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On Trumpism, or the End of American Exceptionalism

Nadia Urbinati*

Abstract

This paper uses Trumpism to illustrate populism in power. It analyses it in its rhetorical style; in its propaganda, tropes, and ideology; and finally in its aims and achievements. It shows how the representative construction of the people is rhetorical and is independent of social classes and traditional ideologies. The paper argues that populist democracy is the name of a new form of representative government that is based on two phenomena: a direct relation between the leader and those in society whom the leader defines as the «right» or «good» people; and the superlative authority of the audience. Its immediate targets are the «obstacles» to the development of those phenomena: intermediary opinion-making bodies, such as parties; established media; and institutionalized systems for monitoring and controlling political power. Populist leaders compete with other political actors with regard to the representation of the people and use electoral victory in order to prove that «the people» they represent is the «right» people and deserves to rule for its own good. The result of these positive and negative actions delineates the physiognomy of populism in power as a «majority» that is tainted by an undisguised—indeed, an enthusiastic—politics of radical partiality: the institutions are used in the interest of the «winning» part against the other.

Keywords: Audience. Representation as Embodiment. Elections as Acclamation. Majority Rule. Trumpism.

From Washington to Caracas and from Budapest to Rome, any understanding of politics needs to take into account a phenomenon—populism in power—that just some years ago was often relegated to the study of the margins of the West¹. This situation has changed, especially since the election of Donald J. Trump in the United States. Since then, populism has become the catchword for describing what many scholars see as a set of troubling global political trends within democratic societies. Populism is used along and at times identified with other recurring words: fascism, authoritarianism, ethno-nationalism, nativism, and finally «Trumpism». Populism is an ambiguous term mostly used as a *nom de bataille* either to brand and stigmatize political movements and leaders or as a rallying cry for those who aspire to reclaim the liberal-democratic model from the hands of elites, believing that model is the only valid form of democracy we have². The intensity and pervasiveness of populism's manifestations in contem-

* Columbia University, New York, nu15@columbia.edu.

¹ This paper profits from an article I wrote with Federico Finchelstein (2018) and the Introduction of my book (2019).

² D'Eramo, 2013; Müller, 2016; Mounk, 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018.

porary societies make scholars talk of populism as a «crisis of democracy»³. In this article, I will not use the language of crisis and will not flirt with apocalyptic visions. There is nothing «undemocratic» about electing a xenophobic leader; nor is there anything «undemocratic» about the rise of antiestablishment parties⁴. I take representative democracy to be a dynamic form of politics and government that is capable of producing and metabolizing transformations, and populism among them—in Norberto Bobbio’s words, «for a democratic system, the process of “becoming”, of transformation, is its natural state»⁵. Thus democracy is not in crisis because, or when, it gives us a majority we do not like or that is despicable. Democracy is a risky game that can produce plebiscitary leaders impatient with institutional checks and political oppositions. In effect, the main target of populism in power is constitutional democracy, and until populist majorities do not make changes in the constitution that give them a superlative power, curb the rule of law to their needs and put in jeopardy the separation of powers, their governments are still democratic. Trumpism is exemplary of this ambiguity and risky situation as a case of populist democracy not fascism, although its language is aggressive against independent media, humiliates political oppositions and makes the tenor of public discourse factional and intolerant. This paper argues that populism has family resemblance with fascism but is not fascism; the main difference between these two regimes pertains to physical violence in political competition and the practice of elections: fascism used violence as an ordinary method to win and retain power and abolished elections. Unlike fascism, populism practices demagoguery yet not physical violence and uses (at times abundantly) elections as a method for testing people’s consent and parading its legitimacy. While fascism does not risk being sent to the opposition, populism takes this risk. If we consider the two corrupt forms of power that qualify fascism—demagoguery and tyranny—we see that populism involves the former, but not the latter. Populism remains a democratic form as long as its latent fascism remains unfulfilled, a shadow. With Benjamin Arditì I think that populism is parasitical on democracy and that when in power looks like a periphery of constitutional democracy not yet another regime outside democracy⁶. I take populism’s history to be part of the history of representative democracy and democratization. First born in the second half of the nineteenth century as opposition movements denouncing elites and minimalist democracy and proposing their own followers as the original, true members of the people, populisms became more complete as mixed regimes after the demise of Fascism⁷.

1. A long and a short story

There are certainly conditions that facilitate the growth of populism: these conditions are unquestionably social and economic but also political and cul-

³ Foa and Mounk, 2016.

⁴ Przeworski, 2018: 2-3.

⁵ Bobbio, 1987: 17.

⁶ Arditì, 2008.

