welfare state. In these countries the damage to healthcare, pensions, and the school system was done mainly in the 1990s and had little to do with the rise of contemporary populist players. Today, these forces have the popular mandate to preserve what is left, but they are not trusted to actually change things for the better. This is probably the explanation for the apparent paradox that the empowered people may opt to incapacitate and constrain their representatives, and thus the democratic state more generally.

#### 4. Representation without emancipation

Contemporary populism is distinctive because it has changed traditional notions of political representation. Historically, populism has been associated with the emancipation of the less privileged: the expansion of the suffrage created the hope that political equality would produce social equality. Representation was seen as an egalitarian instrument which promised to make the status, entitlements and privileges of the few available to all. In contrast, contemporary populists are driven by the fear<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Table. The most basic fear is that the state is not run in the interest of all or of the majority. See the following data from the 2009 Pew Global Attitudes Survey. Question: Generally the state is run for the benefit of most of the people.

Country	Strongly agree Mostly agree	Strongly disagree Mostly disagree	DK
Bulgaria	16	83	2
Poland	40	45	4
Czech Republic	70	28	2
Slovakia	33	63	4
Germany	41	58	2
UK	52	45	3

of the majority that their entitlements might be reduced in order to accommodate the claims of minorities and/or future majorities. In Eastern Europe this is most visible in the stance of populist parties *vis-à-vis* the Roma minority; in Western Europe it is against (Eastern European) immigrants, while in the US it is the more general category of the poor which is seen as a source of unjustified claims on the taxes paid by the rich. Probably the US argument is the generic one, while Europeans have added a certain ethnic flavour to it.

Much has been written about the growing gap between the (self-perceived) middle classes and the superrich over the last decades, and data to corroborate this finding do exist. One of the more tangible effects of this gap in the political process is that it changes the political imagination of the masses. In circumstances in which everybody's wealth increases, and the gap between different income groups decreases (in real terms or as a matter of perceptions), it is possible to see political representation as the instrument of emancipation: gradually, benefits are being extended to groups which never had them. On the contrary, when the wealth of a few increases, while that of the great many decreases or stays the same, it becomes obvious that political equality is not sufficient to produce further emancipation. At most, voting is rationally seen as the instrument to prevent further degradation. I believe that this rational-choice calculation illustrates the attraction of the political package offered by new populism. It has abandoned the universal egalitarian ideal of emancipation, and treats representation as the defensive tool of insecure and distrustful majorities. These majorities have lost the hope of becoming emancipated, that is, of attaining the same status, privileges and entitlements of the superrich. They simply do not want a further loss in status caused by the emancipation of other groups: minorities, new comers, the poor, etc.

The contemporary populist party is designed as a defensive instrument. It has shed most of the traditional policy expertise of political parties in elaborating complex governmental programmes, sophisticated reforms, etc. The people generally do not need them for ambitious and complex policy making. In turn, populist parties are very efficient as instruments allowing the people to say “no”: to the EU, a change in the electoral system, the construction of a nuclear power station, etc. Quick mobilisation, quick response, sensitivity to changes in public attitudes and perceptions is the bread and butter of populists: they do not claim to be able to educate the people – they just reflect and amplify their will.

In Europe the situation is complicated by the process of European integration in which national majorities fear that newcomers to the EU may cause a reduction in their entitlements (jobs, welfare benefits, etc.). Such fears have led a number of established parties to fall into the populist mould of doing politics, advertising themselves as the defenders of their status. Not surprisingly, this whole situation revives nationalism as a political language and a form of political imagination. While nationalism has always been in the fringes of European party systems, some of its themes are becoming mainstream with the rise of contemporary populists. Thus, in several countries there is a more moderate, centrist, mainstream party, living side by side with a “bad brother” party of a more radical and outspoken nationalistic character. The model was probably pioneered by Berlusconi and the Northern League, and could be seen in Hungary (Fidesz and Jobbik), Bulgaria (GERB and Ataka), UK (Conservatives and UKIP), etc. The argument in favour of such political siblings is usually that they keep radicalism at bay and allow for safe airing of certain public frustrations. However, there are reasons to doubt that this works in one direction only: what if the smaller party starts to dominate the political agenda?

## 5. Populism and constitutionalism

The third surprising feature of contemporary populism is its general compatibility with constitutionalism understood as a set of constraints on state bodies (including democratically elected ones). Historically, populists have fought hard to eliminate such constraints: most famously, F.D. Roosevelt threatened to “pack” the US Supreme Court if it continued to sabotage the New Deal policies on the basis of *Lochner* Era<sup>12</sup> *laissez faire* doctrines. Somewhat, paradoxically, contemporary populists have turned constitutionalism in their favour. Most successful in this regard is probably the Tea Party, which has turned constitutionalism as a tool for limiting state power into its political banner. Its obsession with constitutionalism fits well with the general theme of the disabling of the state: legal rules and judicial sentences become key instruments for sabotaging policy changes.

In any case contemporary liberal democracy is heavily constitutionalised: there is a complex system of separate powers with multiple veto players, powerful and independent judicial institutions, enforceable sets of rights and liberties<sup>13</sup>. In Europe, national constitutional rules are buttressed at the supra-national level by EU norms and the pan-European constitutional law produced by the Council of Europe<sup>14</sup>. Despite the notable rise of populism, and the fact that populist parties have been in power in many countries, the existing constitu-

<sup>12</sup> A period of American constitutional history in which the Supreme Court tended to adopt a conservative stance very protective of business interests (from the 1905 case *Lochner vs New York*).

<sup>13</sup> A. Sajo, *Limiting Government*, CEU Press, Budapest, 1999; J. Kis, *Constitutional Democracy*, CEU Press, Budapest, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> W. Sadurski, A. Czarnota and M. Krygier, editors, *Spreading Democracy and the Rule of Law? The Impact of EU Enlargement on the Rule of Law, Democracy and Constitutionalism in Post-Communist Legal Orders*, Springer, 2006.

tional infrastructure has not suffered any significant setbacks. The separation of powers is thriving, the rules and constraints are generally observed, the production of new formal constitutional rules and other legal instruments is well under way. In certain areas, such as economic and fiscal constitutionalism, for instance, there is a lively competition to introduce constraints on the ability of parliaments to increase the state debt, run budget deficits, and even introduce new taxes. Creative engineering goes on not only at the national level, but at the supranational level as well, with the so-called Fiscal Compact adopted in the Eurozone. Populists have not blocked all these developments, and actually in many places have been the driving force behind them.

Among the parties mentioned in the introduction, two deserve certain qualifications. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz has introduced a major constitutional reform in 2010, which many see as problematic and even undemocratic. Fidesz has used its 2/3 parliamentary majority to strengthen its control of political life in various ways: changes to the electoral system favouring incumbents, long-term appointment of loyalists to key positions in institutions such as the high courts, the central bank, media regulators, etc. All this contradicts constitutionalism because it creates considerable concentration of power in the hands of the present super-majority. The new Basic Law further requires that many important policy areas of a constitutional nature (cardinal laws) should be decided by two-thirds majority. These laws themselves make it practically impossible for any future majority to introduce policy changes. So, all things considered, this is a case of a serious, pathological self-entrenchment of a political actor: the very fact that there is no effective check on these policies is problematic from the point of view of constitutionalism. It is interesting though that all of this is done by using the tools of constitutionalism: for instance, super-majorities (2/3 of MPs) are required for many decisions, powerful independent bodies

are being created with terms of office up to 12 years, curious innovative fiscal constraints are invented, like the Budgetary Council (comprising an appointee of the president, the head of the central bank, and the head of the state audit office) with the power to veto the budget law if debt and deficit limits are not observed. There are two possible readings of these developments. First, it could be argued that they are merely the façade behind which there is a gradual slippage towards authoritarianism. The other reading, which I think is the better one, is that the main effect of the Basic Law will not be the dismantling of Hungarian democracy, but rather the incapacitation of future majorities to introduce meaningful policy changes. Electoral competition will preserve its capacity to replace the incumbents, but will not be sufficient to replace existing policies.

