



SYSTEMIC CHALLENGERS: RADICAL RIGHT AND RADICAL LEFT POPULISM IN EUROPE.

Stefano Rizzo¹

Rome, January 2015

¹ Former professor of international relations, La Sapienza University of Rome.



“Our politicians are well-bred, well-dressed fellows infinitely more mischievous, who get into government and rob without stint and lie without disgrace.”

POPULISM IN AMERICA

The words above were not pronounced by Geert Wilders, Marine Le Pen, Nigel Farage or any other present-day European populist leader in his or her incessant (and relatively successful) attack against the political system, mainstream parties and inept and/or corrupt politicians. They were written 160 years ago on the other side of the Atlantic by one of the most prominent American intellectual of the time, Ralph Waldo Emerson. And he was not alone in his scathing denunciation of politician and political parties. When he wrote these words in his *Journals*² in 1857 Emerson was following in a long tradition of anti-party, anti-politics “populist” feelings quite widespread among the population, starting only a generation after the birth of the new nation.

Already in the second decade of the century Andrew Jackson, the future president of the United States, had launched his populist campaign against the party system that had ruled since independence. “Now it is the time to exterminate the monster of party spirit” he wrote in 1816³, advocating a return to “the original spirit of the nation” in the name of “the real interest of the people”. Jackson was at the time the victorious general of the war of 1812 against England and, after his accession to the presidency, proceeded to enact many of the “populist” reforms he had promised, foremost among them the enlargement of the franchise to all citizens of age (with the exclusion of black people and women). Even then all the elements of current-day populism were present: rejection of established parties, mistrust of politicians and in general of elites, reliance on the will of the people and a strong egalitarian penchant.

Populism as a political attitude predates in America the birth of the People’s Party of more than 70 years and of almost two centuries the numerous populist parties (which however do not call themselves by that name) in Europe. What must be noted – and this is the first contrast with the European equivalents -- is that in America populist movements had for a long time a *progressive* character: the consequences of the populist agitations were the strengthening of democracy, more

² *Emerson in his Journals*, J. Porte ed., Harvard University Press, 1982, p 479.

³ C.T. Brady, *The True Andrew Jackson*, J.L. Lippincott, Philadelphia, 1906, p. 302



social justice, more accountability for the politicians and more inclusiveness in the democratic process. The several waves of populism which at various times swept the country took place during periods of great changes which the mainstream political forces were not able to govern: the westward push of the 1820s, reconstruction in the 1870s after the civil war, industrialization and immigration towards the end of 19th the century, the great depression of the 1930s, the social upheavals of the 1960s. These times of social crisis gave rise to populist movements of a progressive sort, in which protest against the establishment led to a more inclusive (or less exclusive) society. Starting with the 1970s, however, the new populist wave had an essentially *regressive* character. Indeed it was populist in the European sense of the term⁴, and it was a grassroots movement (although heavily financed from above), but in contrast with the previous populist waves, it was *not for* but *against* something, aiming at reversing the social and economic conquests of the 20th century. The new populism was characterized by a stress on law and order against “too much” individual freedom and laxity, a stress on free enterprise against state regulation and intervention, a stress on religion against secularization. A reactionary movement if there ever was one, composed of many strands, without any discernible leader that went by the name of radical evangelism, neo-conservatism, neo-liberalism, and the latest incarnation of which is the Tea Party movement.

What must be stressed for the purpose of this paper – and this is the second fundamental difference between American and European populism – is that in both cases, the progressive and the regressive, the party system of the time was able to connect with their demands, embraced them, at least partially, and was eventually able to absorb them in a new political system.

TURNING TO EUROPE

During the same period -- the 19th and 20th centuries -- Europe had an abundance of right- and left-wing movements with many of the characteristics of populism. Except that they were *revolutionaries* of different hues and purposes (fighters for independence, for national unity, for social revolution) bent on overthrowing the state mostly through violent means. If we considered them populist we would lump together too many different movements who only have in common the aim of changing the state of affairs, not the means for doing it. It is much more helpful to define a populist

⁴ Not the American. In the US until very recently the term has been used to define a political force which advocates strong egalitarian policies. Now, following the success of populist movements in Europe, the meaning is shifting.