⁷ I share here Manin’s conception of representative government as mix regime (Manin, 1997).

tural. One could claim that their success is tantamount to an admission that *constitutional democracies based on parties* have failed to resist two social disfigurements: the growth of social and economic inequality, so that for a large part of the population there is scant or no chance to aspire to a dignified social and political life; and the growth of a rampant and rapacious global oligarchy that makes sovereignty a phantom. These two factors are intertwined; they are a violation of the promise of political and civil equality, and they render constitutional democracy in urgent need of critical self-reflection on «its failure to put an end to oligarchic power»⁸. The dualism between the few and the many and the antiestablishment ideology that fattens populism comes from these unfulfilled promises and translates into an accusation of party democracy⁹. As we shall see in analyzing the main tropes of Trump's propaganda, populist leaders purport to be sincere people's knights against the soi-disant liberals; they challenge traditional parties and party democracy more generally.

Party democracy makes «organization» a vehicle for people's participation in the life of the party, which is not only made up of militants showing muscles against militants of other parties, but also of militants exercising some control over their leaders while participating in party life¹⁰. Populist democracy comes at the end of a process of erosion of party organization to resist which parties have adopted the primaries to «democratize» themselves and relaxed organization¹¹. Parties have on the one hand become catch-all parties and on the other turned to the people directly in order to recover legitimacy—in a word, they have established a direct communication of the masses with the leader and thus paved the way to populism—. Populist movements complete this trend with a radical jump: having the leader perform representation directly and thus bypass party organization as much as possible. As Rosenbluth and Shapiro write, the trajectory of Trumpism can be made start with the institutionalization of the «open primaries» to elect parties' candidates, a move that have dissolved the party spirit and, moreover, transformed the political arena in a fight between polarized brands which communication experts concoct in the view of attracting more «clients» or voters¹². Polarization in the electorate is not necessarily the same thing as partisanship (that presumes party identification), which is the backbone of party democracy¹³. Following recent studies on the transformation of mass parties, we may say that party democracy and populist democracy are the expressions of the complex dynamic internal to representative government, somehow a reiteration of the «standard story [that] popular democracy is fundamentally at odds with party-based representative democracy»¹⁴.

⁸ Bobbio, 1987: 30.

⁹ Urbinati, 2018.

¹⁰ I defined «organized parties» the way Duverger (1958) and Sartori (1976) have suggested in their classical works.

¹¹ Rosenbluth and Shapiro, 2018: 20.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ White and Ypi, 2016

¹⁴ Leib and Elmendorf, 2012: 70.

Scholars of politics agree that in consolidated democracies, populism seems to follow a cycle of electoral abstention and apathy, which is a side effect of catch-all parties and mainstreamism and the sign of citizens' mistrust in party politics¹⁵. When elected politicians and citizens become two separate groups that make the opposition between «the many» and «the few» an easily grasped catchword, when ordinary citizens witness increases of social distress and gross violations of economic equality in the general indifference of their representatives and while the most powerful acquire more voice in politics, it may very well happen that people distrust «practical politics» and are ready to side with aggressive leaders promising to bring politics «back to people»¹⁶.

In addition, some new factors contribute today to reinvigorating the populist rhetoric, such as a globalized financial capitalism that weakens the decision-making power of sovereign states (and of democratic states in particular) and a globalized labor market that narrows the possibility of striking a social-democratic compromise between capital and labor upon which constitutional democracy was built after World War Two. The weakening of state sovereignty before global corporate business meets with the people's call for closed borders, as if democratic citizens thought that the protection of their political power demands the containment of free movement of peoples and of free competition over salary and social benefits. Like in the past, populism associates the politics of social redistribution with protectionist policies; in addition, the dramatic phenomenon of terrorism associated with Islamic extremism propels a politics of state security at the expense of civil rights and stresses the nationalistic character of democracy as a vital condition of cultural and religious identity to be protected against external enemies. The split between popular anti-enlightenment sentiments and economic distress and a cultural discourse that is dominated by cosmopolitan elites exalts a representative deficit of the general interest and opens a political space for populist leaders and their anti-establishment plans.

This has made scholars consider contemporary populism a global phenomenon that is fostered by the global culture it censures. It comes to play two roles traditionally played by social-democratic parties: that of denouncing social inequality and the privileges of the few, who do not need national belonging to protect their interests; and that of reclaiming the priority of the interests of the majority. Resuming the two ancient categories —*ethnos* and *demos*— whose mix steered the construction of post-Eighteenth century democratic people, one might say that populism's renaissance in several democratic countries is both a symptom and a triggering force that can disrupt that mix. On the one hand, *demos* («the people») tends to deflate its political meaning as the collective of equals in power and to translate it into a social unit identified with the majority. On the other hand, *ethnos* («the nation»), which the political nation of equals before the law was meant to divest of nativist meanings, tends to be identified

¹⁵ Mair, 2002 and 2013.