The second slightly deviant case is the UK's current drive for independence from the EU. Currently, the revolt of the UK also affects the Council of Europe: the conservatives are inclined to curtail the powers of the ECHR and to re-nationalise constitutional authority. This may be interpreted as a traditional populist revolt against (supra-national) constitutional constraints. The novel element in the story is that the revolt is not so much against *constraints as such*, but about the *origin* of these constraints – whether it is European or domestic. The argument of the conservatives is not that the British Parliament should be sovereign again in order to engage in ambitious domestic policy changes. It is rather that the British constitution is a better constraint and regulator than “foreign” rules of supranational origin. Indeed, conservative politicians in the UK generally share the view that state power to regulate the economy should be strictly limited, that there should be no extensive list of socio-economic rights allowing for state intervention in market relationships, etc., and exactly in these features they find the superiority of domestic arrangements *vis-à-vis* European rules. In short, even outside the EU, the UK

will not become a less constitutionalised democracy with less efficient constraints on power: possibly, it will be a *differently* constitutionalised polity. Of course, leaving the EU will have considerable implications on its own (starting from immigration and the free movement of people): this will mean a redefinition of the borders and the members of a democracy. But such a redefinition does not automatically mean that the policy decisions will be substantively very different. On the contrary, the drive to independence in the UK seems to be inspired by the belief that only independence will allow for rights, entitlements and social-relationships to remain largely as they are.

Thus, contemporary populism can be defined as a phenomenon which affects both the form and the substance of politics. In terms of form, it is characterised by a considerable ideological and organisational lightness, as an exercise of representational minimalism. Parties have shed their claims on broad programmatic expertise, educational capacity and ideological sophistication, and have become flexible mediatised<sup>15</sup> instruments for the expression of the will of the majority. In terms of substance, contemporary populism is an expression of a deeply rooted distrust in the ability of the state to improve the social status and the standard of living of the majority. Therefore, the political goal of contemporary populism is rather conservative: to prevent further deterioration of the situation from the point of view of the majority. For this purpose, populists generally try to block major policy changes and constrain public authorities through legal and constitutional means. In the process, contemporary populists have largely abandoned universalistic claims and ideas of emancipation: their constituency is the insecure and distrustful democratic majority.

<sup>15</sup> J. Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, Simon&Schuster, London, 2009.



## 6. Implications for liberal democracy

Populism has acquired a negative connotation in contemporary political parlance. The term implies a certain defect of democracy, diminishing of its quality, but there is no agreement as to the precise character of the damage. It is incorrect to see the rise of contemporary populism as a threat to democracy as such. None of the parties we have discussed are anti-democratic, anti-systemic, radical or extremist parties. Thus, there is no need of some new type of “militant democracy” designed to exclude populists from the political process. In other words, analogies with the 1930s or the 1950s are inappropriate: contemporary populists do not hold an alternative, non-democratic vision for society. Democracy is truly the only game in town.

Secondly, it could still be argued that the rise of populism is gravely detrimental, because it badly affects electoral competition. As the Hungarian case illustrates, populist outbursts may result in a self-entrenching effort by the existing parties. But the evidence for this danger is rather thin: while attempts of self-entrenchment are unavoidable in today’s politics, the Hungarian example is rather extreme and exceptional. Moreover, it is too early to tell whether this attempt will be successful at all: popular movements have overcome much tougher anti-competitive measures than the ones employed in Hungary (think of the rise of Political Islam in Turkey and the 10% electoral threshold). Also, quite spectacular partisan gerrymandering has been common in US politics, but the heavy incumbent bias has not relegated it to a second-league democracy. Moreover, the link between contemporary populism and self-entrenchment and anti-competitive measures is spurious. Populist parties have arisen in very competitive systems (Poland, Bulgaria), and in Italy they have emerged after the demise of a long-standing party cartel. Thus, increasing electoral

competition, introducing curbs on self-entrenchment efforts may be good in itself but is not a response to contemporary populism: populists could live and flourish in a competitive environment as well.

Thirdly, populism is often seen as illiberalism. And indeed, populists have tapped into illiberal attitudes towards the Roma and immigrants. They have mainstreamed some of these attitudes. This is definitely a serious danger for the quality of democracy and should be closely monitored. The traditional remedy against such illiberal outburst has been more constitutionalism, more constraints on the will of the majority. However, I am not sure that this is the right response in the current circumstances. In any event, all democracies under discussion are heavily constitutionalised (even super-constitutionalised) and there is not much room for further constraints. Moreover, most populist parties live happily within very sophisticated constitutional constraints. Finally, a call to amend a constitution in order to counter populism may be spectacularly counterproductive: as the Hungarian case shows, it could just lead to further self-entrenchment.

Fourthly, in a similar vein, I do not believe that deliberative democracy is the right response to the rise of populism either. It could be argued that the political minimalism of the populists – minimal ideology and minimal party organisation – simplifies and degrades political debate. People lack information and cannot appreciate more complex and sophisticated arguments. If this were really the case, it could be argued that populism undermines the deliberative capacity of contemporary democracy. But are the people who support populists really not knowledgeable? After all we are speaking of the majorities in the most advanced countries in the world in the age of global information, the internet, and spectacular advances of mass communication. Furthermore, the rise of populism has strengthened the political role of the media (Fox News, tabloids, etc.) and has focused the attention on issues

such as media concentration, media independence and so on. Most of the countries under discussion have sophisticated media markets and very popular public broadcasting services: to argue that the rise of populism has diminished political deliberation in such an environment is hardly convincing. Just an example from an unlikely place: every morning on all major TV channels in Bulgaria there is an hour and a half (at least) of political programmes in which politicians, journalists and analysts discuss current political matters. Every Tuesday on public TV there is a programme called *Referendum*, which employs a methodology inspired by leading theorists of deliberative democracy (deliberative polling).

Finally, sometimes the quality of democracy is measured through the integrity and transparency of the political process. From this perspective as well the rise of populism cannot be seen to damage democracy. Populists have turned issues of integrity into central themes in their political campaigns. If anything, there is a synergy between the transparency movement that started in the 1990s and contemporary populism: they reinforce each other.

The conclusion that follows from this analysis is that the link between the rise of populism and the quality of democracy is far from obvious. From traditional perspectives – such as democratic competition, constitutionalism, integrity, transparency and deliberative value – it is not at all clear why populism has acquired a negative connotation and why it is seen as a pathology of democracy. It might appear that populist parties are a successful adaptation to circumstances of low trust in authority in general, and the electronic mediatisation of public communication. Whenever there is abundant information, it might be normal to have less trust in authority, since people believe they have sufficient knowledge to solve the problem themselves. (This explains the paradoxically higher trust in the media as information outlets *vis-à-vis* politicians). Thus, populist parties may be just an efficient adapta-

tion to a new situation: they are more of a vehicle of peoples' preferences than authorities in themselves.

Yet, the analysis offered in this paper may suggest a different explanation as to why populism could still be seen as a problem for democracy, as a downgraded version of a democratic regime. In the first place, it produces governments incapable of changing policy. In this sense, it incapacitates the state, it disempowers it in the long run through the use of various constitutional constraints and complex power-sharing mechanisms that create surprising coalitions. This will not necessarily lead to the self-entrenchment of specific *parties*, but to the entrenchment of a specific *socio-economic status quo*. In this way democracy becomes deeply conservative, and its value for specific social groups (usually the young) sharply decreases. Secondly, and related to that, contemporary populism has shed its claims (typical of historical populism) to universal emancipation. Certain (minority) groups of citizens cannot hope to benefit from the political process, since, despite the changes of government, the gaps between the superrich, the middle classes and the poor have only grown. In these circumstances, democracy becomes the defensive tool of the majority squeezed in the middle: it cannot hope to move upwards, but tries to protect itself against going downward. Interestingly enough, the mainstream populist parties we discussed are not parties of the poor striving for new entitlements: they are rather a revolt of the hope-forlorn people in the middle of society, who see their entitlements and privileges threatened.

Thus, at least two large groups are structurally uninterested in the democratic process: the marginalised poor, and the globalised elites for whom the protection of one nation state could easily be replaced by the services of another if need may be. If this is the case, democracy starts to be undermined in a much more fundamental sense, which was captured by Aristotle's verdict against some ancient democratic

forms: government of the many in their own interest, and not in the interest of all. Notice that this is not a liberal worry of oppression of the minority by the majority: it is rather the worry of the systemic neglect, by the majority, of certain interest. After all, democracy *is* in its essence an egalitarian project, and a democracy that has abandoned its claim to emancipation is intrinsically deficient.

# NORDIC COUNTRIES

## POPULISM IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES: NEW VOICES, OLD ROOTS

*Ann-Cathrine Jungar*

Populism has a long and established presence in the four Nordic countries: Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland. In spite of different historical roots and political origin, the Nordic populist parties – the Danish People’s Party, the Danish Progress Party, the Norwegian Progress Party, the Sweden Democrats and the True Finns – have converged ideologically. They have established closer bilateral and transnational contacts in the European Parliament and in the Nordic Council, and take inspiration and learn from one another. It could be agreed that a new Nordic party family has seen the light of day, but there is disagreement as to how to name it. Mainstream reactions have been decisive for the imprint of these parties on the political processes and the political debates.

