

# A Political Sociology of Populism and Leadership

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*In the face of change in the social bases of advanced European democracies, politics has delayed the articulation of new cleavages characterising a society that can no longer be attributed to the perimeter of belonging and the social classes of the 20th century. The crisis is therefore not an expression of criticism against democracy as a political regime per sé, but rather corresponds to a crisis in the legitimacy of traditional political players. The democratic deficit feeding populism is not weakened by the claimed desire to broaden the participatory dimension of politics, inasmuch as it derives from the loss of collective references in a society divided in new winners and new losers of globalization and in the midst of a crisis of the concept of equality. These aspects shall be analysed further as part of the interpretation of populism as a phenomenon comprising an appeal to the people and an opposition to the élite. The purpose of this paper is to address the issue of the politicization of anti-establishment sentiment, where populism is considered not so much as an ideology but as a political strategy of politicization of the rift between society and politics, where political leaders and parties are the key players in shaping the disaffection of the people toward the traditional mass politics.*

## ***1. Introduction: understanding populism in advanced democracies***

The relationship between populism and leadership plays a key role in the reconfiguration of political forms and players in the lengthy, and not without contradictions, transition from a democracy of political parties and ideologies to a democracy characterized by the personalization of politics and top political leaders. (Cavalli 1987a; McAllister 2007; Poguntke and Webb 2009; Karvonen 2010; Garzia 2014). In *Economy and Society*, Max Weber ([1922] 1978: 1126) maintained that «charisma is not alien to all modern, including all democratic, forms of election». Similarly, we could identify in populism a characteristic that, with varying degrees of intensity, belongs to many of the personalized examples of leadership present in advanced democracies. Whilst not all forms of populism were historically expressed through the personalization of leadership, it is nonetheless true that one of the inherent characteristics of populism, i.e. the lack of a well-defined conceptual and ideological core,

lends itself well to the «politics of personality» (Taggart 2000: 101), making it difficult not to consider the role of leadership in its development (Moffitt 2016: 55). Populism can be analysed from different perspectives: the ideological dimension, political discourse as a communication style or the strategy adopted by a political movement (Gidron and Bonikowski 2014). At the same time, the perspectives under which the literature on populism and leadership was developed endorsed different aspects of the types of modernization and democratization. Whereas in Europe the literature on political transformation has focused on political parties, the relationship amongst them and on social fractures, in other contexts, including in South America, the political leadership has taken on, since the first half of the 20th century, a major role in the interpretation of political phenomena. For populism, this means that the prospect of leadership has been addressed in direct relation with nation-state building in contexts devoid of aggregation and of the articulation of party interests. (Di Tella 1965; Germani 1975). Conversely, in Europe, studies on populism developed alongside the growing phenomenon of anti-establishment parties, specifically, in relation to the birth of the parties of the new radical right (Betz and Immerfall 1998; Ignazi 2003).

For the purposes of this paper, we will consider how and to what extent the centrality of the leadership is able to explain the rise of populism in the current transformation of European democracies, in addition to performing a classic analysis of political movements and parties, and, at the same time, examining the internal developments introduced by leader democracy in Europe. Within the scope of the various perspectives fuelling the debate on populism, the focal point remains the analysis of the procedural phenomenon in which populism is adopted as a particular political strategy and style of politicization and mobilization (Weyland 2001; Jansen 2011; Roberts 2015; Moffitt 2016; Pappas 2016). By examining populist leadership, we can analyse the crisis of representation that has arisen at a time of separation of power and politics, the weakening forms of organized politics in nation states, the place of 20th century liberal democracy, and the shift in power at global level, which is dominated primarily by finance and which has lost its legitimacy as a result of being the subject of political conflict (Bazzicalupo 2010). In such a context, leadership becomes the instrument and vehicle by which we can highlight the political identity building mechanism in the current period of misalignment in a hyper-fragmented and individualized society.

In pursuing this line of argument, populism and leadership constitute phenomena that are both complementary and distinctive, particularly when recalling concepts whereby sociological analysis is called upon to organise, not in a formal manner but rather in a substantial way, the concepts of leader

democracy, populist leadership and charismatic leader. Therefore, this perspective does not aim to reconstruct the history or the semantics of populism based on the ideological affinity of its different manifestations, but rather it focuses on the dynamics of the political strategy adopted by the new leaders of modern democracies. Based on the definition of leadership as a social relationship composed of three key elements, i.e. the leader, the followers, the context in which they interact (Nye 2009: 26), we shall analyse the politicization of no-confidence/distrust and anti-party sentiment, which is revealed in a process of redefinition of the political, institutional and democratic sphere. The aim is to reconstruct a type of populist leadership through its actions and interactions with voters, and verify the ways of appealing to the “people” and the creation of a radical opposition to the political establishment.

## *2. Populism in an era of personalization of politics*

In order to understand populism, we must not only ask ourselves what it is, but in what way, how and by whom it can be developed. For this reason, it is worth starting from the taxonomy proposed by Margaret Canovan of the various types of populism, in order to grasp the role of leadership in the dynamics of populism found in modern democracies. Margaret Canovan (1981: 13) offers us the chance to identify two macro types of populism, one of which can be defined as agrarian populism, the “farmer radicalism” of the American People’s Party in the 19th century, the movement of peasants in Eastern Europe and the Russian Narodniks, whilst the other refers to the category of “political populisms”. This first distinction allows us to establish a difference between populist movements, with a bottom-up trend, which are not focused on leadership, and types of movements that differ based on social, historical and economic contexts, and enjoy a special relationship with a political leader. Political populisms include dictatorial phenomena, “populist democracy” declinations, reactionary populism (or rather, nationalist reactivation) and a broad view of the “populism of politicians”. If we choose to disregard the forms of Caesarism and the reactions to progress, the references to original and traditional forms of community and referendum democracy, the aspect that opens up to more perspectives for the analysis of contemporary populism in relation to phenomena characterising advanced democracies is the aspect related to the «catch-all people’s party» (Canovan 1981: 260-261).