movement as a *systemic challenger*⁵, albeit of a radical sort, who wants to change the system, not overthrow it. It is thus basically democratic as far as the functioning of the system is concerned (not its individual policies). There are of course also populists of an *extreme* sort, who use violent means, and they, following Cas Mudde's definition⁶, represent a *normal pathology* of the system to be fought as a last resort through the police power of the state. Strictly speaking they do not represent so much a *political* problem as a problem of law enforcement. While their basically non violent brethren, the populists, are a *pathological normalcy* within the system and do represent a grave (and more interesting) *political* challenge. It goes without saying that revolutionaries of the left and of the right have been a constant of European politics of the last two centuries, with those of the right far more successful in creating fascist regimes and deeply influencing right-wing policies of liberal regimes. But all this, which is the long bloody story of civil strife in our continent, does not concern us here.

Confining ourselves to populist right-wing movements in the strict sense we see that they rise to public attention in Europe only starting from the last quarter of the 20th century. Why were they such late-comers, compared to the far longer history of American populism?

POPULISM AS A FUNCTION OF DEMOCRACY

The basic reason is that populist movements can arise only when a democratic polity is sufficiently developed in its fundamental traits (universal suffrage, separation of powers, personal freedoms, freedom of the press) and a society is both culturally and economically developed along the same lines (free enterprise, individualism, egalitarianism). Thus populists are a function of democracy and a by-product of its development. In the United States, and to a lesser extent in the United Kingdom, some of these fundamental traits were at least partially in place by the 1830s, certainly to a far greater degree than in continental Europe, where the conditions for the full development of truly democratic polities came into place only after the Second World War. Even then the enormous task of reconstructing a devastated continent and of healing deeply shocked populations for several decades led Europeans by and large to embrace the three historical parties which had come out

⁵ Cfr. *The Changing Faces of Populism. Systemic Challengers in Europe and the U.S.*, ed. by H. Giusto, D. Kitching and S. Rizzo, Feps Foundation for European Progressive Studies, Brussels, 2013.

⁶ C. Mudde, "Three decades of populist radical right parties in Western Europe: So what", *European Journal of Political Research*, no. 52, 2013; and his influential *Populist radical right parties in Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007.



relatively unscathed from the ruins of the war: the Christian-Democrats, the Socialists, the Liberals – which from then on became the mainstream parties of the political system.

The first real cross-European populist movement was *progressive*, like its American predecessors: it was the youth movement of the late '60s and early '70s. It expressed a strong social discontent and alienation from the political system, but it concentrated on the social, the cultural and the personal, not on the political. It did have some political offshoots (a number of small radical-left parties and the Greens), but it was in the end remarkably non-influential in the political arena. Mainstream parties, both of the right and the left, fought them, but ended up with accommodating with them, making minor changes in their political agenda, and went their usual way. After all the political establishment could pride itself of the gigantic economic improvements of the *Wirtschaftswunder*, the *Miracolo economic*, the *Trente Glorieuses*, the sweeping social and economic reforms of Clement Attlee's government. Finally, the constraints of the cold war contributed to solidify political consensus around mainstream parties. In conclusion the rise of populist *radical right* – or left -- movements is *not* a sign of an ailing democracy, but quite the contrary a sign of its maturity, at least in the sense that the democratic political market is more open and competitive. While the rise of strong *extreme right* movements is always a sign of immaturity of the democratic system and a threat to the state (any state, democratic or not).

Of course present-day right-wing populists *are* obnoxious: they are xenophobic, even racist, nationalistic, with a very limited understanding of the workings of representative democracy, and their economic policies are – if they have them at all – simply obstreperous. But *they are part of the system* and operate within it: they must be understood and dealt with, which means fought against with all the tools of political competition.

THE PUZZLE OF POPULISM

I have explained why populists are late-comers in the European political system and what are the preconditions for their rise, but not why they have risen at all. They are *political* protest movements (not just social protest movements like the youth “insurrection” of the '60s): they protest and demand change in politics, in policies, in the institutions of the state and in the economy.

And here is the puzzle of populism, simplistic as it may seem at first glance. Why, we may ask, is such a large section of the European population – approximately 30% of the votes polled in the last



European elections (actually far more considering the very great abstention) -- so dissatisfied with their nations and with the European Union? Of course politicians are corrupt, although probably in a percentage not greater than in the general population, and bureaucrats are – well – bureaucrats. But their failings are certainly not so great as to deserve the heavy pummeling they usually get from the populists.

