17. Italy. A Breeding Ground for Populist Political Communication.

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Introduction

Italy is one of the European countries that, more than others, has experienced innovative and durable forms of populism in the last few decades. The emergence of Lega Nord (LN) in the late 1980s and the unexpected performance of Berlusconi at the head of Forza Italia (FI) in the early 1990s represented the first steps of populism's recent history in Italy. The success of the 5 Star Movement (M5S) since 2013 has expanded the variety of populism, also including parties not belonging to the right.

Research on Populism in Italy

When we look at the Italian literature on populism, we are faced with a paradox. On the one hand, Italy could be considered a sort of hotbed of populism. It had populist governments for eight and a half years between 2001 and 2014 (the three last were Berlusconi's governments in 2001–2005, 2005–2006, and 2008–2011. See Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015). In the 2013 general elections, populist parties (People of Freedom [PDL]), Lega Nord, and the 5 Star Movement) gained over 50% of the vote. On the other hand, it is uncommon to find Italian literature explicitly focused on the concept of populism. It is even less common to find empirical studies on populist actors, media, or citizens, at least since 1995.

For instance, the journal of the Italian Political Science Association has not published even one article on populism in the last 20 years, except for a critical literature review by Tarchi (1998) about the extreme right and neo-populism in Europe. A few years later the same scholar stated: "The concept of populism, despite being beloved and abused by columnists and commentators, in Italy has had little success in scientific circles" (Tarchi, 2003). Interestingly in this regard, the term "populism" has appeared frequently in articles that have been published by Italian scholars, not in academic journals but in the more general, discussion-oriented journal *il Mulino* (e.g., Bertinetti, 2004; Biancalana, 2014; Caiani, 2014; Galli, 2001; Ignazi, 2002, 2014; Mény, 2005; Miani, 2007; Reynié, 2014; Zanatta, 2002).

In his 2003 book, Tarchi for his part defined populism "not as an ideology, but as a mentality strictly related to the vision of social order, where at the base there is the innate belief in the virtues of the people, that is openly recalled as the primary source of legitimation of political action and government" (p. 21). He reconstructed the main forms of populism from 1994 to the early 2000s in Italy and supported the thesis that populism could concern the right and the left in the same way. His analysis was mostly a historical reconstruction of events that lacked operationalization and did not directly deal with the role of the media and political communication. He referred to a previous discussion article by Cartocci (1996), who assessed the main traits of populism. According to this author, "the people" monopolize Good and Truth. As to power, it is a monolithic entity in which the elite conspire against the people through democratic institutions. Politics, ideology, and interests are negative entities. In fact, the citizens' superiority in numbers would guarantee a better way of managing public affairs.

A further general definition of populism was provided by Biorcio (2012), who proposed to approach the study of the resurgence of populism by considering three level s of analysis: (a) the *populist ideology*: The contents common to populist movements do not constitute a specific political ideology, but they represent a kind of basic pattern that defines the proposals of both right and left populism; (b) the *populist rhetoric*: Some of the contents that characterize populist movements have often been disseminated and sponsored by the mainstream media or by several members of the established political class in order to gain legitimacy and consensus; (c) the *populist political parties*: Individual parties or party families reproduce the central ideas of populist movements, adapting them to historical periods and different geographical contexts.

According to Biorcio, recent populist movements can be considered as a new family of parties, since they have developed a similar model of communication and political action, effectively using three potential lines of conflict. The first relates to increasing anti-political feelings and criticism of representative institutions and key political actors. Populist parties propose forms of direct and plebiscitary democracy, which are actually realized by giving their leaders the role of interpreters of authentic popular will. The second line of conflict relates to the handling of hostility toward immigrants. A crucial role is attributed to "the other" in order to take advantage of the fears, insecurities, and popular resentment of the people. Third, populist parties emphasize the defense of national (or regional/local) communities against the European integration process and the effects of globalization.