Populism is presented and established in a context marked by the long-term thawing of classic rifts, which not only involves the organizational transformation of parties, but also questioning the legitimacy of representative

democracy, which is mediated by parties as a linkage between institutions and society. A process without any particular balance, in which mass parties can legitimise the “sharing of political work” between the ruling classes and citizens, in the name of shared ideological affiliations. In the compromise of party democracy, the legitimization of the unequal distribution of power was anchored in the ability of parties to not only connect the élite, the membership and the voters from a procedural and electoral standpoint, but also to create a process of identity integration by connecting individuals and groups, parties and society, the media, collateral organizations and the government (Lawson 1980). Upsetting the balance by overlooking the social integration of parties is the basis for the “crisis” of political representation in which the gap between the political élites and individuals is widened (Manin 2010: 259). In this context, of increasing relevance is the tension between the dynamics of advanced modernization, which alter the social bases of democracy, and the political re-articulation/reorganization of social divisions, with the collapse of political modernization in the definition of new cleavage politics (Bornschieer 2010). In other words, the political class consolidates attributions of power by inserting itself in the institutions from which it gains financial resources and elevated status (Katz and Mair 2009), but, at the same time, politics is incapable of social regulation in increasingly complex societies. The crisis of political representation resulting from the gap between society and politics manifests as the radicalization of the deideologization of parties described by Kirchheimer in the 1960s and 1970s as “catch-all parties”. In light of the absence of cohesive social groups, which are no longer bound by the binding and identifying role of party ideology, of increasing importance, on the one hand, is the immediate relationship of the individual with politics and of the individual politician with the potential voter and, on the other, the process by which the top powers are bolstered by monocratic mandates. The personalization of politics becomes the determining process in the transition to leader democracy, from the candidate-centred nature of the elections, not just in Anglo-Saxon democracies, but in all advanced European democracies, including those with a parliamentary government (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Poguntke and Webb 2005; Aarts, Blais and Schmitt 2011). This personalization constitutes the shift from the centrality of the collective bodies to that of the individual players in the reporting process of political choice and the establishment of political identity (Cavalli 1994; Karvonen 2010). Alongside this process, which expresses at political level what happens in society under the pressure of individualization, is presented the redefinition of power with growing attributions that shift from collective bodies to monocratic top leadership mandates; a complete redefinition of accountability that involves

three complementary dimensions, i.e. of the government, of political parties and, in general, of electoral processes (Poguntke and Webb 2005: 352). The relationship of trust which was built in the past between citizens and leaders shifts: if in the past the reference was identifying with the party through a bond based on ideology, today that reference is the leader who contributes to the creation of the basis for a political relationship. In a context in which the complexity of choices increases, it is no paradox that cognitive simplification, which is no longer operated by ideology and its political interpreters, is not offered by detailed policy programmes but by the leader himself. The biographies of the leaders or their image, which is created by professionals and spread by the media, take on the role of policy programme summary in a direct relationship, which, in its most radical form, can be traced back/connected to not only “audience democracy”, where the audience hears the words of the leader, but also “ocular democracy”, where choice and electoral sanction are no longer articulated in the words but through the vision and behaviour of the political actor (Green 2010).

It would however be misleading to presume that leader democracy corresponds to a party-free democracy, given that parties continue to perform an important role in both election procedures and the selection of political staff. What has changed is the fact that parties now support leaders instead of operating as collective bodies in political mediation. They gradually become professionalized party machines, in which the traditional élites are replaced with new élites chosen directly by the leader, whom he trusts and who are accountable to him, whose legitimacy is indirect, i.e. derived from the very legitimacy granted to the leader by voters (Pakulski and Körösenyi 2012: 148). If personalization becomes the key to the transformation of advanced democracies, then the formation of new fractures and the politicization of no-confidence and anti-establishment sentiment will feature strongly in the personalization of politics and leadership. Reacting to a democracy deprived of its identity, planning, even utopian, components become part of a repertoire of ideas and practices where the people’s sovereignty and “policy of redemption”, as opposed to a purely procedural and pragmatic policy, give substance to the populist project (Canovan 1999; Meny and Surel 2002). Where mainstream politics has adopted the character and practice of cartelization, favourable conditions are gradually created for the emergence and development of anti-party and anti-political-establishment parties (Mudde 1996; Schedler 1996) in which the leadership takes on the central role of the opposition. The populist leader simultaneously becomes the actor and director of the conflict between the people and the élite in a production where the leader is the symbol of the incompatibility with a lacklustre and impersonal élite class, to

be blamed for the cultural distrust felt towards parties which have existed in various forms from the beginning.

### 3. *Crisis of political representation and development of populism*

Populism originated and developed by exploiting the opportunities arising from a sentiment of disenchantment with party politics, on the one hand, and on the other, by attempting to make anti-politics politically active and electorally significant on a mass level. Although the attribute “populist” is associated with a degenerative and potentially dangerous phenomenon for democracy, populism *de facto* lies within the confines of representative democracy, albeit peripherally (Arditi 2005). Indeed, to emerge and develop, populism requires representative democracy, that is to say a democratic procedural context in which to propose a new political and electoral option through a political party. At the same time, a hypothetical “crisis” of representation starts with the different changes to the social bases of democracy and, as a result, with the relationship between modernization, democratization and the role of “political entrepreneurs” within a power struggle. As a disease of liberal democracy or as a thermometer measuring the ineffective responsiveness of its actors, populism connotes a challenge to the reconfiguration of democracy based on new versions of popular sovereignty and constitutional guarantees for the protection of minority groups (Taggart 2002; Deiwick 2009). Like a «drunken guest at a dinner party», populism behaves like an unwanted guest “of” and “in” democracy, underlining the need to rethink the linkage between citizens and politics, as well as the very contents of representation and with it, the entire legitimation process of those in power (Arditi 2005: 90-91). Populism is characterized by contradictions, starting with the fact that it articulates anti-party discourse, but resorts to party form itself, or that it calls for popular participation but that it secures it by simply garnering support for personalized forms of leadership.