¹⁶ Canovan, 2002.

with pre-political characters not acquirable by simply being subjects of the law. Rights exhaust their inclusive and universalist meaning to become a good that the nation possesses.

All these factors together, political, socio-economic and cultural add to the explanation of the growth of populism in democratic societies. In this article I presume this complex set of conditions but do not intend to study why populism grew, or why it continues to grow. My ambition is more limited in scope: I seek to understand how populism transforms (indeed, disfigures) representative democracy and pushes it to its extreme without however proposing a new regime¹⁷. Trumpism can be used to illustrate populism in power.

A further premise is needed before proceeding: in order to approach populism analytically not polemically a distinction should be made between *populism as a popular movement* and *populism as a ruling power*. This distinction encompasses populism in its rhetorical style; in its propaganda, tropes, and ideology; and finally in its aims and achievements. The representative construction of populism is rhetorical, and it is independent of social classes and traditional ideologies. With all of this in mind, the central question this paper asks through Trumpism is the following: *What kind of democratic results does populism produce?* The proposed answer is that today, representative democracy is both the environment in which populism develops *and* its target, or the thing it claims its ruling power against. Populist movements and leaders compete with other political actors with regard to the representation of the people; and they seek electoral victory in order to prove that «the people» *they* represent is the «right» people and deserves to rule for its own good.

2. A Global Phenomenon

Populism had a long history before Trumpism although what happened in the USA in 2016 had a huge impact on its meaning, particularly in the States, where populism has been generally identified with participation from below and democratization¹⁸. Before Trump became a President, bad populism seemed foreign to the States and located preferably in Latin America, the fatherland of populism as a form of government. American scholars studying populism expressed always some sympathy with a movement that played an important role in the making of their democracy in the age of reconstruction after the Civil War¹⁹. The People's Party (1892) prompted a desire for «moral regeneration» and for the «redemptive» aspirations of democracy; it encouraged «folk politics» over «institutionalized politics» or privileged the lived experience of local neighborhoods over an abstract, distant state; and proposed itself as a means to realize popular sovereignty, over and above institutions and constitutional rules²⁰. In

¹⁷ I defined and studied «democratic disfigurement» in Urbinati, 2014.

¹⁸ Kazin, 1995.

¹⁹ Finchelstein, 2017. A concise and excellent overview of the history of interpretations of populism can be found in de la Torre, 2018.

²⁰ Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2001.

this section of the paper I shall briefly summarize the main interpretative trends of American populism.

The term emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, first in Russia (*narodničestvo*) and then in the United States (the People's Party). In the first case, it was a label for an intellectual vision that idealized an agrarian society of communitarian villages standing against industrialization; in the second case, by contrast, it was a label for a political movement vindicating the centrality of individual producers standing against corporate capitalism. There were other differences, too: in Russia, the populist voice was first of all the voice of urban intellectuals, who imagined an ideal community of uncontaminated peasants. In the United States, on the other hand, it was the voice of those citizens who contested the ruling elites in the name of their own constitution²¹. The US case, therefore, not the Russian one, represents the first instance of populism as a democratic political movement, proposing itself as the true representative of the people within a party system and a government²². That wave of democratization spoke of ways to include much larger sections of the population, at a time when the polis was really still an elected oligarchy²³.

Several other important historical cases of populist regimes emerged in Latin American countries. Here, populism was capable of becoming a ruling power after World War Two. It was met with mixed feelings at different historical phases, depending on whether it was evaluated at the beginning of its career or at its apex, whether it was evaluated as a regime in consolidation or a regime facing a succession in power, and whether it was evaluated as an opposition party mobilizing against an existing government or as a government itself²⁴. As in Russia and the United States, in Latin America populism emerged in the age of socio-economic modernization; but much like fascism in Europe's Catholic countries, it led toward modernity by using state power to protect and empower popular and middle classes, to dwarf political dissent, and to tame the liberal ideology, all while implementing welfare policies and protecting traditional ethical values. Finally, in Western Europe, populism made its appearance with predemocratic regimes in the early twentieth century. Here, it coincided with colonial expansionism, with the militarization of society that occurred during World War One, and with the growth of ethnic nationalism—which, in response to an economic depression, unraveled existing ideological divisions under the myth of an encompassing Nation—²⁵. In predemocratic Europe, populism's response to the crisis of liberal representative government ultimately manifested in the promotion of fascist regimes. That said, in societies that are not yet fully democratic, the representative ambitions of populist leaders can subvert the existing institutional order (though they can hardly make the country a stable democracy)²⁶. This is what

²¹ Walicki, 1969; Hofstadter, 1956; Taguieff, 1997; Taggard, 2000.

²² Canovan, 1981; Mudde, 2004.