Authors writing in English have mostly used populism as an interpretative category of the Italian situation. These authors include Albertazzi and McDonnell (2005, 2008, 2010, 2015), Ruzza and Balbo (2013), and Ruzza and Fella (2009, 2011). Ruzza and Fella dealt with the "reinvention of the Italian right," comparing Forza Italia, National Alliance, and Lega Nord, which, since 1994, were allied parties under the leadership of Berlusconi. Defining populism as a "weak ideology" and analyzing the key documents produced by these parties through a frame analysis, Ruzza and Fella found that they share three populist traits: the tendency toward charismatic leadership, appeals to the people, and anti-politics; a choice of language that indicates anti-elitism, vilification of enemies, and homogeneity of the constituency; and the relevance of "symbolic policies," justifying the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (Ruzza & Fella, 2009, p. 186).

Albertazzi and McDonnell are editors of the volume *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy* (2008), which compares populist parties in nine European countries: Austria, Britain, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, The Republic of Ireland, and Italy. They are also authors of the book *Populists in Power* (2015), in which they focused on three government populist parties in Italy and Switzerland (People of Freedom, Lega Nord, and the Swiss People's Party). On the basis of the literature, the authors provides a definition of populism as an ideology based on four pillars: the people, the elites, democracy, and the others. The pillars interact amidst an overall situation of alleged crisis, with the people and democracy depicted as being under serious threat from the elites and the others (2015, pp. 4–7).

Either individually or together, Albertazzi, Fella, McDonnell, and Ruzza have been the leading scholars over the past decade to have studied many aspects of the Italian political situation through the lens of populism, focusing in particular on the strategy and ideology of Lega Nord, both in government and in opposition (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2005, 2010;

McDonnell, 2006), and on Berlusconi's role in his parties (Fella & Ruzza, 2013; McDonnell, 2013, 2015; Ruzza & Balbo, 2013).

In one study, Tarchi (2008) identified the factors underlying the spread of Italian populism in the 1990s. In contrast to other scholars (Betz, 2001; Cento Bull, 1996; Cento Bull & Gilbert, 2001; Huysseune, 2006; Zaslove 2011), he described Lega Nord as not just an example of the radical right parties that arose during the '90s in Europe. Tarchi explained this party to be an example of populism based on protest and identification. In his interpretation, Forza Italia is an anti-political party driven by the myth of the "common man" (2008, pp. 86–96). As regards the emergence and rise of these two parties in the mid-1990s, several factors have been identified as contributing factors (Bardi, 1996; Tarchi, 2008). Among these, we find historical changes, such as the declining attractiveness of both communist and Catholic ideology, alongside other recurring elements, such as the economic crisis which followed the "golden age" of the 1980s, a significant increase in immigration from poorer countries, and high levels of political corruption. These factors have continued to play a central role in Italy over the last two decades, adding fuel to the fire leading to the creation of new populist parties.

Although populism is not a category of interpretation widely used by Italian scholars, it is worth noting that a vibrant debate has been developing around a concept closely related to populism—namely, that of anti-politics. Four monographs, a special issue of a journal (*Antipolitica*, 2000), and several articles have been devoted to, or dealt with, this concept.

As for populism, even the concept of anti-politics is multifaceted and difficult to define. Mastropaolo is the most prolific scholar on this topic (2000, 2005, 2011). In his latest book, *Is Democracy a Lost Cause? Paradoxes of an Imperfect Invention.* (2011, translation 2012), he has distinguished two types of anti-politics. On the one hand, there are *anti-politics from below,* including not voting, electoral volatility, the protest vote, or the vote for populist parties." On the other hand, there are *anti-politics from above*, which consist of "the immense repertoire of polemical discourses, gestures, and actions regarding politics that fill public debate and electoral competition" (2012, p. 170). For at least two decades, the most visible producers of these speeches and gestures have been the so-called populist parties. But the leaders of mainstream political parties have fueled a thriving discussion of anti-politics, as have the mass media. Although not clearly defined, anti-politics seems to be described as a mix of languages, gestures, and attitudes that delegitimize official politics and institutions.