Populism can emerge in any stage of the relationship between modernization and democracy and in contexts that differ according to economic structure and political culture, as a result of three possible types of crisis of representation (Roberts 2015: 147-149). The first of these refers to classic populism in South America, called upon to incorporate large heterogeneous masses, without social and political references, organized by parties and trade unions in a democratic political system. The second type involves a lack of legitimacy resulting from the weak institutionalization of a representation system still largely in formation, an example being the new democracies of Eastern

Europe. The third type corresponds to what is happening in advanced European democracies, particularly the process by which parties reinforce their position in public office, but as a result lose their social and ideological anchor and become more and more powerful but less legitimate. In this last example, populism represents a “negative” challenge to parties in favour of overcoming traditional democratic conflict by resorting to the plebiscitary investiture of a leader and a policy of no confidence in democracy *tout court*. The populist challenge to representative democracy can also insert previously excluded groups or issues in the circle of representation, it can build an ideological bridge that supports the creation of new social and political coalitions, it can increase democratic accountability by including new issues and policies in the political system, and it can contribute, like an exogenous shock, to redefining mainstream political parties, movements and public opinion to strengthen the democratization of democracy (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012: 21).

The activation of populism as an alarm for the declining representation of mainstream politics calls into question the very nature of the actions of a community associated with a political party. Indeed, the party, in its Weberian definition, aims at a «goal which is striven for in a planned manner. This goal may be a cause (the party may aim at realizing a program for ideal or material purposes), or the goal may be personal (sinecures, power, and from these, honor for the leader and the followers of the party). Usually the party aims at all these simultaneously» (Weber [1922] 1978: 938). A legitimization crisis of traditional political subjects erupts when there is no longer a balance between pursuing a shared project, strengthening the political class’s power, and the pursuit by citizens/voters of ideals or socio-economic interests. Therefore, there is not just an identity crisis for political parties, but also a crisis regarding the effectiveness of mainstream parties in improving the conditions of their constituents. This step includes a crisis of representation, attributable to the actions of a community that loses all references to the constituencies as a result of the classic fractures of cleavage politics. This crisis, in the different institutional forms it has adopted over time, is not new to democratic politics; it is worth bearing in mind that the party’s sociological structure as a political actor changes «according to the kind of social action which they struggle to influence; that means, they differ according to whether or not the community is stratified by status or by classes» (Idem: 938-939).

The primary ambivalence of the populist hypothesis is rooted in the common characteristic of post-ideological democracies, i.e. disintermediation to overcome the importance of intermediate bodies in terms of information, of identity building and voting choice in the political sphere. The re-articulation of the linkage between politics and institutions occurs gradually under the

personalization of the leadership, whose relationship with voters, politicization of new fractures, and creation of new parties varies according to the type of leader. At the centre of this process lies the prospect of radicalization, which undermines liberal democracy, starting with the absence of separate “political bodies” and “personal bodies”, and the resulting change in the nature of power as a depersonalized institutional place. In a crisis of representation, populism arises and develops as a process of dissolution of the divide between the sphere of the individual and the sphere of power, as part of a push to «re-embody the body politics», in the name of the people and by acting as a lever on the unification of same through the leader (Moffitt 2016: 64). There are two newly configured forms of linkage: participatory linkage, which is characterized by tools encouraging the re-appropriation of an active role for individuals in the planning of political programmes or the selection of political staff; and electoral linkage, particularly in its declination of plebiscitary linkage, in which the leader replaces the parties by representing the “people” as a whole, thus giving form to a populist perspective (Barr 2009: 35).

The disarticulation of political affiliations and growing anti-establishment sentiment amongst the electorate finds in the populist leader a model representative for “anti-political politics”, inasmuch as the person becomes a symbol of opposition to the politics of the party oligarchy. This process leads to the transformation of the very relationship between engagement, participation and mobilization, given that affiliation is decided by the sentiment felt towards the leader. Populist plebiscitarianism is presented as a specific sub-type of democracy with a leader, i.e. populist democracy (Canovan 2002), or rather democracy with a populist leader. The latter emerges in connection with the loss of balance in mass democracy between procedural elements, embodied by liberal constitutional guarantees, and popular sovereignty (Meny and Surel 2002). In other words, the populist political option taken into consideration in this context opposes democracy as a process, «a claim to legitimacy that rests on the democratic ideology of popular sovereignty and majority rule» (Canovan 2002: 25). In the vacuum of collective affiliations, populism challenges liberal democracies, by presenting itself as a salvific form of “identity” and “redemption”, with a political/theology connotation focused on the category of friend/enemy and the mysticism of the people (Canovan 1999; Arato 2015).

Populist plebiscitarianism is an option, even if it is part of the personalization of post-party democracy; however, it differs from leader democracy and the prospects of participatory and deliberative democracy. Calling a referendum or adopting deliberative practices are not used to promote a bottom-up participation, but rather to deconstruct representative mediations. In this sense, populist plebiscitarianism radicalises the prospect of audience democracy and



leader democracy. The leader is not just the redistribution of shares in power from the organization to the top; he becomes a symbol of the opposition to representative politics, an antidote to the democracy of corrupt and self-referential political parties. In other words, populist democracy is anti-elitist, in addition to being anti-pluralist (Mudde 2004: 543), as it challenges traditional parties and the traditional political class but also undermines the legitimacy of a fractured unity of the people in the name of various conflicting interests. In this sense, populism features aspects of political modernity and anti-modernity, and develops across the decline of the traditional élite and the birth and institutionalization of the new élite (Hayward 1996: 20).