From an institutional point of view and looking at the actual workings of the political system, European countries are among the freest, the most humane and the most democratically accountable societies in the world, certainly more than ever in the past, even without taking into account former Soviet-bloc countries (for which the statement is quite obvious). In this continent there never was a freer press (further incremented by the new electronic media), and a more competitive political market. European countries have been at peace for several generations, while in the past every generation knew one or more devastating war. As obvious as it may seem, this is no small feat for a political system and its operators.

From an economic point of view, despite seven years of economic crisis and stagnation, of reduction of welfare provisions, low salaries and high unemployment, European countries are still the richest in the world, with a lower index of inequality (Gini) compared to the U.S. and other rich countries, with an extensive (although diminished) network of social protections, with widespread leisure and travel opportunities, with educational systems better than most other countries, and certainly better than ever in the past.

So what? Is this enough to discount the populist protest as pure demagoguery -- which it certainly is – obnoxious, but fundamentally irrelevant? No it isn't. Sociologists⁷ tell us that there is a significant divergence between measures of life satisfaction and experienced well-being. The latter has to do with quantitative measurable facts, the former with less measurable subjective experiences such as a sense of purpose, the meaning of one's life as part of the community, the feeling of personal identity. These subjective elements are as important as the objective ones in determining a person's sense of life satisfaction.

Cosmopolitanism, globalization, secularism, may all fare well among the educated elites (who, by and large, belong to the wealthiest sectors of the population), but they do create a disconnect and a painful loss of personal identity among the less educated. There is also a disconnect between the

⁷ A.A. Stone and C. Mackie, eds., *Subjective Well-Being: Measuring Happiness, Suffering and Other Dimensions of Experience*. National Research Council, National Academic Press, 2014.



countryside (and small towns) on the one side and large cities on the other, as evidenced by the poorer electoral performance of the UKIP in large British cities in the latest European elections⁸. The social changes represented by economic globalization, immigration and cultural and religious pluralism, quite independently of their objective dimension (their material advantages and disadvantages in economic terms) are experienced by many Europeans as a loss of personal and social identity, as an attack on the very nature of the community they belong to. It is this more than any objective fact that prompts them to embrace the easy solutions proposed by the populists rejecting the more complicated measures proposed by the cultural, political and professional elites. It is a revulsion in the defense both of the people as *demos* against overpowering elites and of the people as *ethnos* against the hordes of invading immigrants⁹.

Let us not look with condescension at these attitudes. Not only they are a potent political force, but they are far more ingrained in each of us than we normally think. Patriotism, national identity (if not outright nationalism), religious identity and even a diverse palette of prejudice about “foreigners” outside and inside Europe are not the quirks of some fringe group: they find acceptance at all levels of society, even among the more educated. Indeed, the paraphernalia of such sentiments – flags flying, trumpets blowing, parades, guards of honor, ceremonies of all kinds – are still very much with us and presumably will be for a long time. This is not populism, but populism draws its strength from these broadly shared and substantially non-reflected “values” of a society.

As to the economic malaise, the objective facts are far too obvious to be recounted. But the popular – and populist -- discontent is not identical with the facts nor derives from them mechanically. It is *relative*: relative to the *past* (a past of growth while now there is stagnation) and relative to the *present* (a present of increasing inequality). The driving force of the protest is not poverty per se, it’s impoverishment. It is not wealth per se, it’s inequality, the perception that a few get most of what there is and the many get very little. Everybody knows that this reality has always existed, that there have always been rich people and poor people, but what is unsettling is that *it has grown*, and in a democracy -- which after all is the system of government bent on the emancipation of the people, the *hoi polloi* -- it shouldn’t. This is not a populist fantasy, it’s a harsh reality.

⁸ Cfr. R. Huq, “And the Winner is...” (on the elections in the U.K.), in *Turning Point of May 2014. Progressive European Reflections*, Feps-Next left working paper from which I took many interesting data and observations.

⁹ The distinction was made by P.-A. Taguieff in his highly influential *L’illusion populiste. Essai sur les démagogies de l’âge démocratique*, Flammarion, Paris, 2007.