Campus (2006) is another scholar who has dealt with the concept of anti-politics. In her book, she has stated:

> Anti-politics—understood as a type of language used by leaders, parties and movements that are opposed to the political establishment by denouncing the incompetence and/or holding bad faith in the management and government of the State and public administration … is basically a discursive style applied in various contexts. (p. 9)

The connection between the concepts of anti-politics and populism has rarely been the focus of debate in Italy; Campus is one of the few authors who has dealt with this issue. According to her, anti-politics can be considered a dimension of populism. The book discusses two theses: (a) Anti-politics is primarily a language of opposition based on the "we" versus

"they" dichotomy, which could also become a language of government (the book compares Berlusconi, the "President entrepreneur," Reagan, the "President orator," and De Gaulle, the "President hero"); (b) The principle foundation of anti-politics in office is the direct relationship between the political leader and the citizens, which is established through the media and especially on television (that is, through "going public").

'With respect to political communication and populism, research in Italy is still virtually non-existent. The journal *Comunicazione Politica* devoted a special issue to the topic in 2003 and an article in 2009 (Ortega, 2009). In both cases, Italian populism was not the main focus of articles, which instead mainly dealt with populism in other countries around the world. Mazzoleni is the only Italian scholar so far who has directly tackled the relationship between populism, media, and communication. In particular, he has sought to assess the media's role ("media factor") in the growth of populism (Mazzoleni, 2008; Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003). From the classical distinction between the mainstream media and the tabloid news media, Mazzoleni has found that the former are the mouthpieces of the ruling classes and that "they tend to adopt a law-and-order attitude and to use their journalistic weapons for the defense of the status quo when it comes under attack from anti-establishment forces, such as protest groups and populist movements" (Mazzoli, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003, p. 16). Tabloid media, however, implement to the highest degree the classical laws of the news-making profession and they "give passionate attention to what happens in growth of populism." (Mazzoleni, 2008; Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2008, p. 52).

Finally, in a more recent study, he introduced the concept of *mediatized populism* to describe the process of adapting of populist leaders' and parties' communication strategies to media styles and demands, and more generally to media logic (Mazzoleni, 2014). Unfortunately, this fruitful hypothesis has never been validated by empirical data in Italy.

To sum up, with respect to Italy, there are two types of studies. While international scholars have often applied the concept of populism to the Italian case, within the Italian literature, we have only found occasional research not directly focused on populism and scarcely operationalized for systematic research.

Populist Actors as Communicators
According to the literature, the main Italian parties studied as examples of populist parties are Forza Italia (People of Freedom), Lega Nord, and the 5 Star Movement. Following the types of populism proposed by Jagers and Walgrave (2007), Berlusconi's parties and Lega Nord could be defined as examples of *complete populism*, given their references to all the key elements– people, anti-elitism, and the exclusion of out-groups. The 5 Star Movement is more an example of *anti-elitist populism*: In addition to the Italian political establishment, the entire ruling class is the movement's target.

Studies explicitly focusing on populist traits of political communication are so far virtually absent; therefore, scholars are far from identifying a specific and unique style of populist communication. Several studies have at least partially dealt with this topic.

As to populist parties' style of language, Cedroni (2010) discusses the role of language during the Italian political transition with regard to populism and anti-culture over the last few decades. The analysis relies on a qualitative method, critical discourse analysis, which

considers language as a social practice. Although the main topic of her analysis was the permanent transition toward a new institutional model in the last twenty years, this study also analyzed the public discourses of Lega Nord led by Bossi and of the two Berlusconi parties, Forza Italia and People of Freedom. Cedroni argues that Lega Nord's language has overturned the previous codes of political language. This language doesn't need newspapers, the radio, or television: It is a form of non-mediated communication that is mainly expressed through posters and banners, and it spreads because of the rudeness of the speeches and insults (often accompanied by provocative gestures) during party rallies. This language of "rupture and threat" is the language of everyday life, "the language of the ordinary people who do not have time to think, but that simply repeat … the keywords of emergencies and urgent needs, using explicit and vulgar gestures" (pp. 43–44). Cedroni argues that Lega Nord has used a form of communication "without media," and therefore, she is opposed to the interpretation that national media (especially press and television) have an impact on electoral choice. It should be noted, however, that there is no systematic evidence to support these claims. The principle studies on the last election campaign show that the major electoral successes of Lega Nord (2009 European elections and 2010 regional elections) occurred when the party was in power (allied with Berlusconi) and thus were widely covered both by the national press and on television (Bobba & McDonnell, 2015). Lega Nord leaders have traditionally been more able to gather media attention than other political and social actors, both attracting consideration of their issues and confirming their image of outsiders in relation to the political establishment.