Therefore, the issues to be addressed are how the “people” become a political symbol, who promotes their politicization and why, and lastly, the process of establishment of the enemies of the people. In other words, this theoretical perspective is a prerequisite to observe how populism develops in advanced democracies, starting with the role of the “political entrepreneurs” of disenchantment, that is to say populist leaders.

#### *4. Populism and leadership: from ideology to strategy*

Identifying populism as a political family of parties with its own internal coherence in terms of programme policies and identity contents is likely to be misleading when trying to understand a phenomenon that, as part of its chameleonic ambiguity, uses an instrument that can engage in dialogue and merge with existing political ideologies and families (Taggart 2000; Taguieff 2003; Mudde 2004). In what has become one of the most cited perspectives for the analysis of populism, the common conceptual reference is connected to the vision of populism as a «thin-ideology» (Mudde 2004: 543; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012: 8). A thin-ideology based on society being divided into two homogeneous and conflicting groups: on the one hand, the «pure people», on the other the corrupt élites who identify and legitimise politics as an expression of general will for the «good of the people». The core of populist ideology essentially comprises an appeal to the people, holders of moral virtue, and an anti-establishment appeal, in favour of restoring popular sovereignty, which interprets and recovers the redemptive politics constituting democracy (Stanley 2008: 102). Although populism has various manifestations, certain common elements can be identified in the centrality of the people and their uniformity, in anti-elitism, in the use of tools of direct democracy, in the creation of an external enemy, in the amplification of a “crisis”, in the direct style of communication aimed at simplifying complexity, in the polarization of po-

litical positions and, in reference to the leadership, in the use of the image of an outsider and the plebiscitary bond between leader and voters (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008: 6; Rooduijn 2014: 578).

If however we set out to expand the set of characteristics shared by the different forms of populism, even if we only refer to the “political” populisms of contemporary democracies, the presence of common elements does not reduce the different forms of populism in differing political systems. Interpreting populism as a system of coherent ideas behind a well-defined political family would require the existence of a common interpretation of the world and of political reality in terms of design, in terms of a strategy of cognitive simplification, in terms of a process of recognition of a specific social constituency, of shared symbolic codes, values and policies. Moreover, it should not be underestimated that “populist” tends to be a pejorative qualification, attributed from the outside, and not the name by which the members of a specific party or the development of a proper political theory are identified.

The problem therefore is not just identifying how much antagonism there is in populism, but also if it is present and what form it adopts in the political construction of a sovereign people and the opposition to representative distortions of liberal democracy (Panizza 2005: 3-4). In broader terms, if populism is presented as a reaffirmation of popular sovereignty, not to restore the legitimacy of power but rather to exercise it against the élites, then the criterion can be extended to a wide range of political actors and parties that vary in nature. By continuing along the lines of an inclusive criterion, starting from the basic definition of populism, we risk linking a variety of phenomena so broad to the concept as to make it heuristically ineffective, or at least redundant in terms of classic concepts found in socio-political literature. In so doing, what comes into play is a basic form of populism as a show of no-confidence and hostility by citizens towards politics, or populism in the form of communicative rhetoric, a populism of insiders characterized by anti-establishment sentiment within the party or government, hard populism understood as a negation of democratic conflict in the name of hyper-politicization, and lastly, populism in the form of an ideological addendum to other and pre-existing political forms (De Beus 2009). Moreover, if a negative reaction to representative democracy shares different phenomena, the consistency of populism is seen in relation to the political, institutional and policy alternatives to the mainstream politics advanced by various leaders and parties. In the active political and policy part, populism is forced to resort to pre-existing structured ideologies, thereby dismissing the phenomenon from time to time as mainly populist neoliberalism, populist socialism or national populism (Mudde 2007). It follows from the above that the most important dimension for the analysis of the concept is

not so much populism as an ideology, but rather, if the phenomenon in question corresponds (or otherwise) to a particular process of politicization of the opposition to traditional representative politics, and if it features characteristics that differ from those of other parties, movements and leaders.

Even if bottom-up forms of populism that are not necessarily linked to leadership can be found, in advanced democracies it is difficult to disregard political entrepreneurs who activate political opposition to the system. Also, if we consider populism as a cleavage challenging the system, it is possible to recover what has been described under the politicization of cleavages and perceive the development of populism not as a simple type of regime, political movement or party model, or even as an ideology, but rather as a particular process of political mobilization (Jansen 2011: 82). Every process of mobilization in democracies consists of certain steps and political actors included in the struggle for power by constructing a political offer that can activate opposition in society, but which needs to be organized and articulated, with an identity and political form, by a political entrepreneur or an alliance of political entrepreneurs (Bartolini 2000: 13). In shifting from a party-based democracy to a democracy where personalization is a common trend, the key is to identify how certain leaders succeed in producing the politicization of sentiments of detachment and distrust towards the political class and traditional parties and offering themselves as the “voice and image” of the people and “personifying” those exact same political options.