The largely unsuccessful Occupy Wall Street movement chanted “We are the 99%!”. Recent research¹⁰ has confirmed the trend already, evident for quite a few years, has only deepened. In the United States 1% of the population holds now approximately 20% of all the wealth; it was 7% 40 years ago. For most European countries the situation is more or less the same, while on a global scale the inequality is even greater: 1% of the world’s population holds 50% of the wealth. What is more discomfoting to the average observer is that the trend of increasing inequality which started in the late 60s-early 70s across the industrialized countries of the West has reached now the level it had in the mid-1920s, when the great depression first and the implementation of equalitarian policies (first in the U.S. and after the war in Europe as well) brought down the huge gap between the wealthy and the poor giving rise to a new middle class. Inequality has risen again for the past 40 years both in the U.S. and in Europe regardless of the party in power (right, left, center-right, center-left, neo-liberal, New Labour).

It is precisely this, and not poverty per se, which is perceived with a deep sense of injustice and represents a severe indictment against the political class – as well as the professional elites -- who haven’t done much (if anything at all) about it. Needless to say, hard economic facts which were once shielded from the awareness of the many are now of public domain and easily accessible. Until the end of the 19th century the rich displayed their wealth publicly: to be rich and powerful meant to be seen and admired as such. Inequality in wealth was accepted (when it was) as part of the generally high level of inequality in society. Today, in our democratic societies the very rich tend to hide their wealth in exclusive clubs, luxurious resorts, private jets. When they are seen in public they dress like everybody else and they are not much noticed. When they are and their condition is known the public reacts with rage to the enormous gap in income, wealth, opportunities and lifestyles between them and the wealthy. They do so not out of envy, but because they feel that it is a betrayal of the egalitarian promise of democracy – at least this is what economic populism is made of.

But there is more. Globalization is very much a real economic phenomenon which brings advantages and exacts prices. It is undeniable that in Europe and in the U.S. wages and salaries have been depressed by the fact that in other parts of the world hundreds of millions of people have risen from poverty and have entered the job market and sent a gigantic wave of lower salaries across the globe.

¹⁰ R. Chakrabarti and M. Mazewski, “The Capitol since the Nineteenth Century: Political Polarization and Income Inequality in the United States”, Liberty Street Economics paper (23 June 2014) which updates the November 2012 World Bank Development Research Group, Poverty and Inequality Team Report drafted by Branko Milanovic by the title *Global Income Inequality by the Numbers: in History and Now* . <http://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/pdf/10.1596/1813-9450-6259>



The majority of the populations in the industrialized countries of the West lives in what Paul Krugman has called “the valley of despond”¹¹. They are squeezed between the “twin peaks” of the very rich 1% in their own countries and the growing middle class in formerly poor countries. In the valley of despond your economic situation hasn’t much changed for the worse, but is constantly threatened by the two peaks surrounding you: on the one side the very rich and powerful who always ask you limit your demands “for the good of the country”, and on the other side the peak which constantly threatens to weaken your station and your future prospects by sending millions of its inhabitants into your country.

These two – loss of social identity and the increase in economic inequality – are the roots of the relatively new political phenomenon called populism. In them one may find the repertoire of issues from which the different movements of the right and of the left draw their peculiar palette of grievances: the right-wing populists embracing identity issues (both as *demos* and as *ethnos*) and the left-wing populists embracing the economic issues (with a stress on equality and equal opportunity). Despite some common ground, the two bifurcate sharply: the right-wing is *more divisive*, the left-wing is *more inclusive*: each responds to the call of its own distant ideology in putting forth their specific proposals. But despite their profound differences, radical right and left populists have a common enemy: the political system and mainstream parties who are guilty of corruption and incompetence, who have allowed (if not artfully provoked) the demise of the people, have threatened its identity (the right), its economic status (the left), and are the cause of its disempowerment (both the right and the left). Together with the politicians are lumped the professional elites, mainstream media and journalists, bureaucrats and technocrats of various definitions, all complicit with the corrupt politicians.

CAN THE CHALLENGE BE MET?

If these are the challengers, their motives and the “offenses” taken, what can the political system do to address the challenges? A few modest proposals:

¹¹ P. Krugman, “Twin Peaks Planet”, International New York Times, 2-3 January, 2015.