Regarding Lega Nord, as well as Berlusconi's parties, Biorcio (2003a, 2012) identified two different types of populism. Lega Nord's populism has been regionalist ever since it began (Agnew, 1995; Biorcio, 1997; Diani, 1996; Woods, 1995). It is characterized by an appeal to the people as "demos" (the people as a whole, opposed to the elite) and as "ethnos" (the people as an ethno-national or ethno-regional entity). The effective management of this formula has been the basis for success for Lega Nord and for the main European populist parties because it has connected people's protests with a popular identity.

The populism of Berlusconi's parties cannot be equated with that of the European extreme right-wing populist parties; in fact, it has been defined as center-right populism (Zaslove, 2008). Berlusconi's rhetoric, however, has been based on two essential elements of populism: The direct appeal to the people, considered as virtuous and genuine, and the direct link between the people and the leader. Hence, it is no coincidence that from the very beginning Berlusconi has tried to transform every election into a plebiscite on his persona in order to obtain—at least symbolically—a direct investiture as head of government.

Although Berlusconi has been frequently described as a populist, his anomalous position of being both prime minister and a media tycoon has rarely been analyzed in relation to his populist action (cf. Edwards, 2005). Scholars have focused mostly on the conflict of interest and the personal nature of his parties (Calise, 2000, 2005; McDonnell, 2013, 2015; Raniolo, 2006), while they have overlooked his persona (which has many traits of a populist leader); the culture of his organization, which has fostered his rise to the leadership (Porro, 1994–1995), and his TV channels, which have broadcast populist issues and claims over long periods. In addition, it is worth noting that not all scholars agree that populism is a useful category for interpreting Berlusconi's political history. Mancini has argued that:

> defining Berlusconi as simply populist means not understanding that politics has changed, that in the face of the dramatic increase in the role of mass media, and

television in particular, politics cannot remain the same. It has to adapt to the new tendencies of cultural consumption and therefore to the whole imagery of this now-dominant mode of life. (2011, p. 54)

A second series of studies (Corbetta & Gualmini 2013; Biorcio & Natale 2013) dealt with the rapid and successful development of the 5 Star Movement and its leader, the comedian Beppe Grillo. Among these studies, one of the most interesting is a chapter by Corbetta (2013) in which he defines the experience of the 5 Star Movement as "web-populism." According to Corbetta and Gualmini (2013), while traditionally populist parties have often used television or tabloid media to spread their political messages, the communication of the ideas of Grillo's movement does not rely on the mainstream media. On the contrary, the 5 Star Movement is overtly adversarial toward journalists, while emphasizing the possibilities for a disintermediated democracy originating from the Web, especially Web 2.0. Although the label *web-populism* may be attractive, it should be noted that it is not clearly defined nor operationalized. In addition, it is unclear how and why the Web should be relevant to defining a particular type of populism in an organizational, communicative, or rhetorical way.

Although many scholars use the populism label for the 5 Star Movement without justifying their choice, a more cautious and documented position is expressed by Biorcio (2013). The 5 Star Movement and populist parties certainly share their strong criticism of mainstream parties and the entire political class. Grillo's discourse is based on many of the arguments used by populist leaders, even though he, as a comedian, presents them in a disenchanted and self-deprecating form. However, the proposals of the 5 Star Movement are very different from those of the populist-right parties. Its objectives are primarily aimed at promoting forms of participatory democracy as well as the defense of the common and public good.

It is true that the three aforementioned parties have (or have had) leaders that could be called charismatic: Berlusconi, Bossi, and Grillo. Nevertheless, no research to date has focused on these leaders' charisma or their communication skills compared to those of the leaders of the mainstream parties. Likewise, the strategies and tactics of populist parties as well as their approach to different media were not being researched.