It is certainly worth reiterating that not every process of personalization and not every new political rift can be linked to populism. A disintermediated appeal to voters is the characteristic trait of personalization, but it is in the strategy adopted to make a politically relevant appeal to the people that we can identify the specifics of the populist sub-type of personalized leadership. Populism, as a political strategy, is the process by which a personalized leader activates an anti-establishment cleavage at political level by appealing to the people, who do not pre-exist in their “community” dimension, but which he himself moulds, based on conditions of no-confidence, disenchantment or alienation from politics (Weyland 2001; Roberts 2015; Moffitt 2016). If it wants to be a political and electoral option, populism needs a process of politicization and institutionalization, but where anti-political and anti-party sentiment is not sufficient; what is needed is action that makes the invisible visible, with a recognisable identity. In other words, political representation still needs subjects who activate the process. In this sense, populist strategy features two contradictions. Firstly, the fact that populism takes on the form of a political party operating in the electoral arena, whilst still making anti-party appeals and challenging party democracy. Secondly, even if it is in the name of the

people's sovereignty and to reject the corrupt élites, populism criticises representative democracy. It is only according to the rules and guarantees of liberal democracy that "realized populism" can emerge.

As observed, a populist leader does not only operate the politicization of collective resentment, but also a more pervasive construction of the people and their mobilization. The populist leader does not present himself as a representative of the people, but as an integral part of the people, as a servant leader, as the people's spokesperson, as a member of the same "imagined community" he built and manipulated. The populist leader does not "meet" the people, he «creates the people of populism»; he embodies them and gives shape and form to a substance that in truth, does not already have a developed dimension in the social body (Moffitt 2016: 64). Populist opposition creates legitimacy and a sentiment of trust and confidence in its leaders, thanks to the glue that is identity mobilization, and by exploiting the political opportunities arising from the processes of social and political change under way.

### *5. The "people" as a political construction*

The strategic action of the populist leader relates to the social and political characteristics of the context in which it is adopted, and in particular, to the type of democratization and modernization of a country and to the type of political culture that distinguishes a political system. The appeal of the populist leader is therefore presented in two ways: by affirming and recalling an "imagined" community of unity, which can be traced back to the ideal of "general will" and which does not permit fragmentation and minority; or, by addressing the common man, the man on the street, who remains in his private dimension, who does not participate in collective processes, with the exception of media build-up of common sense elevated to «everyone's wish» status (Weyland 2001: 15). The relevance of the populist leader is not only connected to the activation of a personalized bond, which, as such, would reflect the personalization of politics and not connote a populist specificity, except in terms of pure rhetoric. In this paper, we have assumed that populist strategy is not a simple plebiscitary mobilization, and that it cannot be linked to simple psychological behaviour, a particular social class or a series of policies (Muller 2016: 40). It is not enough to simply oppose the élites; an appeal and the construction of a people is necessary, people with moral characteristics ahead of political ones.

The construction of cleavage establishment vs. anti-establishment is not the aggregation and articulation of a specific social group's interests, but rath-

er the ability to create a collective recognition within a common definition of “people”; a heterogeneous people whose mobilization can lead to the simultaneous development of different interests amongst those who are mobilized and in the mobilising leader, without the latter being the subject of protest (Jansen 2011: 85). This strategy, aside from the “mystique of the people”, does not subordinate a political community to a pre-existing social body, which can be replicated by the same political family in various national contexts, but rather articulates a political offer anchored in specific contextual cases. The instruments of this process are able to manipulate and to use identity to counter, to legitimise a heterogeneous, and potentially conflicting, group of interests and expectations. In particular, the populist strategy avails itself of a Manichaean simplification, i.e. “good” and “bad”, friends and enemies that is instrumental in the creation of solidarity amongst socially diverse individuals. The personalization of populist leadership therefore operates as a form of disintermediation, similar to the personalized leadership of audience democracies, but it differs from the latter in that populism makes a moral reference to a primitive order where political representative mediation is not necessary and the leader stands as a symbol of an all-embracing people (Hermet 2001).

Populist mobilization by the populist leader requires, first and foremost, a definition of the internal and external confines of the people (De La Torre 2015: 5). In other words, if strategic action and mobilization are done in “the name of the people”, who are the people of the populists? The appeal made to the people varies, depending on social, economic and political context, and refers to ethnic, civic, collectivist or particularistic nationalism (De Raadt, Hollanders and Krouwel 2004). In broader terms, the various forms of populism refer to conceptions of the people, which underline the dimension of the people as sovereign, as class, as nations, or which underline the condition of the people, in the form of «underdogs» or the «everyman» (Canovan 1984: 315). However, whereas the conception of the sovereign people recalls the *demos* and the direct re-appropriation of sovereignty, the social space in which the populist strategy is adopted for the construction of the people as an “imagined community” is forced to face the social phenomena surrounding the crisis of the middle class in advanced societies and the creation of a social divide between the winners and losers of globalization (Kriesi *et al.* 2012). This perspective is primarily the result of the emergence and progressive evolution of the parties of the new radical right in the midst of a «silent counter-revolution» (Ignazi 2003), in which the winners and losers of new, global social processes have to deal with the impact of phenomena such as immigration, European integration, insecurity due to the absence of welfare systems and job prospects (Bornschier 2010: 37-38).

### 5.1 *The crisis of the middle class and politicized insecurity*

The relationship between the middle class and populism is particularly central to a socio-economic crisis or when the perception of insecurity lends itself to the manipulation of outside leaders; a phenomenon not unknown to democratic political systems, cited by Lipset in reference to McCarthyism and Poujadism as the activation of an extremism of the centre within the middle class in a period of «insoluble frustrations of those who feel cut off from the main trends of modern society» (Lipset [1960] 1963: 178). The prospective decline of the middle class does not only involve the worsening of economic conditions for those professions belonging to the middle class. Indeed, the middle class represents a «nebula, comprising various social figures, but which somehow can be distinguished in its entirety» (Bagnasco 2016: 8), whose common traits refer to education levels, lifestyle, consumption habits, job security and life. From the moment the middle class begins to fray at the seams, in addition to a perception of status deprivation and inconsistency, a problem involving democracy arises. The reason for this is that the middle class in European societies is the political result of a compromise by the welfare state, a project of politics and policies benefitting democratic stability.