The political systems of Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland have been characterised by five established party families: social democrats, communists/left-wing, conservative, agrarian/centre and liberal party groups. After the so-called “earthquake elections” in Finland in 1970, Norway and Denmark in 1973 and in 1991, the party political landscapes trans-

formed as populist protest parties and thereafter green political parties gained representation in the national parliaments.

The Nordic countries have proven to be a particularly fertile soil for populist parties, in particular during the last ten years. As a matter of fact, populist parties have experienced the largest electoral successes in the most recent parliamentary elections.

**Table 1, Electoral support of Nordic populist parties: the most recent electoral result and the best electoral result in national parliamentary elections**

Country	Political party	Period	Last vote: percent (year)	Best vote: percent (year)
Norway	Progress Party	1973-	22.9% (2009)	22.9% (2009)
Sweden	Sweden Democrats	1988-	5.7% (2010)	5.7% (2010)
Denmark	Progress Party	1973-	n / a	15.9 (1973)
	Danish People's Party	1995-	12.3% (2011)	13.8% (2007)
Finland	Finnish Rural Party	1959-95	n / a	10.5% (1970)
	True Finns	1995-	19.6% (2011)	19.6% (2011)

*Sources: Statistisk Sentralbyrå, Folketinget, Statistiska centralbyrån, Statistikkentralen.*

In the 2011 parliamentary elections, the Finnish populist political party, True Finns (Perussuomalaiset), achieved its best electoral results ever, quadrupling its support, when its votes skyrocketed from 4.6% to 19.6%. The True Finns is a successor of the agrarian populist Finnish Rural Party (Suomen Maaseudun Puolue), which had its best electoral fortunes in the 1970s and was a party of government between 1983 and 1990. The Norwegian Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet) obtained its greatest electoral success in 2009 as it received almost 24% of the votes. The Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti) won 12.3% of the votes in the 2011 elections, slightly less than in 2007 when the party scored an all-time high electoral support of 13.8%. Contrary to expectations, the party was able to increase

its vote when it gave its parliamentary support for the centre-right minority government, between 2001 and 2011. A possible explanation is that the party, from outside, exerted considerable influence on the government and played a key role in drafting Danish immigration and asylum policies, which became more restrictive. However, the Danish People's Party has never achieved the same results as the Danish Progress Party (Fremskridtspartiet), of which the DPP is a splinter party. Sweden was the Nordic exception since right-wing populism lacked parliamentary representation. After a long period of local presence and party transformations, the Sweden Democrats were finally successful in winning their first parliamentary mandates in the 2010 elections.

## Historical origin

Populist political parties have more than a 40-year long presence in the Nordic countries. The first wave of Nordic populism arrived to Finland in the late 1950s. The predecessor of the True Finns, the Finnish Rural Party, was formed in 1959 by the charismatic politician Veikko Vennamo as a splinter of the Agrarian Party. The party won its first parliamentary seats in 1966 and took part in coalition governments between 1983 and 1990, which ultimately consumed electoral support and disrupted the party's internal unity.

During the electoral campaign of 1983 the Finnish Rural Party promised voters to eradicate unemployment if it ever came to power. After the elections, in accordance with Finnish political practice, the challenger party was invited to take part in a surplus majority government; the Rural Party received the Labour Market Ministry but could not – as was expected – fulfil its grandiose electoral promise. The party went into bankruptcy in 1995 and from its ashes a new party, the True Finns, was



formed. Continuity prevailed both as to the policies and the party leadership constellation between the two political parties.

Finnish populism has its roots among the rural smallholders and in their values, which were perceived as under threat during the rapid modernisation and urbanisation of the Finnish society in the 1960s. Veikko Vennamo declared himself as the spokesman for the “forgotten people”, overrun by politicians with deaf ears to their voters and academics in their ivory towers. The present party leader Timo Soini continues to cultivate an anti-establishment position, challenging national politicians, experts, and EU politicians and bureaucrats.

The second Nordic wave of populism occurred simultaneously in Denmark and Norway at the beginning of the 1970s. In the aftermath of the debate on membership of the European Community and the expansion of the welfare state, the strongly personalised populist parties of Mogens Glistrup (Danish Progress Party) and Anders Lange gained seats in their respective parliaments. They advocated lower taxes and a reduction in the public sector combined with harsh criticism of the political establishment. Contrary to the Finnish Rural Party, which was in favour of greater public investments and redistribution in order to diminish regional and social differences and inequalities, populism in the westernmost Nordic countries embraced liberal economic policies and libertarian values. Glistrup and Lange were charismatic personalities and political opportunists who challenged the predominating norms and values. For instance, Glistrup encouraged voters not to pay excessive taxes and was sentenced for tax evasion. Anders Lange provocatively smoked the pipe and sipped a drink during televised political debates, behaviours that were previously unheard of in Norwegian society.

The Danish Progress Party was initially electorally more successful than the Norwegian one, but it was shaken by internal conflicts. In 1995 a splinter group decided to form the Danish People’s Party, which was soon brought to electoral

successes by its leader, Pia Kjaersgaard. Giving its parliamentary support to the government, the Danish People's Party exerted great influence over Danish immigration and asylum policies, as an anti-immigration stance became the party's main issue in the late 1990s.

The electoral breakthrough of the Norwegian Progress Party is, as for the Danish People's Party's, a result of long-term strategic work to create a hierarchical and centralised party organisation with local branches. Carl I. Hagen, the successor of Anders Lange, was an organisational talent and laid the foundation of a well-structured party. In the 2009 parliamentary election, the first one for Siv Jensen who succeeded Hagen as party leader, the party received almost 25% of the votes.

Sweden was an exception among the Nordic countries, as no populist party had ever won parliamentary seats, except the short-lived New Democracy (Ny Demokrati), which was represented in the parliament between 1991 and 1994. However, in 2010, as the Sweden Democrats entered the Riksdag, the legislative assembly, populist parties were represented in all of the four Nordic parliaments.

This third wave of populism has evolved out of local protest movements and nationalist groups primarily as a reaction to immigration and integration policies. The roots of Swedish populism can be found in the so-called "new populism", which gained support in the European party systems throughout the 1990s with xenophobia, Islamophobia and Euroscepticism as their priority issues.

## **A coherent party family**

Despite different historical roots, these parties – with the possible exception of the Norwegian Progress Party – constitute a distinct party family. Four different criteria have been formu-

lated in political science for the categorisation and classification of party families: origin, party name, ideology and transnational cooperation. The historical origins of the Nordic populist parties differ, as has been illustrated above. To deduce family-closeness on the basis of party names may at first sight seem banal, but the adoption or change of party names mirrors transformations in the Nordic populist political parties. In the names of European populist radical right parties certain words, such as “nation”, “people”, “democrats” or references to their native country, are frequent. Three of the four Nordic populist parties have adopted or changed to party names containing some of these terms. When the Danish People’s Party was formed different names were suggested, among others “The People’s Party”, “The Liberal Right” and the “The Moderates”. Finally the present name was adopted as there were several people’s parties, but none of them really represented the (ethno-cultural) Danish people.

When the True Finns was established the old leadership of the Rural Party considered a list of suggested party names. Raimo Wistbacka, then leader of the party, chose “True Finns”, as it evoked the idea of the people as a homogenous unit without references to class, occupation or place. The English word “true”, however, does not accurately render the Finnish term *perus* (the Finnish party name is *Perussuomalaiset*), which rather refers socio-culturally to “ordinary”, “common”, “traditional” and “hillbilly”, whereas “true” has connotations of ethnic and cultural homogeneity. The party’s stronger nationalist appeals were recognised in the international media after the electoral breakthrough in 2011 and the party decided to shorten its name in English to The Finns.

Several names were suggested when the Sweden Democrats were formed in 1988, among them the “Swedish Patriotic Party”. However, ultimately “Sweden Democrats” was chosen to underline the party’s dedication to the nation, democracy and parliamentary means instead of street activism,

which characterised its predecessors, such as *Bevara Sverige Svenskt* (Keep Sweden Swedish). The Norwegian Progress Party was formed as a “one-man” party and took on the name Anders Lange’s Party for a Strong Reduction in Taxes, Duties and Public Intervention. The name Progress Party was adopted, and rather copied, from the Danish Progress Party, led by the charismatic party leader Mogens Glistrup, who had achieved electoral successes. The word “progress” tells little about the ideological affinities, as it does not refer to any known ideology or common terms in populist radical right party names.