²³ Macpherson, 1953.

²⁴ De la Torre, 2010.

²⁵ Berlin, 1968: 138.

²⁶ A rich and useful analysis of the «imperfect forms of either totalitarianism or democratic politics»—namely, «authoritarian regime» and whether it can prepare for transition to democracy—can

happened with Italian fascism in the 1920s, and with the forms of caudillismo and dictatorship that one sees at work in Latin American countries.

Comparing those different experiences, Margaret Canovan proposed a divide between populism in «economically backward» societies (where populism could supposedly stretch to give birth to Caesaristic leaders), and populism in modern Western societies (where it could supposedly exist even without a leader)²⁷. According to Canovan's framework, Western societies (she had in mind the United States and Great Britain) enjoyed a kind of exceptionality that makes «populism» almost indistinguishable from electoral cases of so-called silent majorities, who are courted and conquered by skillful candidates and catch-all parties²⁸. Trumpism puts an end to this interpretation. Trumpism shows that all populist leaders behave the same, whether they are Western or not. It also shows that populism as a ruling power can make progress at the center of the West or in consolidated democracies (after having existed in Latin American, Africa and Asia)²⁹.

Yet the language of western exceptionalism is still very appealing. Indeed, for Jaques Ranciere or Marco D'Eramo for instance, the European extreme right cannot be confused with anything that happened previously, or concurrently, in Latin America. In their view, Perón and Le Pen are not much related in either history or theory, and certainly constitute examples that are simply at the margin of the world of consolidated democracies. But their view renders the European or Western populism as a «new» national phenomenon and moreover as too «exceptional» and unique to be connected or assimilated to non-Western phenomena. I disagree with this view. Populism, I had the chance to argue in an article published with Federico Finchelstein, has a history that is at different times global, national and supranational; this history crisscrosses the global south and the global north alike, presenting important theoretical and experiential distinctions but also marking important zones of confluence³⁰. The latter are related to a particular authoritarian understanding of how democratic politics and government should function. This is a disfiguration of democracy that takes away most of its open, pluralistic, tolerant and dialogical attributes yet not democratic institutions and procedures as such, although it tends to change them from within when make them in the service of a homogenous representation of the «good» and «authentic» people. Populism is not only a style of discourse but also an attempt to reformulate democracy by reinterpreting its three fundamentals (the people, majority rule and mandate representation) in ways that are at the same time inclusionary for the electoral majority and exclusionary for the minority, paternalistic and at times even autocratic, celebrating the embodiment of the people into the people but not yet dictatorial.

be found in Linz, 1970. That populism leads to «Competitive authoritarianism» is the central thesis of Levitsky and Loxton, 2013.

²⁷ Canovan, 2005: 87.

²⁸ The analysis of electoral competition as ruled by catchall parties, with the primary goal of expanding their electorate more than their members or affiliates, was provided many years ago by Kirchheimer, 1966: 177-200.

²⁹ Ionescu and Gellner, 1969.

³⁰ Finchelstein and Urbinati, 2018.

From Peronism to Trumpism, populism's growth and detecting signs, although contextual and thus never identical, are similar and point toward a political transformation that changes the tenor of public opinion and, when in power, the functioning management of state institutions and administration. It is the representative maker of this change that most qualifies populism -- the perception of distress that the audience magnifies opens the door to some canny leaders, ready to exploit popular criticism for gaining power quickly and once in power stretching the rules of the game, and the constitution if needed in order to make it consistent to the leader's decisionism drive.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, populist politics is a type of politics that seeks to represent the interests and wishes of ordinary people «who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups»³¹. There are two predefined players in this definition: the ordinary people and the established political elites. The thing that defines and connects these two players is the feeling of the former toward the latter —a feeling that a representative leader intercepts, exalts, and narrates—. Populism involves an exclusionary conception of the people, and the establishment is the externality thanks to which, and against which, it conceives itself. The dynamic of populism is one of rhetorical construction. It involves a speaker interpreting the claims of dissatisfied groups and unifying them in a narrative and above all his or her person. In this sense, the «construction of a popular subjectivity [...] reaches a point where the homogenizing function is carried out by a pure name: the name of the leader»³². The outcome is a kind of movement that, if asked to explain what it is that makes it count as the people's voice, it answers by naming the people's enemies under the name of a leader³³. Developing a direct relation to the people and the audience is essential for this purpose. Thus, Hugo Chávez «spent more than 1,500 hours denouncing capitalism on *Alo Presidente*, his own TV show»³⁴; Silvio Berlusconi was for many years a daily presence on both his private television stations and Italian state television; Matteo Salvini dialogues with «his Italians» through Facebook more than once per day, and Trump is on Twitter night and day.