What happens if the middle class in crisis is radicalized? The middle class can essentially develop an extremism of the centre, which, if not linked to the «fascism of the centre» claimed by Lipset ([1960] 1963), activates political behaviours in a political context ranging from the reactionary defence of threatened interests, to calls for protectionism, to willingness to accept authoritarian hypotheses (Touraine 2002: 239). In the current state of European societies, the middle class has become a place of insecurity, especially in the face of the social regulation of the welfare system, which had accompanied growth and rising social prospects, but which is no longer there; at the same time, the politics of the nation-state has limited power when it comes to playing a role in national regulation processes. The combined effect of these processes does not imply the end of the middle class as a set of professions belonging to the tiers of social stratification, but faced with an escalating crisis and increasing risks, there is the possibility that social demotion and panic will activate populist and totalitarian forms of defence, as was the case in the 1930s (Bagnasco 2016: 150-151). Based on the analysis of Bagnasco (Idem: 204), political change has yet to activate extreme political forms, because the current stage is one of tension and anxiety, not of panic amongst the middle classes; however, the economic and financial crisis of 2008 contributed significantly to the emergence of politicized dissent on the part of new political entrepreneurs, introducing the simplification of political complexity through the gap between the “fragile” and the delegitimized élites.

Such a radical change in the European context does not occur in a system without ideological anchors or even in terms of the complete disintegration of social affiliations; it happens with the birth and development of anti-establishment subjects from the new right and the new left. In this sense, the people of the new radical and populist right are built around the concept of «differential nativism», of nationalist populism that loses the ideological character of the traditional neo-fascist right and openly opposes multiculturalism and globalization (Betz 2003: 195). The people of the new populist right are composed of the losers of globalization, whose identity is not built in the name of the recovered participation by the individual citizen in political processes, but rather with the recognition and trust accorded to top leadership by an (alleged) unitary constituency (Ignazi 2003; Mudde 2007). Since the economic and financial crisis of 2008, a populist dimension has opened in the new radical left, through new political formations that no longer correspond to the traditional social constituency of the 20<sup>th</sup> century left of the workers (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014; March 2011; Mudde 2017). Despite the emphasis placed by the new radical/populist left on participatory and deliberative processes for the democratization of democracy, as well as the emphasis placed on the tools for participation made possible by the new media, once again the role of the leadership in the construction of the people constitutes a key element. The populism of the left has a particular characteristic which recalls the theory redefining the political processes of Laclau and those who speak of the “theory of discourse” to explain populism. Laclau links the dynamic to a post-Marxist perspective where populism takes on a role that can be subversive compared to the existing order but also able to reconstruct a new order when the previous one is in a state of political and institutional crisis. From this perspective, populism corresponds to a highly political process, in which the «discourse» of the leader produces a social construction of the «politician» by formulating the fragmented questions of society around a «new core» (Laclau 2008: 169). In other words, for Laclau, populism becomes politics itself; it is not based on a pre-determined system of class, but it does correspond to a political style that creates identities based on «equivalential chains of unsatisfied demands» (Ibidem), thanks to the ability of the leader to exercise a new hegemony aimed at creating a homogeneous people, no longer identified by the concept of class. Apart from the highlighted differences between the populism of the new right and the new left, what emerges from the analysis of the phenomenon in European democracies is that the leader plays a key role in activating a political strategy focused on the identity dimension of the “people” and on the inability for action and on the responsibility of the traditional power élite for the crisis.

### 6. *Populist leadership and charismatic leadership*

In the politicization of dissent, which emerges in the crisis of political representation and the growing personalization of politics and leadership, there is frequently an association between the populist and charismatic dimensions of the leadership. Like populism, charisma is the subject of numerous interpretations in terms of its potential use in modern democracies. Compared to Weber's original argument, according to which charisma is not a quality present in every form of leadership, but which does expressly refer to an individual endowed with supernatural power or to personal or objective carriers of charisma (Weber 1978: 1134), the debate on charisma in democracies focuses on those who support its presence in modern democratic politics together with rationalization processes (Cavalli 1981) and on those who refer to their own attribution of pre-modern politics (Loewenstein 1966). Without going into the debate on the foundations of charisma, if we assume that it is merely a form of rhetoric then it would be an empty signifier, a simple demagogic attribution based on the semblance of a leader, which differs from the leader as a personality (Cavalli 1987b: 105). The concept of charisma, and even more so the relationship between charisma and democracy, can be interpreted in different ways; however, what is fixed is the fact that charisma cannot be superimposed by the concept of notoriety, the concept of political popularity or simple electoral success (Van der Brug and Mughan 2007: 31; Blondel and Thièbault 2010: 42). By examining the extraordinary nature and quality of a leader, we can observe how the emergence of charismatic leadership stands a greater chance in modern democracies marked by personalization processes and the absence of mass parties in the conditions Weber referred to and above all, in the ideological politics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Cavalli 1987a: 324). Certain conditions highlighted by Weber are still valid, starting with situations of extraordinary crisis for the possible emergence of a leader, a sense of mission and the presence of certain basic, leader-like characteristics, such as passion, defined as dedication to a cause, a sense of responsibility and far-sightedness (Weber 1919), conditions that lie at the heart of that ability to strike a balance between ethics of conviction and ethics of rationality in politics. The «politics of the extraordinary» is therefore availed of certain characteristics referring to the delegitimization of the pre-existing order of symbols, politics, institutions and values, with a new legitimation stemming from the charisma of the leader himself, the effect being radical change through the introduction of a solution to the crisis (Kalyvas 2008: 65).

