In a short statement released late in the evening of April 23, 2017, just after the first run of the French presidential elections, *madame* Marine Le Pen, the well-known candidate of the far-right party *Front National* who had won the second position after Emmanuel Macron, addressed her supporters gathered in her headquarters:

Il est temps désormais de libérer le peuple français, tout le peuple, sans oublier nos compatriotes d'Outre-Mer qui ont exprimé à mon égard une confiance qui m'honore, il est temps de libérer le peuple français d'élites arrogantes qui veulent lui dicter sa conduite. Car oui, je suis la candidate du peuple[1]. (Le Pen 2017a)

This passage, quite impressive indeed, seems clear enough to introduce the working hypothesis that I will try to prove throughout this paper, that is to show how much, and how frequently, populists set up their discourse around a relatively small number of patterns, which happen to be often intertwined. All in all, my guess is that we may identify three main narratives:

1) the worship of the people;

2) a hidden appeal to prejudice;

3) the rhetoric of privilege.

Why are they so fundamental? In my view, because they serve the creation of the most remarkable character which may be found in most populist galleries, i.e. the 'enemy of the people', who apparently enjoys all those benefits and rights that people at large have been stripped of. I will proceed by offering a quick insight into the most interesting studies on populism and its rhetoric, sketching the three main narrative patterns by means of a close look at recent samples of populist political communication and, as a final point, submitting some provisional closing remarks.

Defining Populism: A Never-Ending Story

The vast and varied literature on populism, its nature and rhetorical legacy is proof of a continuing fascination for scholars, who, nonetheless, fail to agree on a standard definition of the concept itself. Three approaches, at least, contend the market of political science, each stressing a (presumably) unique feature of populism:

1) the *ideology* approach;

2) the *discoursive* approach;

3) the *attitude* approach.

According to the first, populism can be understood only in terms of an ideology, however thin it may be (Canovan 1981, Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). It is, for sure, an odd ideology, moving beyond class identity and political affiliation (the left/right cleavage so often derided by populists) but holding a strong grab on the sovereignty of the people, the crucial role of leaders (whose words often have a healing effect on social evils, according to Incisa di Camerana 1976) and the anti-establishment perspective, issues which could make of populism an *inner* alternative to the liberal democratic theory and practice (Mény and Surel 2000).

Still, the ideology approach underestimates the communicative value of populist narratives, which is why a good number of researchers have developed the discoursive approach, focusing on the rhetorical patterns performed by most populist leaders and representatives. Scholars such as Taguieff (2002), Laclau (2005), Reisigl (2007) and Cedroni (2010), however differing in the scope and methodology of their analyses, share a common belief in the fact that populism is «a political style that is used by a wide range of actors across the world

today» and consequently highlight its «performative aspects» (Moffitt 2016: 28).

Others, though, – like Betz (1994), Taggart (2000) and De la Torre (2008) – deem both the ideology approach and the discoursive approach equally inadequate to embrace a phenomenon so complex as populism is. In fact, their proposal lies in the depiction of populism as an *attitude*, a state of mind marked by «a peculiar vision of social order grounded on the faith in the aboriginal virtues of the people, whose primacy as the sole legitimate foundation of political life and governmental policies is openly and proudly called for» (Tarchi 2015: 52).

Notwithstanding the differences, the aforementioned approaches converge towards the acknowledgment of 'the people' as a key principle in populist thought and storytelling. Yet, they seem to miss – more or less extensively – a crucial point, i.e. that the supremacy of the people (at least, in the brand new fashion sanctioned by populists) is forcefully, and furtively, connected to an ambiguous usage of stereotypes and prejudices in order to stimulate a spontaneous reaction of the people (i.e. the voters) against those targets which are blamed for their privileges (however real or presumed). This is what I will deal with in the next two paragraphs.

The People

What do populist mean when they invoke 'the people'? If it is true that «all forms of populism without exception involve some kind of exaltation and appeal to 'the people'» (Canovan 1981: 294), a remarkable feature of contemporary European and North American populism seems to be located in their embracing losers and victims – of globalization, governments and ruling classes, international organizations, industrial and financial élites, intellectual circles etc. – and turning them into 'the people'[2]. A pro-common man and anti-elitist stance has always characterized any sort of populism, of course: for instance, the former leader of the *Austrian Freedom Party* (FPÖ), Jörg Haider, repeatedly stated that «very often plain people got a much wider good sense than top-notch politicians, who

nonetheless try to teach them what moves their inner desires» (Cedroni 2014: 48). But, while we must surely keep in mind the «difference between populist audiences (those who are spoken *to* by populists) and populist constituencies (those who are spoken *for* by populists)» (Moffitt 2016: 96), it is nonetheless amazing to hear of how many odes to the *real*, and therefore *disgraced*, men and women are stunningly sung by populists, as in the case of Donald Trump's inaugural address:

What truly matters is not which party controls our government, but whether our government is controlled by the people. January 20th 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 longer. Everyone is listening to you now. (Trump 2017a)

In this portrait of 'the people', the moral and political dimensions of public life are strictly tied up, so that Nicholas Bay, the secretary-general of the *Front National*, could assert, back in 2015, that «the French long for a real, meaningful change, not merely a political but a moral break», since they had looked with disappointment at «the disdain towards democracy and the people displayed in the last few days by the affiliates of the political élite» (Bay 2015). These words let us notice another double-sided feature of populism, that is the contempt for traditional politicians and the consequent acclaim of populist leaders as the sole 'voices of the people'.

