



Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 13(2) 2020: 1226-1231

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v13i2p1226

Published in July 15, 2020

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BOOK REVIEW

Nadia Urbinati, *Me the people. How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2019.

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In Nadia Urbinati's most recent book, the author explores the relationship between populism and democracy and the potential outcomes that populism can produce on institutions when it governs. The hypotheses that have been proposed relate to the particular type of relationship that populism in power establishes with democratic procedures, with other parties, and the way in which it transforms representation, public discourse, and institutions (in the most extreme cases, even Constitutions). Radical majoritarianism, difficulty in tolerating the division of powers, independence of judiciary power, and the statute of fundamental rights are downgraded by obstacles of a liberal nature which prevent the unfolding of the pure will of the people-as-one, summarized by a leader who embodies it.

It is precisely from these elements, namely from the relationship that populism establishes with the democratic system, that the author proposes to redefine populism on the basis of a maximum conception, which is able to grasp the essence of populism by analyzing it as a specific form of political representation and a (disfigured, cf. Urbinati 2014) democratic government. This is a tried and true reversal in perspective: the transition from the approaches of analysis based on the dilemma: "What is populism?" – from which the definitions of the populist phenomenon, such as thin ideology, discursive style, and widespread mentality arose (cf. Freedman, 1996; Taguieff, 1995; Tarchi, 2004) – to those that focus on the analysis of what populism accomplishes.

In this sense, populism is interpreted as the outcome of the transformation of three pillars – people, representation, and the majority principle – on which modern democracy is based (cf. Canovan, 1999). The comparison between the characteristic elements of populism and those of constitutional democracy fulfills the function of emphasizing and, in some way, weighing the tension between the two poles. The definition of constitutional democracy offered by the author tends to describe it as a political regime that guarantees "(...)

the protection of fundamental civil and political rights by limiting the power of the majority that governs" through pluralism, the separation of powers, and the independence of the judicial system (Urbinati, 2019 pg. 16). The new form of representative government that populists inaugurate when they enter in government is characterized, however, by three factors: a) the direct relationship between the leader and the part that the people consider just, defined by exclusion; b) the supreme authority of the audience, of the opinion, and of the public; c) the impatience shown towards democratic opponents and impedimenta.

The adjective (representative) is not accidental: a populist democracy, according to the interpretation proposed in this book, is described as an extreme limit to democracy (cf. Arditì, 2004), not only as a different interpretation of it that differs from liberal ideals. In fact, the author argues – in disagreement with the theorists of democratic dualism (Dahl, 1989; Przeworski, 1999) – that democracy cannot be reduced to the recurrence of electoral practices. Liberal components, such as the limitation of power, the existence of checks and balances, free information, the guarantee of civil liberties, and the presence of other parties considered legitimate, are inseparable from both form and democratic substance (Bobbio, 1984, Sartori, 1987). The interpretation of populism as a new type of representative government starts from the diarchic conception of democracy (cf. Tuck, 2016), which is based on the idea of democracy as a mixed decision-making government (i.e. political will and the procedures from which the decision-making process originates) and opinion (the sphere of extra-institutional political judgment).

Modern democracy is based on the tension between these two poles, on the irreducible and necessary deviation between the immediate will of the various popular sectors and the political – mediated – translation of requests from below. This void, in a constitutional democracy, can be partially bridged thanks to two mechanisms: 1. The *fictio juris* of the majority as unanimity (cf. Ruffini, 1974; Rosanvallon, 2011), which presents itself as guarantor of everyone's interest, also in light of the opposition's acceptance of the result; 2. The constant work of representation and mediation carried out by the parties – which reduce the distance between the institutions and the portions of the people they represent – both in and out. This allows a representative democracy to keep the political process open (Kelsen, 1929, tr. 1995). A representative democracy, unlike a direct democracy, that does not let the moment of will and the moment of judgment collapse in the act itself of voting (or of a decision made through deliberation resulting from direct consultation). Populism, for its part, proposes a new mixed regime characterized by the oxymoric formula of direct representation.

Differently from what is affirmed by those who see populism as counterposed to a representative democracy and closer to direct forms of democracy (cf. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013), the author sustains that this does not emerge from representative democracy but transmits its essence, verticalizing it, that is, by using the incarnation of the part of the people deemed "worthy" by the leader, with representation through the parties. The direct component of populism, hence, does not so much refer to the ways of creating the decision but to the disintermediated relationship between the leader and his people. It, therefore, replaces the whole with one of its parts and, in this step, it redefines the essence of the representative system, no longer through the synecdoche – based on a pretense that is useful for keeping the democratic scheme open – *pars pro toto*, which replaces a *pars pro pars* one (cf. Müller, 2017). This is where the constitutional democracy is forced to its extreme limit. In fact, populism does not forgo elections (like fascism) but uses them to celebrate the majority and its leader, who is recognized as having a greater validity than that of other parties (cf. Finchelstein and Urbinati, 2018), discredited for the sole purpose of disfiguring the moral and political integrity of the people-as-one. Likewise, populism appropriates the majority principle for itself, in order to concentrate its own power. This is where majoritarianism derives (cf. Mair, 2002; Pappas, 2019).