Pivotal to this analysis of «global populism» is the direct relationship that the leader establishes and maintains with the people. This is also the dynamic that blurs the democratic diarchy of institutions and extra-institutions. While in opposition, populism stresses the dualism between the many and the few, and expands its audience by denouncing constitutional democracy. But once populists get into power, they work incessantly to prove that their ruling leader is an *incarnation* of the voice of the people and should stand against and above all other representative claimants and repair the fault of constitutional democracy. Populists assert that, because the people and the leader have effectively merged, and no intermediary elite sets them apart, the role of deliberation and mediation

³¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/view/Entry/147930?redirectedFrom=populism#eid> (accessed February 1, 2019).

³² Laclau 2005: 40.

³³ Meckstroth, 2015: 179.

³⁴ Meanwhile Chávez «attacked the Internet as “a battle trench” that was bringing “a current of conspiracy”»; Morozov, 2011: 113.

can be drastically reduced, and the will of the people can exercise itself more robustly. Trumpism allows us to see better the transformation that populism in power does to constitutional and representative democracy.

In the remaining part I shall illustrate this transformation through the analysis of the Inaugural Address Donald Trump delivered on January 17, 2017 as a sample of the main characters of what in the final part I will silhouette as a populist democracy.

3. Me The People

Populism represents a redirection of the notion of the people so as to replace its juridical and legal generality with a social and substantive one. In this process of ethnicization and/or racialization of the political *demos* (as it has been the case of many right-wing populisms) or the identification of the *demos* with a particular leader and his/her followers (as it has been the case also with left-wing cases of populism), democracy risks become the ruling power of a specific majority that purports itself as the whole people and rules as an «holistic party»³⁵ or *as if* it were the only good majority that elections reveal but do not create, and *as if* the opposition does not belong to the same people.

Within this perspective, for populists, elections are a ritual that does not collect and reflect individual votes to be counted according to the method of majority; they are instead a revelation or acclamation of a majority that already exists (the «good» or «authentic» people) and that a leader brings to surface and makes it victorious³⁶. The populist majority is not one majority among others as in representative democracy, but the crowing of the «good» majority whose legitimacy is not merely numerical but primarily ethical (moral and cultural), thus autonomous from and superior to procedures, and in this sense not merely political. Populism, one might say, uses elections as referenda or plebiscites, thus transfiguring them in their opposite. Of course, in a democracy majority manages the government and shapes the politics of the country according to its plans, which electors supported. As Adam Przeworski reminded us times and again, votes are power, hard power and majority tends to rule with all strength and determination that institutions and constitution allow³⁷. Yet the populist majority installs itself in power not *as if* it were a temporary winner but as the right winner that has the mission of bringing the «true» country back —thus even if elections are not erased and the populist majority is transitory, it is the *as if* approach to majority rule that makes all the difference—. Governing *as if* the government were the «right» one and its majority and people were the «true» one it entails using the audience (and eventually also the state) to denigrate against those who are in the opposition as they are declared and treated as not being part of the «true» people³⁸. This is the climate

³⁵ Rosenblum, 2008: chap. 1.

³⁶ Mudde, 2004: 543.

³⁷ Przeworski, 1999.

³⁸ Rosenblum, 2008: 51-53.

in which it may happen that the majority is prone to operate at the expense of the rights and legitimacy of many minorities.

Moreover, since the majority speaks through the «mouth» and «words» of its acclaimed leader, the effective (and not told) risk is that democracy becomes the ruling power of a tiny elite which uses the mobilizing ideology of the «true» people in order to make a quick jump into politics and finally get into government. Populism signifies a solidification of procedures and a substantializing of the democratic process in the illusion that this reshaping will make the will of the people less of an issue of mediation among various and conflicting interests and more one of reassertion of an organic body incorporated under the figure of unity as represented by the leader. Populism replaces political representation with the delegation of people's power in the leader. Amending the somehow Romantic view of populism as a «thin ideology» that opposes the «moral» and «pure» many to the «immoral» and «corrupt» elite³⁹, I propose to read populism as a canny and speeding up strategy of power climbing and achieving, that uses the democratic method and procedures after twisting them in a way that can serve non-democratic ends, such as humiliating minorities and oppositions through a mobilization of the majoritarian audience and on some occasions changes in the constitution, and that profits from an effective condition of stress and mistrust of large sectors of the population toward traditional parties. In addition, a populist regime cultivates an ambition to rule over a society in which only the leader's party successfully pursues a hegemonic politics, while all other parties are marginalized into near nonexistence, submerged by the rampant propaganda of the leader in government. Yet marginalizing is not the same as suppressing and in this sense a populist government is not as said a fascist regime. Beyond its strategic impulses, populism, potentially becomes an authoritarian understanding of how democracy should be ruled. It is indeed an ideological construct that depicts the many as legitimate and moral and the few as a disease or a disturbance. But once elected, the leader acts unilaterally and decides without meaningful institutional consultation or mediation, although in permanent communication with the people outside to reassure they are always the master of the game while he's their knight in the Capital city, as Trump implied times and again. Populism is indeed an ideological construct representing the many as «moral» and «honest» and the few as «corrupt» or «immoral», yet this is hardly the creation of the many that have no voice and identity without a leader speaking in their name.