No surprise that both Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen, just to mention the most relevant, have largely relied on some slogans of the sort all along their campaigns: Trump's merchandising managers made stickers and hats available with the motto 'I am your voice' and sold them abundantly, while Le Pen's posters often claimed her being '*la voix du peuple*'. But why are populist leaders deemed as extraordinary by their supporters, at least as far as their proximity with the people is concerned? Because they can handle quite skillfully the rhetoric of difference: 'us' and 'them', 'pure people' and 'the corrupted few', the 'honest bulk of the people' against the 'wealthy turncoats'. A very good example, once again, is offered by a passage in Trump's inaugural speech:

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. (Trump 2017a)

In sum, populist leaders are perceived as different not merely because they can legitimately speak for the people, but in so far as they *belong to the people* – which is funny, indeed, when we recall that a lot of populist billionaires like Trump, Berlusconi, Perot, Fujimori and many more have pretended to act as the true representatives of the common people. In so doing, it has been written with more than a reason, they can be successful «by emphasizing action and masculinity, playing into cultural stereotypes of the people and by proposing 'common sense' solutions at odds with the opinion of experts» (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 68). In the meantime, we should never forget what Jan-Werner Müller has argued so persuasively, that «in addition to being antielitist, populists are always *antipluralist*. Populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people» (Müller 2016: 2). Which is why they need to sketch a detailed catalogue of enemies and their servants, appealing to our inner prejudices to decry their pretended privileges and clearing the way for an illiberal, absolute representative presumption.

Enemies, Prejudices, and Privileges

Many enemies, much honour: it seems like our populists have learnt the lesson well. Professional politicians, as we have seen, are the first on the list since they belong to the

worst class, that of the 'enemies of the people'. Politicians are not reliable because «they are not willing to do anything for you [common people], since they are submitted to Brussels, Berlin, to corporate interests and financial powers» (Le Pen 2017c); besides, they do not comply with the popular will, a reason to choose the populists who, instead, «offer the electorate a real alternative to the old status quo» and «ensure that the politicians are reminded that real people must not be ignored» (UKIP 2017: 2, 3).

Politicians, though, are just a small portion of the overwhelming assemblage of the enemies. Matteo Salvini, the young leader of the *Northern League*, tweeting right after the first run of the French presidential elections, for instance, included in the list «politicians and journalists, philosophers and pseudo-artists» not to mention the «bankers [who] celebrate Macron», while «around 40% of farmers and workers voted for Marine Le Pen» (Salvini 2017). Farmers and workers, the 'pure people', who vote for the populists, against the (un)happy few. Who are the latter? The privileged, the rich, the well-educated, the well-born, the ones who live under the State's patronage and drain resources from the poor while scorning them.

Other targets, yet, are required these days: the EU and eurocrats are among the best for populists, both right-wing and left-wing (let me mention at least the anti-European rhetoric of *Podemos* and *Syriza*). European authorities are seen, a priori, as unfriendly rivals and true obstacles on the path of the people: UKIP leaders, for example, have long dreamt, before Brexit, of «a Britain released from the shackles of the interfering EU» since Europe is a «failing super-state that tells us what to do and does not listen to what we want» (UKIP 2015: 5). Of course eurocrats enjoy plenty of privileges, granted by the States' contribution to the EU budget and sharply criticized by populists who, as in the case of the *Finns Party*, ask for the «termination of detrimental EU-bureaucracy» (The Finns Party 2015b: 5). Besides, eurocrats' guilt exceeds by far their existence being, as they are sometimes, «designated by national governments to sit in mysterious committees» (Lega Nord 2014: 3).

The EU, in fact, in most populist narratives is portrayed as the 'bad guy' who forces member States to raise taxes and cut the healthcare, social insurance, culture etc., while the same «nation States are less and less democracy-driven», since the EU is an «obscure and distant entity» and does not listen to the people (Lega Nord 2014: 3). But Europe is responsible, as well and most noticeably, of the worst crime of all (in mainstream populist perception): the

'open-door' policy when it comes to immigration issues. Right-wing populism has monopolized the topic, since it «endorses a nativist notion of belonging, linked to a chauvinist and racialized concept of 'the people' and 'the nation'» (Wodak 2015: 47); it consequently blames European authorities for «the EU's founding, unshakable principle of the 'free movement of people'» (UKIP 2015: 12) and proposes the «demission of the Schengen treaty to take back control of national borders» (Le Pen 2017b).