This *reductio ad unum* of the authentic people promotes the affirmation of a majority – as expressed by the leader – that describes it as the only righteous one and, in doing so, tends to dissolve the mediation of the institutions and to exclude the other party (the dissent). The transformation that populism produces in and of democracy therefore, above all, concerns the holism that is inherent in its political content (Canovan, cit.). The modern populist phenomenon is to be found in what Bernard Manin (2010 pp. 215-261) called the latest transformation of representative government: public democracy. In this, traditional political organizations that structured collective identities leave room for an indistinct audience that expresses itself mainly through new mass communication channels. The attempt of populism, in such a context, is that of attracting the multiple requests that come from this audience of voters-users. The legitimacy of the decision stems, not so much from the ability to mediate and compromise within the institutions, but from the effects and reactions that political seduction manages to have on the recipients of the messages. The central core of populism is undoubtedly the antiestablishment approach (cf. Stanley, 2008; Kazin, 1998). In turn, when populists reach the government, they do everything to avoid looking like an establishment and launch a permanent election campaign in which they present themselves as “besieged rulers” by a recalcitrant elite.

Moreover, this difficulty demonstrates the gap that is characteristic of populism between the redemptive side and the pragmatic one (Canovan, cit.): the representative democratic government, in producing new government majorities, induces parties to subject redemptive intentions to practical tests, which need practical fulfillment. But the success of this venture subjects the parties to an institutionalization, which populists try to avoid at all costs, in order not to repeat the practices of the old establishment. If the democracy of the parties divides popular will into conflicting interests, which it proposes to overcome through parliamentary synthesis and compromise, in a populist democracy, the will of the people is described as pure and predetermined (Cf. Mény and Surel, 2002), and acceptance of the compromise is described as a collapse towards the impure practice of parliamentarism that defiles the proactive purism of the people. The transformation of the meaning of the elections stems from the binary and irremediable opposition between the pure people and the corrupt elite. The elections, as presented by the populists, therefore lose their formalistic character and reveal a truth that already exists. The power of the people and the practice of government come together in the figure of the leader who claims to speak on behalf of his people (Pitkin, 1967).

Likewise, the use of direct tools of consultation, such as referendums or popular legislative initiatives (cf. Martinico, 2020), responds more to the needs of the common people – such as the ratification by popular acclaim of decisions taken by top management – rather than to the real intentions of directly involving voters. During this process, the self-limitation required in democracy is lacking. In fact, the populists obtain legitimacy for their actions from considering themselves the authentic representatives of the people, once and for all. These elements already offer us a more concrete perspective on the real identifying nucleus of populism, which conceives politics not as the stage on which universalistic visions collide, but as a terrain of contrast between particular and conflicting interests of a various nature, and its purpose is the achievement of power (cf. Laclau, 2005). In this way, politics are also purified from ethical issues and relativized as a field of contention for the achievement of power. The author deals with this topic in the first chapter.

Besides the relationship it establishes with other democratic players, another peculiarity of populism in power is the transformative effect it produces on two concepts: that of majority and that of the people. It uses the majority rule as a force legitimized by being the expression of the righteous people, which allows and justifies the procedure of humiliating the opposition. Identifying all the people with a part of the community, and the consequent delegitimization to the detriment of the excluded part, makes populism a factious government. It is in this sense that the author speaks of a passage from participatory to the power of only one party – the only one deemed legitimate – over the others. From a phobia for the party and for the society

divided into parts we, therefore, reach an idolatry for the righteous party. This topic is further analyzed in the second chapter, where the author distinguishes between People as an abstract entity of republican extraction and the people as part of the whole for which a decision-making legitimacy is acknowledged (Morgan, 1988 pp. 90-91). Populists respond to the indeterminacy of the people by proposing the extraction of authentic people from empirical people.