The «thin ideology» of the politics of morality hides a clear strategy for power conquering that has intolerant ruling at its constitutive core as we can see from the way in which populist electoral victory is interpreted—as indeed «taking the people back» as if the people were not represented before the populist leader was elected—. The implication of this not innocent declaration of legitimacy is that all prior governments were morally illegitimate although formally legitimate, a radical disfigurement of democratic proceduralism and the democratic process. Populism is thus not an ideology that wants simply to mobilize the people against the establishment or that wants to mobilize the people in order to make

³⁹ Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013.

them the actor of their own emancipatory needs. Populism «uses» the «moral» people argument and asks the people to identify with a political outsider (thus «moral») leader, moreover to trust the latter will work for their emancipation—more important, it claims that the leader will do it for them, not them by themselves—. Populism is not a species of direct democracy thus, but a form of «direct representation» or the making of the leader as representative by his direct and permanent connection to the people. It is thus the representative agent that is direct in its claim rather than the people identifying with him. In Trump's words:

We, the citizens of America, are now joined in a great national effort to rebuild our country and to restore its promise for all of our people. Together, we will determine the course of America and the world for years to come. We will face challenges. We will confront hardships. But we will get the job done⁴⁰.

This brings us to the last character of populism this paper intends to stress, the fact that populism is an ideology based on *trust through faith* more than trust through free and open deliberation among the followers and between them and the representative, and in this sense a trust that is essentially linked to its opposite, mistrust. Populism does not cultivate nor actually appreciates the idea of accountability but claims that to have a beloved and populist leaders is enough condition for trust. And in fact, the idea of the people that populism sponsors it is structured in a way that is congenial to this surrender by faith in the leader's hand: the victory of populism is not merely the victory of the people but that of the «true» people, the authentic people that a representative leader declares to interpret in its right wills and needs as nobody has done before, although ruling with the consent of a majority. In fact, at one point the actual people are transformed into an imaginary entity incarnated in the leader, who extracts the «true» people from the empirical people that inhabit a country or is subjected to a country's legal order.

Populism in power seems to make possible a post-fascism-coupled-with-elections and the remaining democratic institutions, which a leader incarnating the people as one is primed to re-legitimize. As Chávez declared after reaching power, he was no longer himself but the people, «I am no longer myself. I feel as incarnated in the people. Chávez became the people and now we are millions»⁴¹. Similarly, Perón said that Peronism «became incarnated forever in the Argentine people»⁴². As we see from his Inaugural Address, Trump repeated the same trope when he proposed himself as representative of «everyone» across America and his presidency the people's celebration:

It belongs to everyone gathered here today and everyone watching all across America. This is your day. This is your celebration. And this, the United States of America, is your country. What truly matters is not which party controls our government, but whether our government is controlled by the people. January 20th

⁴⁰ Trump, 2017.

⁴¹ «Yo ya no soy yo, me siento encarnado en el pueblo. Ya Chávez se hizo pueblo, y ahora somos millones» (Ramonet, 2012: 1).

⁴² «Se ha encarnado para siempre en el pueblo argentino» (Perón, 1953: 82).

2017, will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again. The forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer⁴³.

In criticizing the then moribund parliamentarianism and speaking to the authoritarians of his times, Carl Schmitt wrote that electoral accountability is a liberal concept that presumes a transaction kind of relationship, thus a set of rules and actors apt to market kind of relations, not politics. People—the actual existing people of the nation—is the right sovereign and there is nobody outside that can question it or limiting it; hence, the public manifestation of the consent of the people in the form of identification with, and acclamation of «its» leader is the only valid accountability because the only political manifestation of the popular will, not procedural and formal. The intensity and acclamation power of the people are the prove of their strength and their leader's legitimacy⁴⁴.