Still, there is something more subtle and disguising: the frequent appeals to anti-migrants prejudices (mostly anti-Muslim, at present) are often mingled – at least in the last few years – with a novel narrative pattern which emphasizes the alleged privileges of migrants and asylum seekers. After all, few months ago, Donald Trump explicitly told the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, that «immigration is a privilege, not a right, and the safety of our citizens must always come first» (Trump 2017b). But the same applies to what has been called the 'welfare chauvinism', a phenomenon that has recently reached its apex when European populist parties such as *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), the Swiss *UDC*, the *Front National* and the *Finns' Party* (formerly known as the *True Finns*), have denied any legitimacy to whatever claim over national healthcare and social security programs put forward by «migrants who lack necessary skills for employment as well as for those with religious and cultural reasons that are not willing to accept basic European concepts and principles of equality and freedom of speech» (The Finns Party 2015a: 1). Even more plainly, right-wing populists very often deplore the fact that 'our people' is left behind, while the State and communities 'pay for them':

The Finns Party does not accept that people can reside in Finland illegally – never mind that these people are getting health and social care as well as extra and wider services. The asylum seekers are also getting support for transport and leisure activities – this situation should be reviewed. The Finnish welfare-state should not be acting as a magnet for immigration – the system should be prioritising Finns for receiving education and medical care and treatment services. The repercussion of the immigration flow on the welfare-system and its effect on the Finnish population must be brought under control. (The Finn's Party 2017: 11)

How? Easy to figure out: as a first step, by the «termination of any public medical aid for illegal migrants» (Le Pen 2017c); then, maybe, introducing «an Australian-style points based system to manage the number and skills of people coming into the country» (UKIP 2015: 11) and so forth. The anti-privileged-migrants narrative deployed by populists is multifaceted as it is effective.

We have come so far to witness a full circle: the worship of 'the people' – even better: the belief that populists, and they alone, serve «the interests of a imagined homogeneous people inside a nation State» (Wodak 2015: 47) – has become the basis, and the ideological anchorage, for a series of appeals to intimate, well-rooted stereotypes and prejudices fueled by a discourse centered on a flamboyant condemnation of the privileges that others than 'the pure people' (politicians, bureaucrats, journalists, businessmen, intellectuals and, lately, migrants) apparently enjoy against the popular will. And this, in turn, «attracts the attention of the all-important media through which they [populist leaders] broadcast their appeal to 'the people'» (Moffitt: 68). *Voilà*.

Final Remarks

In this paper I have tried to argue, looking at the most recent samples of political discourse in Europe and America, that most messages sent by populist are intended to flatter the people and stimulate prejudice-based reactions by means of the rhetoric of privilege, the strong impact of which on public opinion cannot be underrated. These narrative patterns, in my view, serve the purpose of creating a large gallery of enemies – however implausible they can be – that populists must rely on to develop their anti-establishment arguments.

What does this outcome tell us on populism and its nature? First, it confirms that Ruth Wodak was right when she maintained that populists are used to «instrumentalize some kind of ethnic/religious/linguistic/political minority as a *scapegoat* for most if not all current woes and subsequently construe the respective group as dangerous and a threat 'to us', 'to the people'» (Wodak 2015: 2), even though we might add that the same applies to any social

group that doesn't fit in their fictional portrait of 'the people'. Second, it gives us some practical insights into the rhetorical tricks veiled under their advocating a democratic revival, that, when populists «succeed in leading the government of a democratic society» (as in the case of Hungary and Poland), suddenly turns into an authoritarian project including «centralization of power, weakening of checks and balances, strengthening of the executive, disregard of political opposition and transformation of election in a plebiscite of the leader» (Urbinati 2014: 129).

Our analysis seems to teach us something more, yet: populism prospers where public opinion is too fragile and dumb to find out any hidden appeal to prejudice and stand against it. After all, as Walter Lippmann wrote long ago, public opinion relies heavily on stereotypes, since they offer us «an ordered, more or less consistent picture of the world, to which our habits, our tastes, our capacities, our comforts and our hopes have adjusted themselves» so much that «any disturbance of the stereotypes seems like an attack upon the foundations of the universe» (Lippmann 1991 [1922]: 95). Here, precisely, may be found the final reason why populist rhetoric is so attractive: no challenging thoughts, no self-responsibility, no efforts required, just a number of lame excuses and pleasant customary prejudices. But what's that if not another form of propaganda, a well-designed «effort to alter the picture to which men respond, to substitute one social pattern for another» (Lippmann 1991 [1922]: 26)?

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Endnotes

[1] «It is time, at least, to free the French people, the people as a whole, not to forget our fellow citizens of the departments outside France who have pleased and honoured me with their faith and consent, it is time to free the French people from arrogant élites ready to influence its conduct. Because it’s true: me alone, I am the candidate who speaks for the people».

[2] See Gest (2016).