The four Nordic populist parties that are analysed here are often defined as radical right or populist radical right parties in academic research as well as in the media. Until recently, they have consciously avoided defining themselves in relation to established political ideologies or traditional political conflict dimensions. Rather, they have aimed at positioning themselves outside or above these. The Sweden Democrats party leader Jimmy Åkesson stated in 2011 “we are neither right nor left”. However, things are changing because the political platforms of these political parties necessarily need to be broadened as they are represented in decision-making assemblies and they have to formulate policies on several issues. As the socio-economic left-right cleavage is the primary and dominating conflict dimension in Nordic politics, these parties need to position themselves in this respect in order to attract new voters and grow electorally.

The Danish People’s Party was a pioneer as it moved from an economically liberal right position to a centrist position on the socio-economic left-right dimension, demanding the maintenance of the welfare state and, in particular, advocating support for “weak” and “entitled” groups, such as pensioners, children and families. The party gave voice to welfare chauvinism, and immigration and immigrants were accused of threatening the welfare state and reducing the services pro-

vided to the “native” people. This was combined with conservative values, opposition to immigration and the EU, and criticism of a perceived Islamic agenda. The DPP has been successful in promoting a radical transformation of the Danish immigration policies as a supporting party for the conservative coalition government between 2001 and 2011.

At the last party congress, the Sweden Democrats presented itself as a social-conservative force: “The Sweden Democrats is a social-conservative party that sees nationalism, conservative values and the maintenance of a solidaristic welfare model as the most important instruments for building a good society”. The ideological transformation was motivated by the fact that through the association with “a rich, encompassing and deep-rooted tradition, the party is placed in a historic context, which makes it more difficult for those who criticise us to spread lies about our origin”. The Sweden Democrats are often delegitimised and the Swedish political establishment maintains a “cordon sanitaire” around it and, consequently, does not negotiate or cooperate with it due to its neo-Nazi origin. The ideological reorientation of the party does not entail any policy change as the party “has been to the right in value-issues, such as family policies, defence issues, criminal policies, and to the left on redistribution and welfare”. The nation is the unifying entity for the party, rather than representation of interests, as class or occupation.

In the electoral manifesto formulated for the 2011 parliamentary elections, the True Finns identified itself explicitly with a number of ideological traditions, which it had not done previously. The party describes itself as a nationalist, Christian social party that does not have faith in the power of money, as believed by the right, nor in the power of the social structures embraced by the left. The party defines itself also as a populist party, trusting in “a democracy that rests on the consent of the people and does not emanate from elites or bureaucrats”. In contrast to the other Nordic populist parties,

the True Finns have a long and well-established position in the left as far as the socio-economic policy dimension is concerned, and advocates tax-based redistribution for attaining social and regional equality.

Anti-immigration attitudes were already present in the predecessor party, but with the entrance of strongly nationalist and anti-immigration groups, the party's profile on these issues has radicalised. After 2007 the True Finns – like the other Nordic parties – embraced welfare chauvinism, purporting that the “native” people should be given priority access to job offers and welfare entitlements. Whereas left-wing parties base welfare policies on general equality and ultimately on the idea that all humans are equal, the Nordic anti-immigration parties support a social conservative welfare policy aimed at establishing and maintaining a national popular community. In this so-called solidaristic model of welfare a line is drawn between those who are entitled to receive support and those who are not. Those who contribute to the society and live according to its “traditions” and “culture” are eligible for welfare, whereas citizenship and public assistance for immigrants are rewards that have to be earned by assimilation and adaptation. The “people's home”, which originally was a conservative idea taken over by Swedish social democratic rhetoric, has been seized and re-paraphrased as the secure, ethnically and culturally homogenous community threatened by international crime, foreign peoples and cultures.

The Nordic populist parties are placed in the centre or left-of-centre on the socio-economic spectrum. On the so-called liberal-authoritarian dimension they position themselves on the authoritarian end, which, besides an anti-immigration stance is expressed as traditional family values and anti-feminism, opposition to the rights of sexual minorities, anti-environmentalism, harder anti-crime policies and Euroscepticism. However, the Norwegian Progress Party deviates from the three other political parties, as it is economically more liberal

(it does not reject globalisation and free trade, and has a more positive attitude towards the EU). On immigration and law and order the Progress Party pursues similar policies to the other Nordic populist parties.

Populist and nationalist political parties have historically taken little interest and had difficulties in establishing international contacts. Their nationalist ideology has been one reason, but some parties fear being associated with political forces that are perceived as too radical and illegitimate since their credibility might be tarnished from such cooperation. Bilateral and transnational contacts have so far been weak in spite of the fact that the Nordic populist parties have converged ideologically. However, some changes are underway. In April 2012 the Danish People's Party and the True Finns formed a joint party group in the Nordic Council, Nordic Freedom, which is united in its criticism of the EU and immigration. Even though the Sweden Democrats are represented in the Nordic parliamentary assembly, they were not invited to join the party group, as the members of the True Finns believed that cooperation with the Swedish populist party would be harmful to their domestic political profile as they would be associated with a former neo-Nazi party. The decision was not based on policy differences between the two parties, but out of calculated reputational consequences.

Bilateral contacts are more common. Pia Kjærsgaard, for example, took part in and supported the Sweden Democrats in the 2012 electoral campaign. The Sweden Democrats aspires to win seats in the 2014 European elections and, to this end, is trying to establish closer cooperation with Nordic and European likeminded parties (such as the Dutch Freedom Party or the Belgian Vlaams Belang). The Danish People's Party and the True Finns are members of the same party group in the European Parliament, Europe of Freedom and Democracy, and have established closer relations with other European parties there. The True Finns and the UK Independ-

ence Party have begun to cooperate, and the two party leaders, Timo Soini and Nigel Farage, pay visits to each other's party assemblies.

The Nordic parties have also taken lessons from one another in terms of policies, organisation and strategy. The Norwegian Progress Party has no formal cooperation with any of the other Nordic parties, but they have taken particular inspiration from the Danish People's Party on restrictive immigration policies. During the last decade Nordic populism, and in particular the Danish People's Party, has taken over the role previously played by the French Front National as a source of inspiration and forerunner. For instance, Geert Wilders consulted Pia Kjaersgaard on the experiences of being a government support party, after the parliamentary elections in 2011. And Pia Kjaersgaard has been proven right when she stated, after her party's electoral victory in 2002, that the DPP would prove an "avant-garde" for other anti-immigration political movements in Europe.

How should the new Nordic party family be named? Extreme right, radical right and populist radical right parties are phrases commonly used to describe them. They are right as to their nationalism and value-conservative policies, but this definition is less applicable to their socio-economic policies. Radical and extreme does not entail that they are anti-democratic or anti-system parties critical to democratic and parliamentary politics. They run for elections and compete for political power by parliamentary means. Hence, the radicalism rather says something on their position relative to the other parties. This is also complicated by the fact that other political parties embrace similar policies and up to one quarter of the electorate vote for them. Are they still radical and extreme?

The term "populism" is not sufficient to categorise these political parties. The degree of populism, defined as anti-establishment appeals, varies between the Nordic parties. Both the Danish People's Party and the Norwegian Progress





Party have been anti-establishment and protest parties and this historical legacy prevails as to how they present themselves as alternatives to the “politically correct” party establishment and as representatives of the ordinary people. The True Finns still represent classical populism in their rhetorical appeals as representing the people against the political, economic and cultural elite. The Sweden Democrats have, as a consequence of their neo-Nazi origin, strived to attain credibility and legitimacy as an “ordinary” parliamentary party, with little success so far. As the parties combine ethno-cultural nationalism, social conservatism with centrist socio-economic positions, existing classifications give a flawed picture of these parties combining elements from both the left and the right.

# UNITED STATES

## THE ODD COUPLE: POLITICAL PARTIES AND POPULIST MOVEMENTS IN AMERICA

*Stefano Rizzo*

Populism has a long history in America, not just the populism that gave its name to the People's Party in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and to kindred agrarian movements well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nor does this refer to populism as American political scientists and commentators currently use the term, as a general brand for radical progressive demands by the electorate and proposals by the politicians<sup>1</sup>. If by populism we mean what most political scientists in Europe would agree on – a general attitude organised in a political movement against established parties and government institutions with a direct appeal to the electorate in the name of the “real interests of the people”, spurning compromise and professional politics and aspiring to a return to a previous blessed state of direct

<sup>1</sup> In contemporary American usage the term “populist” hardly ever refers to a political party or movement, but rather to define the radical character of some progressive policy proposals (such as raising the minimum wages, providing universal health care, liberalising marijuana, etc.). Contrary to European usage, in the U.S. a movement such as the Tea Party would not be defined “populist”. In this paper I shall use the term in its European meaning.

democratic participation<sup>2</sup> – then populism in the United States starts at the very beginning of the history of the Republic and is strictly intertwined with its political thought and organisation. If, at the same time, we define a party as “an institutionalised coalition, one that has adopted rules, norms and procedures”<sup>3</sup>, organised at the local and national level in order to compete in elections and exercise its influence on the executive and the legislature, requiring loyalty and discipline from its members and leaders and having a unifying outlook on government’s policies – then political parties and populist movements are not only historically strictly intertwined: they are two sides of the same coin, one not existing without the other. Whether populism is to be considered a recurrent disease of party-based democracy or the cure for its ills is, of course, another question to be settled only on contingent grounds.