1. *Face the facts. Beware of psychological repression.* If – as Mudde said -- populism is the manifestation of a *pathological normalcy* within a democratic polity, the first step in order to cope with the “pathogens” is to recognize them for what they are: not figments of the imagination of misguided or downright bad people, rather the expression of grievances with very much real causes. The patronizing disdain and revulsion should be addressed to the populist leaders, not to the people who support them. This doesn’t mean condoning the most obnoxious policies propounded by populists, but realizing that they have root causes which must be addressed. Furthermore, the populist upheavals -- and here the American example is particularly fitting -- should be seen as an opportunity to understand what is amiss in the European political system, and *act* on the understanding. On the contrary, it is simply appalling to see the nonchalance with which political elites in Brussels and in many European capitals treat the populist insurgency, despite their very poor performance in the last EP elections¹².

2. *Symbolism is important.* Mainstream parties and political elites must put their house in order. There is much empty demagoguery in the anti-caste anti-party accusations, but there is also a lot of truth. The 20th century democratic state is different in fundamental ways from the 19th century liberal state, but it was -- and still is -- enshrined in the outward symbolism of its predecessor, and of its predecessor’s predecessor, the absolutist state. Man is a symbolic animal and the step from symbolism to concrete behavior is short. It is not just a question of symbols (uniformed guards, valets, pompous ceremonies, princely palaces, motorcades), but of the very real privileges and benefits that go with the exercise of power. People tend to believe – with some good reason -- that those privileges are not the outward manifestation of democratic institutions but are a special bonus for the class of politicians who occupy them on a rotational basis. As Ernst Kantorowicz explained¹³, the symbolism of power in the days of absolutism strengthened its acceptance by the population. In democratic regimes it may have the reverse effect and contribute to the disconnect between the people and the political system.

¹² Aggregate data are not easy to interpret. Nonetheless in the past elections, compared to the previous ones in 2009, and despite an overall increase in Assembly seats from 736 to 751, the three mainstream “core” parties – EPP, PES and ALDE, lost almost 9 points percentage to the non-core parties and represent now 65.7% of the assembly compared to 72.5% in 2009. EPP lost 53 seats, ALDE 16 seats and PES 6 seats. Center-left parties (PES, GUE, Greens) had a slight increase of 1.7 points, center-right parties (EPP, ALDE, Conservatives and Reformists) lost 7.1 points. In terms of seats pro-European parties lost around 80 seats and the euroskeptics, both of the right and the left, gained 66. (*Turning Point of May 2014. Progressive European Reflections*, cit.)

¹³ Notably in his seminal work *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, Princeton University Press, 1957.



Think, as an example, of the houses of parliament. Most of them were built anew or by renovating existing princely palaces in the second half of the 19th century by the bourgeoisie that through them intended to celebrate the power recently wielded from the aristocratic class. It is no coincidence that the houses of parliament across Europe were built in the same pompous style used to build the other landmarks celebrating the power of the new ruling class: grand hotels, museums, opera houses, railroad stations. It was never just a matter of architectural taste (rather bad at that), but of the symbolic function of these buildings: the proud affirmation in tangible form, for everyone to see and admire, of power.

If this is true for public buildings in the era of the liberal state, what should be the architectural style – and the symbolism – of public buildings in the era of the democratic state? The new democratic elites never asked themselves the question: they found it quite natural to accommodate the new power in the mold of the old. There was no lack of awareness that the state had radically changed, but there was a (more or less) unconscious desire to identify with the awe-inspiring power of old. And yet there, in the lack of awareness of the symbolism of power, lies part of the problem – admittedly a small part – of the disconnect between the people and democratic institutions. And it's not just a problem for the architect, but for their clients as well. In Europe I can think of only one building that shows some awareness of the changed symbolic relationship between the people and the state: the building designed by Charlotte Frank and Axel Schultes to house the new Bundeskanzleramt in Berlin. Certainly not the pompous, huge modernistic buildings of the European Union modeled on the headquarters of great banks and international corporations: a monument to technocracy and arcane power. They are a very good example of what should *not* have been done to create a bridge between ordinary citizens and European institutions.

As to bureaucracy, which – apart from elections -- represents the everyday connection between the citizens and the state, there is no doubt that it plays a strong role in shaping attitudes. Bureaucracy has a life of its own independent of its political masters. In the countries – and in the European Commission! -- where bureaucracy is opaque, obtrusive, all-pervasive, and the relationship with the citizens is one of condescension rather than service, there the sense of alienation from the state is greater and populism is stronger.