This means that the ideological discourse that opposes the «pure» people to the «corrupt» elite is like the top of the iceberg sustained by a view of the people (represented by its leader) that because it is sovereign cannot be wrong. As Paulina Ochoa Espejo writes, «Since they are the people, they cannot be wrong; since the people are sovereign, they cannot lose. Thus, when populists find themselves in the electoral opposition, they see that as itself a flagrant injustice that requires “taking back” the country from those who have stolen it from the authentic people»⁴⁵. All issues of accountability vanish within this perspective. We come here to see that the expression «taking back» the country betrays the cross-eyed relationship of populism with democracy. The democratic principle of majority is directly linked to the idea that it is the will and opinion of the single citizen that counts and must be counted equally. This entails that the people over there is never actually already there, but is formed in its political actorship every time votes are counted. This is what populism transforms. So Trump:

Every four years, we gather on these steps to carry out the orderly and peaceful transfer of power, and we are grateful to President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama for their gracious aid throughout this transition. They have been magnificent. Today's ceremony, however, has very special meaning. Because today we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another, or from one party to another—but we are transferring power from Washington, D. C. and giving it back to you, the American People—. For too long, a small group in our nation's Capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished—but the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered—but the jobs left, and the factories closed. The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country. Their victories have not been your victories; their triumphs have not been your triumphs; and while they celebrated in our nation's capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land. That all changes—starting right here, and right now, because this moment is your moment: it belongs to you—.

But to use the electoral procedure in order to bring to the surface that which exists already—as populist parties claim—it entails devaluing democratic pro-

⁴³ Trump, 2017.

⁴⁴ Schmitt, 2008: 370.

⁴⁵ Ochoa, 2017: 94.

cedures and more important equal political liberty, which is the assumption of democracy as a form of politics and government that belongs to not the masses but each individual citizen. It entails to assume that majority has an embodied might that counts more than a mere temporary quantity and exists already, as a sleeping «true» sovereign waiting for the right prince to be awakened. Clearly, majority is not a merely method for decisions but becomes a substance, a homogeneous unit that already exists, with a specific culture, ethnical identity, religion or interests and is ready to keep off the impostors and traitors who occupy the public sphere of opinion and institutions. Thus the logic of the populists is essentialist not procedural—they want to reinstall the true people in power—⁴⁶. Within this rendering of democracy, only the populist majority is the legitimate people. In many cases, as in that of Trump or Nicolás Maduro, these majorities are more imagined than actual and in fact pure rhetorical construction, with the function and power to make the imagined majorities look real. They represent slim or inexistent political majorities, but the actual mathematics of electoral politics are not the only marker of sovereignty for populists any way. Still, it is notable that the ideological mantra of sweeping electoral victories as the form of ultimate legitimacy for a leader that otherwise presents more theological forms of sovereignty, remains an important historical distinction between populism and its illiberal predecessor in power, fascism⁴⁷.

To sum up, populism can be seen as an authoritarian national form of democracy, a post-fascism in which the issue of *who* rules or uses the procedures acquires much more relevance than the issue of *how* procedures are operated and used. More explicitly, in fact, the «who» is the sociological force that gives legitimacy to the procedural «how», which comes to be seen a pure formality to be subjected to its will. It is indeed a fact that in all countries in which a populist force gets the majority, the tension within the powers of the state emerges and the contestation against the non-political institutions (like justice or bureaucracy) in the name of the superiority of the political institutions starts. Populism is impatience with constitutionalism as we knew it or as a system of division of powers (and in some countries of checks and balances) that regulates the functioning of state institutions whose basic legitimacy comes from the people via elections (and on some occasions referendum). Reaching power through mobilization, a populist leadership can consolidate and perpetuate it through patronage or clientelism. A democratic Machiavelli would say that in that case, it would not be the people sovereign «over the law» but the leaders who win people's consent to their plans. Political scientists call this «discriminatory legalism»—the idea that «everything for my friends; for my enemies, the law»—⁴⁸.

This is what populism may do when it succeeds in conquering consent and changing the procedures of constitutional democracy. Populist leaders or parties that have enough power are not content with simply winning a majority but want

⁴⁶ On the relationship between populism and presidential democracy—in opposition with Kelsen and Bobbio's theory of parliamentary democracy— see Pazé, 2017: 122.

⁴⁷ Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015.

⁴⁸ Weyland, 2013: 21.

a more unbounded power and moreover to stay in power as long as possible; they «will seek to establish a new populist constitution —in both the sense of a new sociopolitical settlement and a new set of rules for the political game—»⁴⁹. This is what in some European countries is today happening with the emergence of strong populist leaders or nationalistic parties. Just to offer an example, the Hungarian Civil Alliance (Fidesz) won a supermajority of the seats in Parliament and since 2012 used it to scrap the old Constitution, write a new one, and amend it continuously, entrenching its own political vision at the expense of opposition parties and an independent judiciary⁵⁰. Similar forms of populist «constitutionalism» recurrently happened in Latin America, from Perón to Chávez. More generally, populists, from Trump to Salvini often equate legality with repressive notions of «law and order». This «penal populism» constantly undermines political and social forms of equality⁵¹. This view of the law is essentially Schmittian in equating legality with legitimacy. Perón synthesized it when he famously said in 1973 one could not present «dualities» as a conductor in politics, «to the friend [we give] everything, toward the enemy, not even justice»⁵². The first thing in politics was to make clear who were the «eternal enemies of the people».