Even in the partial similarity between the two phenomena in terms of crisis, anti-establishment and personalization, we can distinguish charismatic personalism from populist personalism, starting with the characteristics of



charisma in democratic systems, and by highlighting the differences in terms of the strategy adopted by the populist leader. Indeed, whilst the degree to which the leader controls the party, the disintermediation of his relationship with the voters, the personalization of power within the establishment and the dynamics of outsiders and the anti-establishment are all traits shared by populism and charisma, as noted by Pappas (2016: 3), the reconstruction of a new political and institutional order adopts the characteristics of radicalism that go well beyond the delegitimization of the traditional political class.

One cannot ignore the fact that the overlapping of populism and charisma is cited in extensive literature, particularly in that which analysed the emergence of the new radical right in the 1990s and which identified as its main characteristics a lack of institutionalization and reliance on charismatic leaders around whom dissent towards mainstream politics formed (Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Betz and Immerfall 1998; Taggart 2000). Populist leadership is frequently associated with charisma, especially in the leaders of the new radical right, and with an overlapping of other phenomena in reference to both the characteristics of the leaders and the personalization of politics and top leadership, and the political parties. Recognising in a populist leader the attribute of charisma does not prevent a part of these terms from being expressed as “similar” or prevent us from suggesting that we are dealing with synonyms. Taggart (2000: 169), for example, states that populism has a certain propensity for charismatic leadership, but this is an indication of its greater predilection for a strong leadership. Even more indicative of an association that is likely to increase the problems of populism is Kriesi’s analysis (2014), which, on the one hand, recognises the charisma in populist leaders as communication without intermediaries, and on the other, recognises how this quality “facilitates” populism without exhausting the phenomenon *per sé*.

Therefore, although there is still the tendency to highlight charisma as an inherent attribute of populism, a new perspective was recently developed, which, at the very least, problematises the juxtaposition of these two phenomena (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Jansen 2011; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2014; Pappas 2016). Those perspectives that are wary of expressing charisma as an attribute of populist leadership begin with different considerations. It is not only the emphasis placed on populism as a thin-ideology that has limited the necessary presence of charismatic leadership, but also the more general perspective of non-charismatic personalism (Ansell and Fish 1999). When applied to populism, it has led to the description of the neo-populist leader as just “one of us”, one of the people, and to the consideration that the trust accorded to him is inextricably linked to the achievement of a goal, to a period of media coverage or to the perception that there is no other alternative (Miscoiu 2013: 23-24).

Indeed, attributing charismatic qualities to populist leaders is the result of too broad an interpretation of the two concepts, given that the extraordinary qualities of charisma are made to coincide mainly with a demagogic attitude and media popularity. As observed by Panizza (2005: 19-20), the populist leader builds his message through symbolic storytelling, featuring myths, partial ideological references and data use, but no programme, and by focusing on his success outside of politics, particularly his unfamiliarity with the political system, its rules and, even more so, his disposition towards «political correctness». The populist leader depoliticises politics and hyper-politicises social relations, in the sense that he uses his private, professional and business life as proof of his being a successful outsider, a “self-made man”; in so doing, he testifies to the opportunity for social ascent by anyone, since he himself is part of and equal to the people.

Based on what has been argued thus far, we can see that the key aspect of the charismatic leader’s message is not to oppose politics, but rather to transform the system he symbolises. Otherwise, the populist leader has to continuously reiterate his hostility towards the system to keep a tight rein on his followers, without introducing elements, such as programme choices or defined policies that could potentially divide his followers. Moreover, if charisma presupposes a direct and emotionally intense relationship between the leader and his followers, then it is possible that not all political and party manifestations of populism are characterized by complete acceptance of the leader. Moreover, the actual link between leader and followers can have a charismatic connotation, not at electorate level, but for the faithful followers of the leader, resulting in a different and more restricted connotation that is not for the masses but rather an example of «coterie charisma» (Eatwell 2006; McDonnell 2015).

Despite the fact that charisma is connected to the foundations of an advanced democracy, it features certain characteristics that are not immediately translatable and that, in some cases, are nothing like populism. Firstly, the fact that the main and ideological reference of populism is the people and not the leader’s charisma means that popular sovereignty and a mythologized community play a pre-ordained role instead of the leader himself. Secondly, the fact that the charismatic leader is not “equal” to the people; instead, he has a quality that makes him “superior”, and as such, he becomes an example and a guide for the people, who go on to radically redefine themselves according to their values, not by virtue of a pre-existing imagined community, but by a new community founded “by” and “on” the leader himself. Claiming that charisma is inherent to populist leadership would only lead to the identification of a rhetorical and demagogic attribute for this quality in the language

of politics, and not to the establishment of a social relationship based on the legitimising role of an emotionally intense relationship, in which the followers perceive the leader as the “solution” to the crisis.

The populist leader is he who manages to activate politically a series of contrasting feelings, interests and questions formulated in a society undergoing profound changes in terms of democracy and political representation, by building a “discourse”, a “narrative” that adheres perfectly to the disorientation of individuals, without necessarily offering a solution, but with a resounding echo. It therefore becomes crucial to capture “the mood” of the people through opinion polls, by standardising an appeal that is not structured but latent, that makes no claim to new policies. In such a dynamic, it is easy to see the representative weakness of traditional political subjects, on the one hand, and the weakness of a civil society that is not activated by horizontal ties of an associative nature, on the other. Opposing the political class becomes a shortcut to turning to a new leader, instead of launching critical reflection to overcome the disintegration of basic social and political ties. In this sense, Taguieff (2003: 106-107) refers expressly to the ability to manipulate and elaborate symbolic codes and simplified cognitive tools by three different types of «populist demagogues», whose characteristics are not just necessarily hybridized, but co-present in single leaders. The populist leader can therefore act as a Tribune addressing the people to win their trust, a leader who works on the shared feelings of the people to manipulate them, and lastly, a player of the media who, by means of his abilities to stimulate the collective “dream” of the people, bypasses and counters the methods adopted by the élites he is opposing.