3. *Be credible and do what you promise.* The accusation against politicians expressed by Waldo Emerson 160 years ago still rings true to many. There is abundance of examples, but just to take one. In 2012 François Hollande campaigned against the policy of austerity and the fiscal compact



promising to reform the treaty. Once in office, he did nothing of the kind and rather followed the policies of his predecessor. When things got bad, under pressure from international markets, Hollande appointed prime minister Manuel Valls, the only socialist candidate who during the party primaries had advocated policies of austerity exactly contrary to his own. People may be misguided, but they have some right in being confused. Politicians do not always rob without stint, as Emerson said, but they certainly lie without shame. If the French have turned in such great numbers to the Front National who is to blame?

4. *Be coherent and keep your stand.* If representative democracy is a competition among parties with an identifiable profile based on clear policy choices, grand alliances, national unity governments, *grosse Koalitionen* should be the exception for times of emergency, not the rule. In the United Kingdom one such coalition between Labour and Tories was formed during the second world war and was broken immediately after it when Clement Attlee, until then deputy prime minister in the war cabinet, called for new elections, won them and proceeded to enact the sweeping reforms that go by his name. A few years later in 1951 Winston Churchill, who had vehemently opposed those reforms, came back into office. The present coalition government in the UK was not necessitated by an emergency, but by political expediency, and it is proving disastrous for its junior partner, the Liberal Democrats. Equally negative for the Democratic party in Italy were the results of entering into a coalition government with Berlusconi's *Popolo della libertà* under the premiership of Mario Monti (2011-2013). Economic emergency was the justification, as it was in Greece in forming coalition governments. There it went very badly, in Italy only a little better.

In too many countries mainstream parties, unable to govern alone or in alliance with smaller parties, form coalitions among themselves without much regard to the coherence of the program resulting from exhausting dealings. This, although apparently necessitated by electoral results, increases the disconnect with the electorate who do not understand why the platforms on which candidates had so strongly campaigned have now to be abandoned. Of course there are always good reasons for claiming the necessity of a grand coalition besides the extreme situation of war: economic emergency, terrorism and in general the need for compromise if things have to move forward. Stability and compromise are often preferred to the recourse to new elections which would produce uncertain results. This may be justifiable but one should not forget that stability comes at a price: the price of the ruling parties being perceived not just as untrustworthy, but as defenders of the status quo, that is, of their own interests. The unintended consequence of coalition government is all



too often the growth of disaffection towards politics. Those who are dissatisfied with this state of affairs, who are not conversant with the complications of electoral laws or simply do not think stability – the defense of the politico-economic system -- is a value in itself, demand something else and, not finding it in the existing party system, turn to the anti-party system par excellence, the populists. Alternatively they take refuge, and in far greater numbers, into abstention.

The experience of the latest European Parliament elections is proof enough of this, without going into the many specific single-country cases. For five years the Parliament (and to a large extent the Commission) were ruled by a coalition of the three parties (EPP, PES, ALDE) who in 2009 had campaigned one against the other. Many good things were done in those five years, but the perception of the electorate was that the alliance had simply been a pretext for enacting wrong policies in favor of the banks and the business community, and that the economic woes of the common people were not addressed adequately. Voters are not expected to understand the complexities of inter-institutional relations within the EU, the fact that the European Council takes decision based on compromises which often means ineffective decisions or no decisions at all. So, not believing that any of this counts, nor believing that the promises made by the *Spitzenkandidaten* would be kept, they simply didn't go to vote¹⁴.

Of course, following coherently upon one's electoral promises is more easily said than done. It doesn't depend so much on the individual leader or party as on the electoral system and the party system as a whole. The electoral system may or may not facilitate the formation of a homogeneous government, but does not assure stability and clear-cut outcome by itself. Even in a country like Britain, with a historical two-party system and single-district winner-takes-all electoral system, the Tories (who had come first but did not have a majority) decided in 2010 to form an alliance with the Liberal Democrats. The unintended result, besides a feckless government, was the extraordinary success of UKIP in the EP elections (26.8%), which bodes more instability for the future.