This is where the difference lies between “governing as”, which is typical of a representative democracy (the pretense mentioned earlier), and “governing in the name of” (and also “instead of”). In the second case, the separation between popular sovereignty and the authentic people, and the separation between sovereignty and government as an exercise of power – that forms the basis of representative democracy – is lost. Populist majoritarianism starts from the idea that its own is not only a numerical majority but an ethical one, calling into question the temporality and, in the most extreme cases, also the transience, of its own power. The majority is reified and made to coincide with the empirical social majority. In the third chapter, the author focuses on the proprietary conception of the people that populism in power introduces, replacing the procedural vision of representative democracy with the idea of the majority as a force. Unlike a representative democracy, in which parties measure their integrating ability through the classic tools of responsiveness and accountability, populism promotes an identification between leader and the people that defers judgment and provides for a fideistic approach (cf. McCormick, 2017). While distancing the public allows to recognize the right of citizens to control the work of those who govern, identifying between popular will and political decisions promoted by populism produces the paradoxical effect of making it superfluous.

The coincidence between institutions and an electoral body puts a strain on the permanent tension between legitimacy and trust. While in democracy, criticizing the elite is part of the dialectic between majority and opposition, in populism, it is resolved in the static juxtaposition between two poles that are stably contrary on the basis of the position they occupy with respect to state power. Therefore, the people and power, both fragmented in a representative democracy, are reassembled into a populist democracy. In fact, identifying representation with incorporation jeopardizes pluralism and, consequently, weakens traditional controls ensured by party representation. In doing so, the leader tries to neutralize, *ex ante*, any request for responsibility. This issue is explored in the fourth chapter. The leader submits to his will, which prompts the people to legitimize institutional controls, impediments, and inertia. In this sense, it is possible to speak of populism in terms of a constituent (or re-constituent) power (Arato, 2019), which aims to build a strong and centralized authority and a vast social cohesion. In this identification process, plans and intentions give way to emotional politics, for the ideation of which the hypertrophic figure of the leader finds a very powerful means in the network that allows for the simplification of a trusting relationship and the rapid reception of a message (Gerbaudo, 2019). This means that populism is not limited to just the use of democratic institutions and principles, but it tends to disfigure them. Nevertheless, although institutional change may have the effect of weakening legislative power and controlling institutions, it does not change the political regime. Democracy is identified by populism through processes of unification of the masses and no longer through a dialectic between a majority and an opposition in a political dimension marked by party groups and partisan affiliations.

This book is crucial for the interpretation of populism as a phenomenon that does not reduce its role to protesting but proposes itself as the power of government. Its purpose is to shed light on the effects that populism has on democracy both at an institutional, as well as at a governmental level. In particular, unlike traditional approaches based on a “minimal definition” of populism, Nadia Urbinati tries to develop a theoretical approach capable of describing populism as a new and specific form of representative government. In this perspective, the many ideas that have been proposed in the text represent the basis for an innovative

analysis which contemplates the potential repercussions on a constitutional democracy and on liberal institutions of populism in power. The category of populism that is examined, not as a chapter of direct democracy but as a form of direct representation, is the background to all the work carried out and helps us further analyze the main relationship that populism in government intends to strengthen: that between the leader and the people. Starting from a basic dualism between the people and the elite, populism tends to limit partisan divisions and transcends ideologies (cf. Anderson, 2017) in the name of the unity of the parts favored by exercising state power. An intolerance towards pluralism pushes it towards unifying the “good” electorate as opposed to the corrupt elite.

These elements lead towards governing not as a majority among the many, but as the “righteous” majority, and elections change their meaning: they lose their formalism to become a plebiscitary mechanism that sanctions the existence of “a truth that already exists”. An intolerance towards procedures is the result of the conception of politics that rejects claims of universalism, in order to celebrate a fusion between the leader and the authentic people, whose voice is considered the only source of decision-making legitimacy. In fact, empirical observation seems to confirm that, by gaining power, populism can introduce several models of radical majoritarianism, and it shows an intolerance with regard to the division of powers and liberal-democratic institutions.

In line with Lefort’s thought (1999), power must remain empty in democracy, and no one must claim to fill it definitively, since a diarchy implies tension, not harmony, and the function of a vote is to regulate dissensions, not to solve them once and for all. In the direct representation of populism, however, a relationship without mediation between the people and the leader tends to occupy this space by abolishing the tension between the representative and the represented and the distance between in and out. It does not call into question the indirect relationship between the governors and the governed but, more specifically, the method of management used. It calls for surveillance rather than a direct government. The criticism of representation as a mandate is aimed at building a new form of popular representation that can overcome party divisions through the unifying narrative of leadership. In line with what the author emphasized, populism exploits the internal contradictions of democracy but does not create them. Understanding the objectives, the opportunities of affirmation, and the purposes of populism can then represent an opportunity towards revitalizing democracy and politics as a whole, understanding its limits and trying to refine the tools required to overcome them.

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