Hence, populism in power is thwarted between two movements: a permanent electoral campaign in order to stress and reconfirm the leader's unity with the people and a more radical and dangerous course of action toward constitutional reform that gives the direct ruling power of the elected leader of the people a superlative power. The misfortune of Trump is the fortune of American democracy; this fortune resides in the Constitution of the United States, which is not only hard to be revised but moreover based on a federal system that adds to the institutional containment of the executive power. After winning the presidential election, Trump wanted to convey an argument against the division that he himself had fueled in the campaign, and in doing so he actually stressed the need to collapse all distinctions for the sake of the whole. His people had to «get together»: «To all Republicans, Democrats and independents across this nation, I say it is time for us to come together as one united people». It was clear then, that polarization would not leave the stage. Attacking partisanship and homogenizing the people are a key element of his populism. This was Trump in his most «inclusive» moment. However, the more «real Donald Trump», and especially through the medium of tweeter has represented an exclusionary politics toward his political adversaries and minority peoples.

The redefinition of the people in such absolutist and substantialist terms makes populists conclude that single electoral decisions are a prove of the people participation and consecration of leaders, who are construed as the only legitimate representative of the people. In turn, the idea of a single unified people led by these leaders rests on the notion of radical adversaries which are represented as «enemies of the people» (Trump) or the «anti-people» (Perón). All

⁴⁹ Müller, 2016: 62.

⁵⁰ Arato, 2016: 205-222.

⁵¹ W. Jennings, S. Farrall, E. Gray and C. Hay, 2017.

⁵² Finchelstein, 2014: 90-92.

these characteristics of populism presented very distinctive histories. The result of a historical reading of populism is a necessary stress on variations and contextual mediations. Thus, Trump is different from Peronism in the same way that Hugo Chávez differs from Silvio Berlusconi or Marine Le Pen or Matteo Salvini. Populism is a complex phenomenon that cannot be easily reduced to an ideal-type or a Cartesian clear and distinct idea or even an essence. Yet these histories need to be told in both national and transnational terms. Populism, especially in its right-wing xenophobic forms is in its own way an international and supranational phenomenon that speaks in the name of the nation and the people. It is a matter of elective affinity that Le Pen adopted the slogan «Au nom du peuple» or that Trump presented himself in the Republican convention of 2016 as the «voice of the people».

Conclusion

Trumpism leads us to understand the implications of populism's reappearance in relation to constitutional democracy. Constitutional democracy is the political order that promises to protect basic rights (which are essential to the democratic process) by limiting the power of the majority in government, by providing stable and regular opportunities for changing majorities and governments, by guaranteeing social and procedural mechanisms that permit the largest possible part of the population to participate in the game of politics, and by influencing decisions and changing who makes decisions. It does this through the separation of powers and the independence of the judiciary. Stabilized after World War Two with the defeat of mass dictatorships, constitutional democracy was meant to neutralize the problems that populism is now trying to capitalize on⁵³. These are (1) the resistance of democratic citizens to political intermediation, and to organized and traditional political parties in particular; (2) the majority's mistrust of the institutional checks on the power that the majority legitimately derives from the citizens' vote; and (3) the climate of distress with pluralism, or with the views and groups that do not fit with the majoritarian meaning of «the people». I have argued that representation and the audience is the terrain on which the populist battle over these issues takes place and that constitutional democracy is the target.

In conclusion, populist democracy is the name of a new form of representative government that is based on two phenomena: a direct relation between the leader and those in society whom the leader defines as the «right» or «good» people; and the superlative authority of the audience. Its immediate targets are the «obstacles» to the development of those phenomena: intermediary opinion-making bodies, such as parties; established media; and institutionalized systems for monitoring and controlling political power. The result of these positive and negative actions delineates the physiognomy of populism as an interpretation of «the people» and «the majority» that is tainted by an undisguised —indeed, an

⁵³ Müller, 2011: 5.

enthusiastic— *politics of radical partiality*: the institutions are used in the interest of the «winning» part against the other. This partiality can easily disfigure the rule of law (which requires that government officials and citizens are bound by and act consistent with the law), and also the division of powers, which —taken together— include reference to basic rights, democratic process, and criteria of justice or right. That these elements form the core of constitutional democracy does not imply they are naturally identical to democracy as such. Their intertwinement occurred through a complex, often dramatic, and always conflictual historical process, which was (and is) temporal, open to transformation, and finite. It can be revised and reshaped, and populism is one form this revision and reshaping can take.

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