## Political parties, democracy and populism

The Founding Fathers of the American Republic had no sympathy for political parties and the Constitution they drafted does not even mention them. Their aversion to political parties, however, had nothing to do with some sort of populism in an

<sup>2</sup> A still valid survey of the different definitions of populism may be found in P. Taggart, *Populism*, Open University Press, Buckingham, 2000, chapter 2; as well as in the now classic E. Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, New York 2005, specifically in part I, chapter 1 “Populism: Ambiguities and Paradoxes”, pp. 3-20. Y. Mény and Y. Surel explore in depth the relationship between populism and democracy in their *Par le peuple, pour le peuple*, Librairie Arthème, Paris 2000, whose title, of course, echoes Abraham Lincoln’s famous “government of the people, by the people, for the people” in his Gettysburg Address (1863). Notwithstanding the many conceptual difficulties, I prefer to stick to my value-neutral – essentially operational – definition that I deem most appropriate to the American political context.

<sup>3</sup> J. H. Aldrich, *Why Parties. A second Look*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009, p. 297.

embryonic state. The Founding Fathers were steeped in European political philosophy of the time, which generally considered the “spirit of faction” detrimental to the workings of government (D. Hume), undermining the sovereign power of the state (T. Hobbes) and disruptive of the envisioned unity of the community (J.-J. Rousseau). The very idea of “opposition”, a party opposing the government in a continuous and organised manner, would be considered treasonous. In the small environment of the American colonies, political leaders had no use for parties since, at that scale, consensus could be reached by direct democratic participation, which generally deferred to the leadership of the landed gentry and the merchants. But after the Revolution political parties were soon born in the now much wider Republic, with millions of people spread over millions of square miles. Confronted with pressing issues of domestic and foreign policy, the Democratic-Republican and Federalist parties coalesced around the eminent figures competing for political power: Jefferson and Madison in the Democratic Party, Adams and Hamilton in the Federalist Party. The creation of political parties was an unprecedented American invention, which antedated analogous developments in England by at least thirty years, legitimising political opposition and creating a new political order. From then on political parties, although still looked upon with suspicion<sup>4</sup>, were considered a constituent part of the American system of government.

But, together with the parties, soon came the anti-party spirit. The original two parties (the so-called First Party System<sup>5</sup>) had strong limitations. Though based on different con-

<sup>4</sup> As late as 1835 Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in *De la démocratie en Amérique*: “Les partis sont un mal inhérent aux gouvernements libres”. (Flammarion, Paris, 1981, vol. I, p. 256).

<sup>5</sup> The classic account of the successive American party systems is to be found in W. D. Burnham and N. Chambers, editors, *The American Party Systems: Stages of Political Development*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1967.

stituencies (the Democratic-Republicans more rural and state-centred, the Federalists more urban and national), the two parties were both patrician and gentry-based; theirs was an elitist outlook in which government and political leadership were the province of an educated wealthy class of landowners. The revolt against the first party system took less than a generation to assemble: already in 1816 Andrew Jackson (then the victorious general of the War of 1812) wrote that “Now it is the time to exterminate the monster called party spirit”<sup>6</sup> – of course in the name of a return to the “original spirit” of the nation and in “the real interest” of the people. This was the beginning of what came to be known as the Second Party System, or Jacksonian Democracy, with the enlargement of the franchise, the election of judges and candidates to public office and other forms of direct democracy. At the social level, Jacksonian Democracy was the result of the growing power of the frontiersmen, the farmers and herders, following the push westward and further enlargement of the Republic.

This is a recurrent theme. Over and over in the history of American democracy, as political parties solidify and appear inadequate in answering the demands of a growing and changing population (frontiersmen, new waves of immigrants, internal migrations), or in solving the pressing issues of the time (slavery, industrialisation, urbanisation, recurring financial crises), an aversion to parties springs up in the nation taking the form of anti-establishment, anti-party movements. This gave rise, eventually, to a new party system. When this happens the leaders of the existing parties cry out against the threat to society and the established order represented by the newcomers, while the prominent intellectuals of the time<sup>7</sup>,

<sup>6</sup> C. T. Brady, *The True Andrew Jackson*, J. P. Lippincott, Philadelphia, 1906, p. 302.

<sup>7</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson in a page of his *Journals* for 1857 (J. Porte ed., *Emerson in His Journals*, Harvard University Press, 1982, p. 479) denounced present-day politicians as “well-bred, well-dressed fellows infi-

hearking back to a romantic golden age of political harmony, excoriate the political class for its privileges and corruption. This is what happened in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in the United States, has happened since, over and over again – as it is happening now – in America, Europe and elsewhere whenever a populist movement is set on challenging, from the outside, the existing political order in the name of democracy and the “will of the people”.

A further point must be stressed in the relationship between political parties, democracy and populism (in the European sense). As long as political parties are controlled by limited elites representative of the privileged classes (as it was the case in the U.S. up to the 1820s and in Europe until the end of the century), it is possible to maintain party discipline and be assured of the loyalty of the (then limited) electorate. But as democracy expands and parties too become more democratic (with an elected leadership, conventions, local and national organisation, primaries to select candidates for office), as millions of new voters enter the political arena, party cohesiveness becomes precarious and parties more open to attacks from outside insurgents. Jacksonian Democracy was the first instance of such an attack: it created a new party structure, it overthrew the old patrician system, and at the same time it planted the seeds for other attacks. A generation later, the floundering of the Democrats and the rise of Lincoln’s new Republican Party was the result of the anti-abolitionist movements of the 1840s and 1850s and of the new-born (albeit short-lived) Liberty Party. Half a century later the reformist policies of Theodore Roosevelt during the so-called Progressive Era were the result of a long series of

nately more mischievous, who get into government and rob without stint and without disgrace”. Similar “populist” views by another celebrated intellectual of the time were expressed by Walt Whitman (see his *Preface* to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and *Democratic Vistas*, 1867, *passim*).

agrarian populist grass-roots movements<sup>8</sup> sweeping the country and challenging both established parties after the Civil War.

Jumping half a century ahead, something similar may be said of the civil rights movement of the 1950s, of the youth protest movements of the 1960s, of the fundamentalist evangelical-Christian and socially conservative movements of the 1970s and 1980s, of the Tea Parties of 2010, up to the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011. All these movements and “parties” were rather unstructured (or thinly structured) pluralist organisations, of a progressive or reactionary character, sometimes led by a charismatic leader (such as Dr King for the civil rights movement), or several leaders (the religious fundamentalist pastors) or no leader at all (Tea Parties, Occupy Wall Street). Basically their aim was to give expression to popular dissatisfaction against established parties and policies, thereby spurring change. In general terms and irrespective of their specific policies, they may be viewed in a positive light, as part of the democratic process, the result of the expansion of democracy and the empowerment of the people (which they always advocate, both from the right and the left, in opposition to government by professional party-based politicians). But they may also be viewed in a negative light, since – by opening the door wide open to populist insurgency from below – they make the political system more fragile, prone to the changing mood of the electorate and always in danger of being overthrown. So pervasive in the political system is the role of grass-roots populist movements (in both the European

<sup>8</sup> Among them: the Patrons of Husbandry (the Grange movement), the Greenback or National Independent Party, the various Farmers’ Alliances and several others all leading in 1890 to the People’s Party. For a succinct history of the various agrarian movements cf. Everett Walters, “Populism: Its Significance in American History”, in D. Sheehan and H. C. Syrett, editors, *Essays in American Historiography*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1961, pp. 217-230; and G. B. Tindall, *The People’s Party*, in A. M. Schlesinger Jr., editor, *History of U.S. Political Parties*, Chelsea House, New York, 1973, vol. II, pp. 1701-1731.

and the American sense) that since the days of Andrew Jackson the history of American politics may be described, more than in any European country, as the constant struggle between political elites trying to hold on to power and outsiders either demanding reform and a place at the table or the overthrow of the system: essentially, as Tocqueville said<sup>9</sup>, a struggle “between those who want to constrain political power and those who want to extend it indefinitely”, a constant battle between political power and economic power – always fought against the entrenched political parties.