The Media and Populism
The only Italian author who has dealt with media and populism is Mazzoleni; he did not, however, directly analyze the case of Italy in his works. There are no studies that have systematically investigated the media's role in relation to populism, the resonance of populism discourse in the media, the content features of coverage, or the way that each individual media outlet deals with populist discourse. Nevertheless, some findings deserve to be discussed.

A typical feature of Italy, according to Mastropaolo (2011), is that the media exert a representative function in competition with conventional political representation. To ensure their centrality and audience, the media contrast the injustices suffered by the citizens to the privileges and inefficiency of the political class. At the same time—following the media logic—they simplify and popularize political news by preferring scandals and gossip to in-depth journalism. In this way, the media feed anti-political and anti-partisan feelings to the citizens and foster the growth of populist movements or parties. Starting from the huge political scandal called Clean Hands in the mid-1990s, the major mainstream media produced a public discourse in which catastrophic representations and narratives on the Italian state

prevail and in which proposals for radical, immediate, and cathartic transformations of the status quo are advanced.

The Mastropaolo studies are theoretical. The latest studies on election news coverage within the mainstream media (Bobba, Legnante, Roncarolo & Seddone, 2013; Bobba & Seddone, 2014, 2015) have highlighted empirically the presence of a strongly negative coverage of politics and the relevance of several anti-political issues (such as political scandals and conflicts, wastage of public money, and tax increases) as part of the 2013 general election coverage. Despite not addressing the issue of populism, these studies have shown the presence of elements that might be defined as prerequisites for populism; further, they have also shown a certain concordance between populist stands and the media environment.

As regards populist actors and communication in non-journalistic online media, Bentivegna (2014) has shown that there are no differences between mainstream party leaders and populist party leaders in the use of the Internet as a campaigning tool. By monitoring the Twitter profiles of the competing leaders, the overall result was the confirmation of a broadcast model aimed at self-promotion. Surprisingly, this model was preferred to a conversational model, even by those who, like Grillo, based a part of their success on the Web.

In Italy, the few studies to date on digital media and populism have dealt with the strategic use of the Internet, specifically focusing on Grillo, rather than investigating the relevance of populist communication in online citizen discourse or the similarities between citizen and media discourse about populism. In an interpretive essay, Biancalana (2014) identified these basic elements of the rhetorical use of the Internet by the 5 Star Movement: (a) the process of disintermediation (The Internet allows citizens to reconnect, making institutions, parties, journalists, etc., superfluous.); (b) the absence of a leader (The Internet allows decisions to be made without the need for a leader.); (c) transparency (The Internet promotes transparency; those who lie are unmasked.); (d) the creation of community and the possibility of establishing a "true" democracy (The Internet redefines the relationship between the citizen and the state: The citizen becomes the state.). Thus, the Internet provides useful and essential elements to the populist discourse of the 5 Star Movement.

As demonstrated by the 5 Star Movement and even more so by the success of Lega Nord in the early 1990s, the traditional parties' hold on mainstream media is not only an incentive for populist parties to explore disintermediated forms of communication but also a rhetorical tool by which to assess whether politicians and journalists ("the establishment") are organized against the people (Biorcio, 2003b).

Citizens and Populism
The only studies on the relationship between the citizens and populism concern voters for populist parties. No research on the effects of populist messages on citizens has been done in Italy to date.

In a study primarily based on public opinion surveys from the Italian National Election Studies Association (www.itanes.org/en), Fruncillo (2010) identified the main factors that have contributed to the growth and spread of the populist vote among Italian citizens in the last few decades. His article aims to examine whether and to what extent Italians are populists or affected by populist rhetoric. By analyzing the issue from an electoral point of view, Fruncillo proposed an *index of proximity to political parties* and considered relevant variables to be the reasons for voting and the degree of agreement on the need for a strong political

leader. The analysis did not draw clear conclusions, because the data "do not show a clear preference for either a model of democracy centred on the figure of the leader, nor by one organized around political parties" (p. 294). In general, despite some discussion in the literature, the concept of populism is inadequately operationalized and suffers from the use of secondary data only.