The relevant fact is that political fragmentation has increased throughout Europe with two-party countries such as the UK and France having now a number of effective parties competing in local or

¹⁴ The turnout was 42.5%, lower than the low turnout of 43% in 2009 compared with 56.7% of 1994 (Europe-12) and 45.5% in 2004 after the accession of Eastern European countries (Europe-25). The lowest turnout was in Slovakia (13.5%) and the highest was in Belgium (89.6%). Incidentally Slovakia has one of the lowest per capita income in the Union and Belgium has one of the highest. In general the lower income countries and the new accession countries -- except for Malta and Cyprus - had a lower turnout than the core original and better-off countries (Europe-9).



national elections of 6 and 5 respectively¹⁵. The index of bipartisanship, obtained by summing the percentage of votes of the two main parties in a single election, gives 93.4 for Malta (almost a perfect two-party system) and 28.9 for the extremely fragmented Belgian political system (Italy and Germany both stand at 62). The average in Europe is around 51.1 (Austria), which means that coalitions governments, in the absence of strong majoritarian electoral laws is -- and increasingly will be -- a necessity. We live in a political system fundamentally different from the 20th century: not only there is a proliferation of new parties (among them, to a marked extent, the populists), the ideology of the old parties has crumbled and their historical identity has waned; the electoral volatility (changing behavior between elections) has dramatically increased. As a consequence of these sweeping changes in the party system and in electoral behavior, no party (not even the populists!) can be sure of the allegiance of their base. Perhaps there is no short term solution to the trend, but sticking to clear-cut recognizable policy choices by parties would certainly help.

5. *Search for “good” coherent alliances.* The party system is very much fragmented and no single party may be able to govern and keep its promises, thus feeding the mistrust towards politics. If the credibility gap of institutional mainstream parties is to be overcome a simplification of the political system is therefore required. This does not mean forming unholy alliances just to gain a majority, but it does mean that an alliance or a unification among the proximate parties is necessary. All too often past squabbles and personality issues weigh too heavily against the possibility of finding a common ground among similarly oriented parties. This applies in general to all parties on the right-left divide of the political spectrum. But it is particularly true of the PES and its national member parties. Of course we know that the history of the left is full of internecine conflicts – some of them violent. But in the present radically changed political system this should not be allowed to continue.

Today social democratic parties are faced with the twin challenge of radical right and radical left populist parties, both competing for the same popular/middle class electorate. In the last EP elections social democrats lost a significant part of their electoral base to the radical right populists and for the first time to the radical left as well. The GUE group increased its seats from 35 in 2009 to 52 in 2014, thanks mainly to the success of Syriza in Greece (26.6% of the votes) and of Podemos and the Plural Left in Spain, which together polled about 18% of the vote. In comparison the S&D group remained relatively stable (from 25 to 25.4%), but lost 5 seats (from 196 to 191). In absolute terms this is not a crushing defeat, perhaps not a defeat at all. Actually in the 9 core European

¹⁵ L. Di Gregorio “A ‘revolutionary’ election: The Italian party system is the most simplified in Europe”, in L. De Sio, V. Emanuele and N. Maggini, editors, *The European Parliament Elections of 2014*, CISE-Centro italiano di studi elettorali, 2014.



countries (the 6 founding members plus UK, Ireland and Denmark) the social-democrats *added* 32 seats to the previous 87, thanks mainly to the success of the Democratic party in Italy (40.8%). But in any case it is a sign of stagnation and slow retreat. Without doubt if the social democratic parties want to fence off the twin challenge from the radical right and the radical left they have to consolidate their electoral base and expand it in the vast arena of the non-voters¹⁶. In order to do so they will have to *move left* formulating more convincing and clearly identifiable policies, and *look left* with the prospect of forming stable alliances with their proximate competitors of the left. No other option is available in such a crowded and fragmented political landscape.

Whether these prescriptions – once adopted and painstakingly implemented – will eventually cure the symptoms of the democratic malaise which we call populism is far from certain. What at any rate must be understood is that populism arises in a democratic system when it is fully developed and when all – or most – of the conditions for its functioning have been put in place. It is not a sign of the imperfection of democracy, rather of its maturity; thus it is not a transient phenomenon that will disappear at some time in the future. Perhaps it may be likened to some ever changing virus which may be overcome at one time to return later in another form. Perhaps – as the experience of American populism in the 19th century suggests – it may be a stimulant to the party system to look outside of itself and find a new connection with the people it should represent.

¹⁶ But the political landscape is shifting very quickly, as witnessed by the Greek elections of 25 January with the unprecedented victory of the radical left party Syriza, and may happen again in the Fall if the similar radical left movement Podemos wins the elections. In those countries moderate left parties should decide without any hesitation to ally themselves with their unloved victorious cousins.