### **Populist grass-roots movements and the American party system**

Historians of American politics count at least five, possibly six, different party systems since the inception of the Republic. The first (1790s-1820s) was the system that realised national unity and independence; it comprised the Federalist Party led by Alexander Hamilton and the Democratic-Republican Party led by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison; their electoral base was limited to the landowners and the well-off. The second system (1820s-1860s) saw the transformation of Jefferson’s party into Jackson’s party, which now called itself simply Democratic, and of the Federalists, who now called themselves Whigs. The main issues of the period, besides specific policy differences between the two parties (on protectionism, banks and the role of the executive), were the expansion westward and the enlargement of the franchise to all white males<sup>10</sup>. The third sys-

<sup>9</sup> A. de Tocqueville, cit., p. 258 and ff.

<sup>10</sup> What Y. Mény and Y. Surel call the shift from the 19<sup>th</sup> century *parti de cadre* to the 20<sup>th</sup> century *parti de masse*, which in Europe occurred after 1880, in the United States took place at least fifty years earlier under Jackson. Cf. their *Politique Comparée*, Montchrestien, Paris, 2009, pp. 81-101.



tem (1860s-1890s) was the period of the Civil War, Reconstruction and industrial expansion, ending with the crash of 1893 and depression; the electoral base of the two parties began to solidify: to the Republicans (who had taken the place of the Whigs) the industrial and urban population of the North, to the Democrats the rural population and landowners of the South; generally the period was dominated by the Republican Party, although in each party there was a more progressive and a more conservative wing, which allowed cross-aisle cooperation. The fourth system (1890s-early 1930s) was the period of the Progressive Era and of unprecedented industrial expansion, in which the Republican Party (which continued to rule for most of the period) was the party of reform, of business regulation and labour protection, enacting legislation which had been championed a generation earlier by the People's Party and other agrarian and urban grass-roots movements, such as the election of senators, the introduction of the primaries, term limits for office, a more responsive judiciary; while the Democratic Party became more and more the party of conservatism and "Jim Crow" laws. The fifth party system (1932-late 1960s) is the period of the Great Depression, the New Deal, and World War II, followed by even greater economic expansion. The task of the fifth party system, as Arthur Schlesinger has said, was "to regulate and humanise the industrial economy" addressing the enormous "problems of economic instability and social injustice"<sup>11</sup>; a task at which the previous party system dominated by the Republican Party had failed, precipitating the Great Depression. This was a period dominated by the Democratic Party, during which Franklin D. Roosevelt, in pursuit of his policies of government intervention in the economy and of social welfare for the people, was able to transform the Democratic Party assembling a totally new coalition: a party comprising the tradi-

<sup>11</sup> A. M., Schlesinger, cit. p. xlv.

tionally Democratic Southern and Midwestern electorate with the new immigrants of the North, the rural white poor with the blacks and the urban unemployed, the intellectuals with the labour unions. During this whole period the Republicans remained the party of big business and social inequality, and lost consensus all over the country. The New Deal coalition dominated the political scene to the end of the 1960s, always controlling Congress when not in the White House (under Eisenhower). A sixth party system may be counted from the end of the 1960s to the 2000s; it was characterised by the great upheavals of the 1960s, followed by economic recession and a conservative backlash, which came to full bloom with the advent of the Reagan Era with its accompanying values of small-government, unfettered business and social conservatism. The period was ruled for most of the time by the Republican Party thanks to its ability to fuse social and religious conservative issues with the interests of big corporations and financial speculators; the Democratic Party lost most of its Southern base due to the civil rights laws and by being identified as the party of urban liberals. This was a momentous political shift<sup>12</sup>, whose consequences – and to a large extent core issues – are still with us and cast a long shadow on the current Democratic presidency of Barack Obama<sup>13</sup>. Each shift from one party system to the other was caused by changes in the social composition of the parties, by new issues coming to the fore and by the ability – or inability – of the established parties to effectively address them. In bringing about each of these changes grass-roots social movements and single-issue interest groups have had a determining role. By being anti-

<sup>12</sup> On the changes in the party system during this period, cf. M. S. Levensky, *The Partisan Sort. How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republicans*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Whether the financial and economic crisis of 2008, together with the election of Barack Obama, marks the beginning of a different seventh party system remains yet to be seen.

party, anti-establishment, anti-Washington, they have forced the two mainstream parties to change.

When we talk of shifts in the American party system we should not forget that we are talking of a “system” always made up of two parties who, for most of the time, have competed for the totality of the electorate. But the same reasons that have caused a party system to evolve into another have often caused the birth of “third” or “independent” parties. The rise of third parties is also a recurrent feature of the American political scene and at the same time a short-lived one due to the majoritarian (or first-past-the-post) electoral system prevalent at all levels of government (local, state, national). Generally speaking, third parties develop from grass-roots movements that cannot find a support base (at least not to the expected degree) in either of the two major parties. Needless to say, such parties, as well the movements they grow from, always have a strong populist bent. Nonetheless, not all of the more than fifty “third parties”, which, since the 1850s, have competed for the voters’ favour, were populist parties. For example, the most often celebrated forerunner of populism, the People’s Party, was certainly *not* a populist party in the European sense of the word. Despite its populist (in the American sense) roots and themes, despite its inflammatory rhetoric and anti-establishment stance, the People’s Party developed a national platform (the Omaha platform of 1892) addressing real and pressing problems of democracy and the economy. It competed in state and national elections winning a number of governorship and representatives in state legislatures and in Congress. Nor was the short-lived (1912-1914) Progressive Party a populist party. Founded by Theodore Roosevelt, its aim – had Roosevelt won the election – was to complete the reforms of the Progressive Era<sup>14</sup>. Actu-

<sup>14</sup> The same may be said of parties such as the Communist Party USA (founded in 1919) or of Robert La Follette’s Progressive Party of 1924, but

ally, it is precisely the fact that the People's Party was *not* a populist party which has given the term "populism" in American political parlance such a different – basically positive to neutral – connotation when compared to the European usage.

## **Populism of the left and populism of the right**

All that has been said in the previous paragraphs merely refers to the dynamics of populist movements within a given political party system. In a sense, they are a permanent structural ingredient of any democracy. Local movements arise around one or more issues; some of them have the strength, the cogency and the appeal to evolve into national movements. They establish themselves in contrast with existing political parties and institutions. They generally have a life cycle of a few years or a decade. If they succeed they reach, at least in part, their objectives and are eventually absorbed into the party system (transforming it at the same time); if they fail, they continue for some time their testimonial role before becoming extinct – until a new grass-roots movement is born. However, up to this point nothing can be said about their contents. The point must be stressed: a populist movement may be defined in its relationship to the democratic system; it is not intrinsically right-wing or left-wing. In the course of American history there have been genuine and successful populist movements (anti-establishment, anti-party) of a progressive nature that have actually spurred democratic development, enlarged democratic rights and advanced social jus-

not of most of the several other third parties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Independently of the extent of its following and radicalism of its proposals, a political party should not be considered populist (in the European sense) if it is willing and capable of inserting pressing national issues (social, economic or otherwise) into a general national platform.

tice (Jacksonian Democracy, the Progressive Era). There have also been successful populist movements of a contrary orientation, that have pushed for fewer rights, a less open society and fewer social protections (the “Reagan Revolution”, George W. Bush’s presidency)<sup>15</sup>. But for one populist movement that succeeds there are dozens that fail: the remnants of third parties of the most different political tendencies litter the field of political history. By not being big enough, encompassing enough, by not being able to compromise or to ally themselves when compromise and alliance were required, by not embracing the right leader at the right moment, populist movements and third parties more often than not disappear into the dustbin of politics, perhaps to re-emerge a generation later under a different guise.

Liberty Party, Free-Soil Party, Greenback Party, Silver Party, People’s Party, Progressive Party are just a few of the many short-lived populist and non-populist parties of a progressive character who had a lasting influence on politics by altering the political status quo and moving the political balance to the left. The last time a populist anti-party, anti-establishment movement of a progressive, leftist character swept the country was in the 1960s. It was made of different strands: the civil rights movement of the ‘50s, the protest movements of the ‘60s, the more radical New Left and Black-Power movements, even groups bent on the violent overthrow of “the system”, such as the Weather Underground. It was a youth movement which rejected the sexual and social mores of its parents, was

<sup>15</sup> Of course, progressive or regressive change is not always, nor in most cases, brought about by the pressure of populist movements; for example, the pro-business reaction to the Progressive Era of the 1920s, or the expansion of civil and social rights under Kennedy and Johnson in the ‘60s and even Obama’s current progressive policies (modest as they may appear) are autonomous policy choices made by individual leaders largely within their party’s platform. On the contrary, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan *transformed* their own party’s platform to embrace new constituencies and through them shape new coalitions.

against anything in politics and society that smelled of compromise, was strongly anti-Republican, but at the same time very suspicious of the Democratic Party. It demanded profound changes in all sectors of the social life – even a revolution – but by refusing direct involvement in the political process, it condemned itself to failure. Its following was great and its cultural influence enormous, but without a unifying platform and some sort of political organisation pulling together its different strands, it was not able to prevent the backlash that came full force in 1968 with Richard Nixon’s election to the presidency, and his even greater victory in 1972.