A further study by Biorcio (2007)—also based on the Italian National Election Studies surveys—has raised the question of how to measure orientations and populist attitudes in Italy. In order to build an index of populism, the author considered various indicators relating to the most important dimensions used within populist discourse: the mobilization of anti-political feelings (positions of criticism and disaffection toward the functioning of democratic institutions and main political actors), the mobilization of hostility toward non-EU immigrants (the lack of protection of ethno-cultural characteristics of the people and for the betrayal of the idea of "nation"), and the quest for authority (expressed in the particular role attributed to populist leaders). Using panel survey data, Biorcio carried out a factor analysis of 11 indicators relating to the topics used by populist actors. Anti-politics, ethno-centrism, and the quest for authority are positively correlated to one other, and all of these are strongly correlated to the overarching dimension of populism. With regard to voting behavior, not surprisingly populism is more frequently a value for the voters of Lega Nord and Forza Italia—almost two-thirds of them—than for the voters of other parties. It is worth noting, however, that populism is also quite common among left and Catholic voters (25%–30%).

Finally, several studies have focused on the voters of the 5 Star Movement. What is striking is the change in the voters and supporters of the movement that has taken place in the last five years. In 2007, the profile of the supporters of Grillo's initiatives was very precise: "Young, well educated, living in medium or large cities, and, naturally, with a higher than average rate of Internet use. From a political point of view, the *Grillini* declared themselves prevalently to have center-left sympathies" (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2013, p. 442). The widening of electoral support in 2012 and 2013 led to important changes in the socio-demographic characteristics as well as in the political origin of the 5 Star Movement voters. The dimensions of age, profession, and geographic distribution suggest that the profile of the 5 Star Movement voter is moving toward that of the average voter. With respect to political orientation, an ideological mix characterizes the supporters of the 5 Star Movement. The propensity to vote for this party shows a perfectly equal distribution between the left and the right: 34% of the party's voters are placed on the left of the political spectrum and 33%, on the right (24% are at the center and nine percent not placed) (Maggini, 2014).

Summary and Recent Developments

Populism has been barely tackled by Italian scholars of political science and political communication. With some exceptions, we found few attempts to define and operationalize the concept. An important element—probably specific to the Italian case—is the academic development and diffusion of the concept of anti-politics, which has been used to analyze and interpret the growing distrust of citizens for politics and parties, fueled by both populist parties and movements, and mainstream parties and media.

Regarding political actors, we mainly found articles dealing with the language and communicative style of three parties and their leaders: Lega Nord, Forza Italia/People of Freedom, and the 5 Star Movement. Each of them has stressed a particular aspect of populism: the ethno-regionalism of Lega Nord, the supremacy of a charismatic leader in Forza Italia, and the relevance of the Web in Grillo's movement.

Pertaining to media and populism, the reviewed literature mainly discusses the role that mainstream media have played in creating and disseminating some prerequisites needed for the growth of populism, such as anti-political sentiments. The new media are important for the rhetorical discourse of the 5 Star Movement. The Internet is the tool that at least symbolically can allow people to regain sovereignty through forms of direct democracy. Studies on citizens and populism, based on survey data, showed that populism, although more prevalent among center-right voters, reached significant levels even among voters of the left and of Catholic parties. Data for most articles relates to periods prior to 2008, but it is likely that in the last few years, populism has become further widespread among Italian citizens under the pressure of the economic crisis and the simultaneous rise of the 5 Star Movement.

The most recent developments in Italy are showing at least three strands that could modify and further strengthen the Italian populists. First, the aftermath of the 2014 European elections could possibly soon prompt the 5 Star Movement to support anti-European policies in alliance with other European populist parties. Second, Lega Nord seems to be undergoing a process of profound change from its original regionalist populism to nationalist populism, inspired by the French Front National. Third, populism seems to be flourishing in the Democratic Party, where the leader Matteo Renzi's communication style and strong personality, which he imposes on his party and on the government, have often been compared to those of Berlusconi.

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