

The Rhetoric of Identity in Right- and Left-wing Populism: A Brief Survey

Among all the theoretical contributions on the topic, I will rely on the approach which classifies populism as a political style, marked by a set of rhetorical and discursive practices. In this sense, it seems possible to find some connections even between apparently opposite positions when it comes to the adoption of a common populist strategy and its communicative codes. Within this discursive pattern, shared by a politically heterogeneous group of actors, contemporary politics tends to rely more intensively on the logic of othering, namely a process through which the affirmation of one's own identity depends on the positioning in an opposite front compared to the one of the *different* enemy. The *us vs them* rhetoric showed itself efficient because, by simplifying public space, it allows an immediate identification of the individual with a collective front, in addition to a clear discovery of her/his political rival. But how does populism make the spreading of this discursive divide concretely operational? Benjamin Moffitt has persuasively claimed that the appeal of populist rhetoric results from the adoption of a series of narratives, actions and linguistic choices through which populist parties establish a privileged communicative bond with their public. Under these terms, populism as a political style achieves a performative act, and through its discursive practices ties in a political relationship which «typically consists of a proclaimed relationship with the 'public', an us/them attitude and [...] a period of crisis and mobilization» (Moffitt 2016: 31).

Laclau: the Populist Construction of Political Identity

Among the most discussed theorists who adopted and developed this interpretative approach we may find Ernesto Laclau, who based his research precisely on the performative features detectable in populist political discourse. In his well-known *On Populist Reason* the Argentinian scholar proposes an original reading of the phenomenon as he starts wondering: «why could some political alternatives or aims be expressed only through populist means?» (Laclau 2005: 17). The identity crisis that, on different levels, is affecting the traditional actors of the political arena is self-evident: but what are the trajectories of possible evolution of this crisis? Is there any social rationality behind populism? Would it be possible to take advantage of its impetus?

Setting himself apart from the many scholars and policymakers who deem it a pathological disease of contemporary politics, Laclau considers populism an occurrence to study in the light of social dynamics in the process of community building, as a natural process of articulation of the various issues, inscribed in the grammar of the political itself; that is, a natural expression of the political character organic to each individual. From this point of view, populism refers to «a constant dimension of political action which necessarily arises

(in different degrees) in all political discourses, subverting and complicating the operations of the so-called 'more mature' ideologies» (Laclau 2005: 18). From this constructive approach, which evaluates the performing acts achieved by populism through its discursive and rhetorical practices, we could try to draw an analytic framework in order to understand the nature and legitimacy of two political movements featuring a different ideological baggage but linked by a common political style.

The New Heroes: Right-wing and Left-wing populism

In particular, it aims to consider how the current political background tends to shape up in a dichotomic distinction between right-wing populism and left-wing populism, evolving from the traditional right and left positions. Populism is no longer to be understood as a distinctive feature of both extreme right and left: its historical developments, indeed, «followed the inner opportunities offered by the particular dynamics of competition» (Tarchi 2015: 71), so as to generate different outcomes in different backgrounds (that's the case when we compare European and Latin American populisms). To make my point clearer, I will rely on the contributions by two scholars which are expressly fitting in the explanation of this approach, both based on the interpretative structure of Laclau's populism: the political theories of Alain De Benoist and Chantal Mouffe. In fact, they have been trying to sketch a populism vision rooted, respectively, on the traditional values of the right and the left through a bunch of very close discursive practices and namely through the *us vs them* logic. The first pattern which leaves the mark of populism on the political outline provided by De Benoist and Mouffe is precisely the rhetoric of antagonism, which must be understood as the ground of the associative practice. The expression of the different souls that make up a community must depend, according to this logic, on the grouping of issues and positions along a frontier, which would set up the conditions for a dialogic struggle for hegemony (in Gramscian terms). The need to resort to populist discursive strategies arises, according to De Benoist and Mouffe, when the demands of the various social groups of a given historical society become aware of their public role and ask for the building of new frontiers in order to articulate themselves and express their own political identity, positioning on one of the two sides of this frontier.