### *7. Conclusions: populism beyond rhetoric*

In conclusion, how useful is populism when analysing the politics of advanced democracies? The development of a political sociology of populism is a way to analyse the changes to the redefinition of political actors and contents and, in particular, the shift from a democracy forged “by” and “on” parties where personalized leadership becomes the only trustworthy actor. In this paper, we have assumed that populism is not just an anti-establishment attitude or a mere show of empathy generated by communication skills; otherwise, instead of analysing the concept of populism, we could have interpreted the phenomena in light of rhetorical and demagogic skills. At the same time, the populist leader does not overlap with the more general trend towards personalization of the top leadership, and the populist leadership is not synonymous with charismatic leadership.

The perspective adopted in this paper aims to bring together populism and the representation gap created between mainstream politics and the citizens. On the one hand, society no longer has the social layout of the twentieth century, and it has been overrun by insecurity and tension in the middle classes as a result of the crisis in the traditional welfare system and the re-spatialization of financial and migration flows stemming from globalization. On the other, politics is aware that the parties of the establishment have failed to re-define responsiveness in terms of identity and policy. Added to this is the proceduralization of democracy, which is without a suitable component to generate trust and supranational regulation, as is the case of the European Union, which is bound to non-majority institutions and by an incomplete political process. However, we would be unable to comprehend the importance attributed to the populist leader from the analytical perspective adopted in this paper, if we did not analyse two additional processes that set apart society and advanced democracies, i.e. the personalization of politics to identify and disintermediate and the strategy behind the construction of a “people”, holders of morality and virtue and therefore in conflict with the power of the corrupt and self-referential establishment.

The problem is not determining whether or not leadership is important, but rather what leadership we are talking about in reference to populism at a time when political phenomena can no longer focus exclusively on the parties as collective organizations. The personalization of leader democracy indicates that strengthening a leader’s power occurs at the expense of intermediate bodies and organizations, but it is also a process of elaboration for policy or ideology within parties that change in terms of organization and function compared to mass parties, but which are also pre-existing and survive the leader. Radically put, the populist leader operates the “politics of disintermediation”, a politics of anti-politics, i.e. he transforms overcoming intermediate bodies in traditional politics into value and identity, the glue and strategy of his appeal to the people. A strategy in the struggle for power, that sees in the delegitimization of the establishment’s traditional politics the tool by which to gain consensus. The juxtaposition between populism and charisma is also analysed, not only because of the presence of non-charismatic populisms or personalization, but also because of the intrinsic and constitutive difference between the conceptual cores of the two phenomena. The populist leader becomes “one of the people” and puts the people in a position of supreme moral virtue, ahead of all political virtue, turning his anti-establishment appeal into his very own political programme and action. Charisma, from the perspective of modern democracy, confirms its ability to solve a crisis thanks to a process that focuses on a quality of the leader that goes beyond rhetoric and which

does not put the leader next to the people but above them. Charisma creates a solution, whereas populism creates a constructed image of the people that, in political action, is an end in itself. Moreover, confidence in the populist leader is conditioned by the similarity in claims and it does not set in motion the acknowledgment of a leader whose bond is founded on the people's faith in his ability to be the bearer of a new political order. If in the populist leadership the appeal to the people is instrumental in the *pars destruens* of "politicising the protest", then in charismatic leadership what prevails in the *pars costruens* is the "great reform" where a previous political reform has failed. We can therefore advance an interpretation of the phenomena, according to which both populist leadership, and by extension a populist democracy, and charismatic leadership, and by extension a charismatic plebiscitary democracy, constitute different subtypes of leader democracy as a general process, marking the shift from a democracy of ideologies to a mass post-party democracy.

Moreover, in light of the processes described above, it is possible to articulate a gradation of populism and introduce the difference between soft and hard populism. Hard populism can be traced back to an outside leader, an outsider unfamiliar with the party system who nonetheless does not place himself outside the perimeter of representative democracy but instead is focused on opposing the establishment. Soft populism is one of the strategic resources that can be mobilized by an outsider within a traditional party to replace the old dominant coalition, through a symbolic discourse opposing the establishment "inside" the party itself. What remains however is the ambiguity of an excessive expansion of soft populism, given that the opposition to the establishment, the personalization of leadership and the use of «bad manners» in political discourse (Moffitt 2016) are not sufficient for there to be populism. Populism as a strategy for politicization requires the "construction of the people" as a homogeneous whole, an imagined community of virtue, to be preserved from the corruption of the élite. If the appeal to the people were only based on the search for catch-all consensus, then it would be difficult to distinguish a populist leader from a personalized one; the people of the populists are one, pure and as such, subject to a unitary representation that does not concede defeat on diverging interests. In other words, the catch-all formula is compatible with the pluralism of political conflict, whereas if innate to populism, it is the politicization of the people as a whole that results in the de-politicization of conflict in democracy.

In conclusion, the challenge for political sociology is not just to analyse populism as a crisis of the bureaucratic-professional party in terms of loss of importance for assemblies and the intermediate political class, of the insignificance of organizations on the territory, of the loss of representative capacity of

traditional political identities. If tackled on the basis of the above indicators, populism lends itself to a heuristically sterile label, or rather to being referred to as a nominal variant of the concepts that have always existed in socio-political research. Conversely, if considered as a particular strategy adopted by the new entrepreneurs of politics in an attempt to politically activate fragmented social bases by making the appeal against the establishment the lowest common denominator of identity, then populism can represent a theoretically and empirically stimulating phenomenon in a period of profound change in civil society and in Europe's political society.

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