As a consequence of the general upheaval some changes were made in the party system (first and foremost by the Democrats), such as the generalisation of the primaries, term limits for office holders at the state and local levels, and – above all – desegregation and the extension of the franchise to millions of *de facto* disenfranchised blacks. Important progressive laws were passed in the 1960s and early 1970s – for women’s rights (the fight for the Equal Rights Amendment), for rights in the workplace, for criminal defendants, for the protection of the environment – spurred by a progressive and proactive Supreme Court. But all in all this leftist populist insurgency failed to reach its aims. When the Cultural Revolution subsided, “the system” re-emerged stronger than before. The economic difficulties of the 1970s compounded the cultural backlash of the decade and, after the short interlude of the ineffectual Jimmy Carter, opened the way to conservative social and economic policies of the 1980s that went by the name of “Reaganomics”.

Ronald Reagan himself had some of the traits of a populist leader: flamboyant, with great oratorical skills, he interpreted the anti-establishment and anti-government mood of his time, the quest for law and order and a return to the social mores of old, which became dominant not just among the right-wing electorate, but among the general population. At

the same time he was able to channel this anti-government resentment (his famous dictum was: “government is not the solution to our problems, government is the problem”) into the Republican Party. In the 1980 election, besides winning the presidency, the Republicans gained control (for the first time in 28 years) of the Senate and advanced greatly in the House, allowing Reagan – with the help of many conservative Democrats from the South – to enact his legislation against drugs, general permissiveness, taxes, regulations, and in favour of rearmament, smaller government, cuts to welfare programs, and the adoption of a more confrontational foreign policy. Many of the liberal (progressive) achievements of the 1960s and 1970s were thus reversed<sup>16</sup>.

The “Reagan Revolution” was therefore a success and clearly demonstrated the power of a populist anti-establishment insurgency when a shrewd and capable leader channels it into existing institutions – recipe for success that from then on was followed by Republican leaders and strategists, both in the opposition during the Clinton years (1993-2001) and in government during the Bush father (1989-1993) and Bush son (2001-2009) years. The recipe consisted in compounding an array of disparate grass-roots movements each working on a specific issue (abortion, right to bear arms, religion in schools, lower taxes, immigration) into a powerful unified force in support of the Republican Party. It was so successful that in 2004, after winning the presidency and Congress for his party, Karl Rove, George W. Bush’s chief strategist, proudly proclaimed that “a permanent Republican majority” was now in place. This evidently was not so if only two years later the Democrats were able to win back both the House and the Senate, and four years later, in 2008, the White House as well. Nonetheless, the

<sup>16</sup> On the conservative backlash and the confrontational character of both right-wing and left-wing populist movements, cf. D. Sandbrook, *Mad as Hell. The Crisis of the 1970s and the Rise of the Populist Right*, Random House Anchor Books, New York, 2011.

Republicans' savvy in channelling popular discontent and populist anti-establishment resentment into their own party was shown in the ensuing elections with the rise of the Tea Party. This right wing movement effectively rejuvenated many of the traditional issues of the right since the conservative backlash of the 1970s, once more bringing its followers into the Republican fold. A non-hierarchical movement, without recognised leaders and with a very vague platform, it united under an anti-government, anti-taxes, anti-immigration, nativist banner (vaguely hearking back to the Revolutionary period) – thus a truly populist movement in the grain of its European counterparts – threw its considerable weight in support of the “right” Republican candidates, endorsing them in the primaries and helping them win seats in Congress. Thanks to its grass-roots activism, only two years after Obama's “transformational” victory, the Republicans won back the House and made gains in the Senate. The composition of both houses shifted markedly to the right, effectively blocking or watering down many of the new president's proposals.

This was on the right of the political spectrum. Nothing comparable has happened on the left. In the autumn of 2011 a populist movement of a leftist strain by the name “Occupy Wall Street” made its appearance in New York. It proclaimed itself to be on the side of the “99%” of the population against the 1% represented by the very rich and powerful. It was against the arrogance of corporations and financial establishments – Wall Street – and in favour of the rights and interests of the powerless. It endorsed a number of “fashionable” themes, such anti-consumerism, environmentalism, energy conservation and – a hallmark of populism – direct democracy. It quickly received the support of many New Yorkers and even of some prominent Democrats in Washington, such as House minority leader Nancy Pelosi. Even President Obama declared his sympathy for its causes. The movement adhered to a confrontational but non-violent political agenda (also drawing in-



spirations from the “Arab Spring” demonstrations of the same year), permanently camping out – not on Wall Street – but in a near-by private square, Zuccotti Park. It tried to avoid clashes with the police. However, after initially tolerating the occupation, they moved in on the demonstrators, arresting and beating many of them. The movement quickly spread to a number of cities all over the country; hundreds of demonstrations were held over several months, drawing attention via the national media. In the ensuing 2012 elections some Democratic candidates proclaimed their closeness to the movement (which now called itself simply “Occupy”), but none of them was endorsed by it<sup>17</sup>. Pointedly, a spokesman of its Canadian-based organisation that inspired the movement<sup>18</sup> (as for the Tea Parties, the movement has no leaders and no permanent organisational structure) declared that Occupy did not endorse any candidate, did not run for elections, although it might the next time around. Thus, despite its great visibility and the sympathy it received from liberal circles, the movement did not exercise any marked influence on the political process, nor was it able to advance its ambitious egalitarian aims.

The contrast with right-wing populist movements, such as the Tea Party, could not be sharper. In both movements there is a strong anti-party, anti-establishment penchant and both purport to speak in the name of the great majority of the

<sup>17</sup> During this campaign Occupy brought out a poster which read: “Vote for the Politician You Can Trust: Nobody 2012”. William Dobb, a press liaison for the movement, was more explicit: “We need champions of the people... to win our democracy back... Occupy doesn’t endorse candidates or parties” (reported by K. Rawlings, *Time Newsfeed*, 21 February, 2012). Later in the campaign Occupy vilified Barack Obama, among other things, as a “warmonger” for his foreign and defence policies.

<sup>18</sup> Adbusters, a Canadian-based anti-consumerist and pro-environment organisation which publishes a journal by the same name, has sponsored numerous international campaigns such as “Buy Nothing Day”, “TV Turn-off Week”, and is credited with launching the Occupy Wall Street movement and drafting its iconic poster, the Charging Bull with a ballet dancer on top.

population against a small minority wielding all the power. For the Tea Party this small minority is made up of Washington politicians, mainstream media, city intellectuals and in general leftists out of touch with the values of the common man. For Occupy the minority is made up of bankers, profiteers, wealthy people and corrupt politicians. On the face of it, it should be easier for Occupy to achieve political results than for the Tea Party. After all, bankers and rich people are clearly identifiable – as well as corrupt politicians – and it should be possible to propose legislation to curtail their power and limit their malfeasance. On the other hand, mainstream media, Washington politicians, city intellectuals out of touch with the common man, are less clearly identifiable and, above all, it is rather difficult to conceive appropriate punitive measures against them. But precisely the contrary occurred. The Tea Parties, waving their populist right-wing banners, endorsed candidates, helped them win elections and ended up exercising a very concrete influence on the political agenda. Occupy Wall Street, waving its own populist left-wing banners, did not endorse any candidates, did not ask them to make any specific commitment<sup>19</sup> in exchange for its support, and in the end – despite its large following – condemned itself to political irrelevance. The “mistake” made by the Occupy movement is of the same order of the one made forty years before by the youth protest movement: neither was willing to engage meaningfully in the political process. But the mistake is not peculiar to the populist left and populist right-wing movements have made it as well<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> Such as the Taxpayer Protection Pledge introduced by Grover Norquist, founder of the anti-tax organisation Americans for Tax Reform; prior to the 2012 elections the pledge was signed by most Republican candidates in order to garner support of right-wing populist groups.