The Populist *Democratic Revolution*

The institution of a new antagonistic frontier serves as a tool to guide public opinion and

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comes in response to the tendency to occupy the central stage of the political spectrum that marks, according to both De Benoist and Mouffe, most traditional parties in many European democracies. This process reveals itself through the rise of anti-establishment, grassroots movements who claim their political autonomy and the satisfaction of their demands, while their ideological roots may equally be right-wing or left-wing. The democratic balance is broken, according to the analysis of both theorists, when *centre-right* and *centre-left* parties merge into a *dominant ideology* which «argues that there's no alternative to the neoliberal order and that the break-up of people in the global market is the only horizon of human history» (De Benoist 2017: 29). They identify this unifying tendency as a direct consequence of an 'original sin': the surrender of the traditional left to the laws of globalisation.

Speaking of which I find quite meaningful the analysis of the French philosopher Jean-Claude Michéa, who maintains that the convergence of the right and the left towards a undefined program starts right when the left moves away from its ideological origins, joining the cultural values and codes of liberal society such as «cult of modernisation to the bitter end, mandatory and permanent mobility (both geographically and professionally) and moral and cultural transgression» (Michéa 2005: 45). Framing his analysis on a revision of the political history of French socialism, Michéa argues that the left persuaded itself of the impossibility of overcoming capitalism and renounced to the traditional connection with the working-class movements (Michéa 2005: 122). The 'treason' of the left converts it into a political entity incapable of grasping and meeting the needs of the various social groups that used to refer to it, through a «progressive dissolution of the socialist ideal of a *society without social classes* [...] in the liberal night when all of the cows are grey» (Michéa 2005: 28). In the meantime, that portion of the right which does not accept any loosening of its positions to converge towards a centrist perspective, finds in populism a perfect discursive frame in order to broadcast its most relevant purposes, often extreme in their shapes.

As a consequence of the homogenisation of the political offer, the democratic principle of a free and responsible choice between two opposite alternatives fails and citizens get deprived of the concrete chance of expression of their beliefs. This is why Mouffe demands the necessity of a democratic revolution, which would appear on stage with the rise of «new social movements» and from the «questioning of many other forms of inequality» (Mouffe 2018: 51), something that requires a new identity partition in the political scheme. The Belgian scholar takes this binary logic straight out of the definition of the 'political' developed by Carl Schmitt, according to whom a political community finds its identity when confronting the otherness of an *enemy*, whose existence comes into being «when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity» (Schmitt 2007 [1932]: 28).

The antagonistic dimension becomes an interpretative key of every aspect of the political life inside a given community, therefore requires the establishment of a series of novel politically opposed borders, which would distinguish a new *us* from a new *them*. Namely, the precise discursive setting populism rests on. Both right and left-wing populisms build their political proposal aiming to respond to the unsatisfied demands of society, re-articulating community along a frontier. As Silvio Waisbord argues, this kind of Manichean storytelling is fostered as well by the evolution of contemporary media, more and more characterized by the communicative modality named *post-truth*. Denying the information model which refers to the existence of a one and only rational, empirical and demonstrable truth, *post-truth* assumes that «we cannot overcome subjectivity and that diverse publics lack shared norms and values» (Waisbord 2018: 4). According to the aforementioned perspective, populism looks at this fragmented and multifaceted portrait of reality and therefore chooses to highlight the *alternative* political choices, insofar as expressions of different souls which don't deny each other, but clash in an hegemonic war for dominion.

France 2017: A Case Study On Populist Construction of Identity

A very clear, practical example of the meaningfulness of this theoretical approach is supplied by contemporary French politics. Recent Presidential elections held in April 2017 saw the lining up on one side of Marine Le Pen's right-wing figure, fuelled by a well-prepared populist rhetoric; on the other, Jean-Luc Mélenchon tried to bring back together some pieces of the French left. *France Insoumise* took advantage, as well as Le Pen's *Front National*, of the proclaimed effectiveness of populist rhetoric to present itself to the voters; an ideal case to show how two forces so distant as to their ideological origins can share a discursive strategy. Both parties defined a collective identity - *us* - made up of strong symbolical meanings and created an enemy to fight against. The *us* pictured in such a storytelling is represented by the *people*, which should be understood in term of a collective and autonomous political subject, structured around a series of cultural and linguistic features.