<sup>20</sup> For example, evangelical movements of a rightist bent have been quite active throughout American history and particularly in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; they made a lot of proselytising, they had magazines and radios, but they were explicitly non-political. It was only during the '70s that their religious leaders saw the political potentials of what had been a re-

Of course this is not meant to imply that they should have acted differently (they still may, and perhaps there will be Occupy candidates in the next elections). It is simply to state a corollary of the general law that links populism and democracy: the more mature a democracy, the more it is subject to recurrent populist insurgency. If this is the general law, the corollary is: unless a populist movement is willing and capable to engage in the political system, even with the objective of subverting it, it is destined to irrelevance. Populist movements, both of the right and of the left type, count. They can and do influence the political process, sometimes to a very high degree, but only if they are willing to engage in the political system. They can remain true to their objectives, but they cannot spurn the means for achieving them, which in a democratic system are the same for everybody. Testimony is important, but results are better.

## The role of populism today

We may approach some conclusions with an eye to the American context, but – we believe – with broader implications for the phenomenon of populism in general. Populist movements are the norm in a democracy, not the exception; they tend to be more frequent (and more convulsive) the more a democ-

ligious sect, looked around and chose a fellow traveller in the Republican party. Billy Graham, one of the most prominent evangelical leaders, endorsed Ronald Reagan and later became his “spiritual adviser” in the 1980 elections. In return Reagan gave to his policies a bent consonant with the social values of the evangelical right. A further step was taken in the late ‘90s when Republican strategist Karl Rove made right-wing evangelism an integral part of the Republican platform. Cf. W. Martin, *With God on Our Side. The Rise of the Religious Right in America*, Broadway Books, New York, 1996; and K. Phillips, *American Theocracy. The Perils and Politics of Radical religion, Oil and Borrowed Money in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Viking Penguin, New York, 2006.

racy matures. The enlargement of the suffrage, for example, is always accompanied by populist movements, before and after; so are social and economic issues, not always and *per se*, but when they can find adequate expression in the political arena (and this happens in freer and more participatory democracies). Populist movements, independently of their specific policies, are by definition anti-party and anti-establishment, so it is no coincidence that they arise when established parties and institutions prove unable to solve or even to address fundamental social and economic issues. The enlargement of the franchise to all white males in the 1820s, to black men in 1879 and to women in 1920 increased the possibilities for grass-roots movements, often with populist strains, to do battle with established parties and political elites. In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as free speech, universal education, civil rights, the spread of the popular media (daily press, radio, television and finally the internet) greatly enlarged the playing field of politics, inviting democratic participation, the established parties and in general the leading classes “from the top” had to constantly fend off the attacks of insurgent movements “from below”. The introduction, in the second half of the century, of television and later of the computer weakened the role of political parties as mediators between the politician and the voter, opening new possibilities for political activism of a populist nature. This was only accrued at the beginning of the new century by the spread of the internet and the social networks, giving people a real – albeit virtual – sense of direct participation in the political process, which was no longer viewed as the exclusive domain of the professionals.

Such being the general rule, the outcome of the struggle between “the elites” and “the people” for political control may vary. If on the side of the elites there is a national political figure endowed with the necessary personal charisma (and a modicum of demagoguery), he may be able to channel the

discontent into the existing political system enacting the required reforms and in the process transforming the political system itself. Sometimes this may not be possible when the issues are simply too intractable and not amenable to easy solutions even by an accomplished leader. This was the case with slavery (a social and economic issue, and not just one of liberty and equality), which since the birth of the nation no American politician was able to address and was finally solved only through recourse to war. Jumping a century ahead, not even a man like Lyndon Johnson, who certainly had uncommon political abilities and did not shrink from demagoguery and political arm-twisting, was able to give an answer to the “populist” demands of the youth protest movement (even though he did much to respond to the requests of the civil rights movement). With the consequence that in 1968 another cunning politician, Richard Nixon, took up the banner of reaction against the protest movement, channelling into the Republican Party the several strands of what he called “the Great Silent Majority”; and in 1972 garnered the millions of formerly democratic Southern voters, who four years earlier had gone to George Wallace in protest against the civil rights laws, winning the presidency by a landslide. Nixon, however, because of his personal flaws, which eventually forced him to resign, was not able to hold this new Republican coalition together for long. Ronald Reagan took the task up a decade later. The “Great Communicator” performed it with uncommon flair and political acumen, thereby entering the pantheon of politics as an enduring icon of the right, admired even on the left of the political spectrum<sup>21</sup>. All this confirms the deci-

<sup>21</sup> During the 2008 campaign Barack Obama referred to Ronald Reagan as a transformational figure who “changed the trajectory of America in a way that Richard Nixon did not and in a way that Bill Clinton did not ... He put us on a fundamentally different path because the country was ready for it” (interview to the *Reno Gazette* of 15 January, 2008, and reported the day after by all national media).

sive role that populist anti-establishment movements can perform when a capable political leader interprets their grievances and channels them into the party system. The feat<sup>22</sup> performed by Nixon with regard to Wallace's racist electorate and to the mounting wave of conservative reaction was beyond the reach of any Democratic leader when it came to the liberal youth protest movement. After the defeat in 1968 the Democratic Party created a commission (headed by George McGovern, the 1972 presidential candidate, representative of the party's more liberal wing) to make the party more open by drawing into it women, blacks and the young, in line with the party's historical tradition of inclusiveness. But the effort produced very limited results and was short-lived.

The rise of a national figure capable of absorbing a populist insurgency, however, is a rare event which in the course of American history has occurred at most three or four times. The first such leader was Andrew Jackson, who was able to enact a grand transformation of the political system by interpreting the aspirations of the new classes of farmers and frontiersmen. The second such figure was Theodore Roosevelt, who was able to restore the confidence in the system, badly shaken by the greed of big corporations and by recurring crashes of the economy, by enacting sweeping economic reforms and important institutional changes to the political system. The third figure is that of Roosevelt's cousin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who had to face the devastation wrought by the Great Depression and, despite his elitist background, to convincingly address the expectations of the masses. The fourth and last figure capable of absorbing populist protest into the political system was that of Ronald Reagan, who articulated the profound malaise that had pervaded the nation

<sup>22</sup> Indeed a feat. In 1968 Nixon obtained 43.4% of the popular vote and in 1972 he reached an all-high 60.8%, absorbing all of the formerly Democratic votes gained by Wallace in 1968 (13.5%) plus an assorted 5% of dissatisfied white workers from the North.

after the social and racial convulsions of the 1960s. Barack Obama probably will not be counted in this short list of presidents, whose particular merit was to cope with populist insurgencies, whether from the left or from the right. First of all, he lacks the outward characteristics of a leader who may appeal to the populist mind: too intellectual, too highly educated, too self-composed and too disinclined to use demagoguery. Not only does he speak reasonably, but he expects his fellow citizens to do the same – to engage in a political “conversation” and not in partisan squabbles. Secondly, he is a man of the institutions, meaning that his preferred choice when facing a complex issue is not by direct appeal to the people – the classical populist strategy – but by working with Congress, accepting the lengthy timeline and compromise necessary to reach an agreement<sup>23</sup>. And this, despite his personal qualities (or because of them), makes him a far less transformational figure than had been hoped. Obviously, being black, of middling background, and assuredly on the side of the poor and of the disadvantaged, is not sufficient to make one a populist leader.

The aim of populism is “politics without parties”, the pursuit of the delusional dream of direct exercise of the people’s will. But politics without parties would not be government by the people, but government by even more secretive and restricted elites. Populism (in both the European and American sense) is not the solution to the troubles of a governing democracy or to popular disaffection with party politics. Indeed, populism, by catering to the anti-party, anti-establishment feelings that periodically sweep through the electorate in democratic countries, is a sure recipe for the disintegration of the precarious balance between popular sovereignty and government institutions on which any democratic system is based.

<sup>23</sup> Of course this may also be due to the fact that since the congressional elections of 2010 he does not have a majority in the House.

At the same time a bit of populism (like a drop of poison to counter a more powerful poison), if accompanied by credible reforms enacted by respected leaders, may help – and indeed is required – in order to overcome the populist malaise of our times.

I wish to conclude with a prophetic quote by Arthur Schlesinger, who more than forty years ago warned against the dangers of catering to anti-party and anti-establishment movements in the mistaken belief that they may be the solution to the ills of representative democracy:

“If [political parties] were no longer the link between government and the people [...] We might then enter an era in which political leaders, like Chinese warlords, roam the countryside, organising personal armies, [...] conducting hostilities against some rival warlords and forming alliances with others, and, as they win elections, striving to govern through *ad hoc* coalitions in legislatures. The prospect is not inviting. The crumbling away of historic parties would leave political power concentrated in the warlords, the interest groups that financed their armies and the executive bureaucracy. The rest of us would not even have the limited entry into and leverage on the process that the party system, for all its defects, makes possible. Without parties, our politics would grow angrier, wilder and more irresponsible”<sup>24</sup>.

As indeed it has.

<sup>24</sup> A. M., Schlesinger, cit., p. liii.





# APPENDIX



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