The myths of homeland and of the *drapeau tricolore bleu, blanc, rouge* lies at the heart of the *Front National's* (now *Rassemblement National*) political rhetoric and it's no surprise that Marine Le Pen labelled herself «the candidate of the people» (Le Pen 2017). Similarly, Jean-Luc Mélenchon fills his storytelling with metaphors taken from the natural world, suggesting the existence of a people anything but artificially built but constructed around innate and emotional boundaries: «take a listen everybody to the whistle coming from our ranks [...] like the sound of wind blowing through leaves, like the one of rain on stone. This

sound hasn't a name, but a signal, the one of the strength of the people when it burst into history» (Mélenchon 2017). On the other side of the frontier, the portrait of a *them* with deliberately liquid boundaries and unidentifiable in a single social group: the enemy is sketched as the symbol of an external domination, applying a strong political and financial pressure over the people. A collective *them* occasionally embodied by the ruling class of the country, the financial oligarchy, the technocratic bureaucracy of Brussels and many more options.

This binary logic of counterposing the two fronts therefore leads to an identification process based on nationality; namely, a discursive practice appealing to the attachment to homeland and its values in emotional terms. The political discourse is then framed not only to deliver its storytelling but to push citizens towards its internalization through a shift which involves the emotional level, in order to strengthen the bond with a collective external entity. Chantal Mouffe deems that this 'sentimental' blueprint is fundamental for an effective political discourse and finds its justification directly in Freudian psychoanalysis: way before speaking of rational choices, it is fundamental to get in contact with the irrational side of the individual, to the «strong libidinal investment operating in the forms of identification» (Mouffe 2018: 85). Here we may find the reason why of the myths of the *France Fièrè, la République*, the flag and the defense of the national idiom, recurring in the discursive practices of both *Rassemblement National* and *France Insoumise*, as a plea to the emotional sphere of each individual.

A Common Style with Many Variations: The Value of Ideology in French Populism

While we can assert that a faint line runs between left and right-wing populist discourses, both adopting a language equally aimed at identifying a frontier defined by an emotional connection to the nation, it is not necessarily true that populism flattens the ideological stances cherished by its actors. Mouffe herself remarks that the same discursive practice of dividing public space in two opponents could be developed in the light of different ideological criteria. When right-wing populism builds its concept of 'nation' not merely in patriotic but nationalistic terms, it implies that we should exclude from the collective *us* immigrants and people belonging to different cultures, none of which would find her/his own space in the national storytelling pattern. According to her, instead, the project for a left populism should extend the democratic horizon towards everyone opposing the hegemonic domination of the oligarchic and financial establishment, including in the project «workers, immigrants and the precarious middle class, as well as other democratic demands such as the LGBT community» (Mouffe 2018: 27).

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Drawing on this outline, all through the 2017 presidential campaign the alignment of the two parties along a frontier showed up to be divergent in many topics and mostly when the identity discourse went through the immigration issue. Le Pen's right-wing populism maintained a coherent approach with the most radical conservative tradition on this matter, putting the safeguard of the French cultural baggage and the highest standards of national solidarity over the opening of society to multiculturalism. Resorting to the motto «rétablir les frontières nationales et sortir de l'espace Schengen», even through the militarisation of borders, Le Pen stands against *ius soli* as well: «L'acquisition de la nationalité française sera possible uniquement par la filiation ou la naturalisation» (Front National 2017). Instead of seeking for compromises and practical solutions to the integration issues, right-wing populism rather goes for a neat rhetoric according to which every single hole in the wall endangers community as a whole.

On the other side, *France Insoumise* sets out the limits of its frontier fostering a strong patriotic pride but still tracing its identity border along a more inclusive line, strengthening its own idea of national identity through the need to integrate outer elements in the horizon of the country: «France is a political community, not an ethnic reality. It's therefore the existence of a common destiny who should ground access to nationality» (Féraud and Senon, 2017: 23). A left-populist social model needs to be based on shared but not exclusive cultural elements, which could be imparted to individuals and social groups who want to join the community. In his fight against political élites and financial oligarchy Mélenchon includes migrants as well, since they become the first victims of the common enemy, instead of being its instrumental allies. The only immigration to fight against is the one which comes through the «free trade routes» and gets abused as regard to the lowering of «wages and putting an additional pressure on social rights» (Mélenchon 2018).

In sum, both *Front National* and *France Insoumise* share a common, divisive rhetorical pattern, while pursuing partially different ends and targeting somehow diverse segments of public opinion in terms of ideological belonging.

Speaking of Left-wing Populism: A (Momentary) Conclusion

Laclau argued long ago that «between left-wing and right-wing populism, there is a nebulous no-man's-land which can be crossed — and has been crossed — in many directions» (Laclau 2005: 87). Until recently, right-wing populism proved to be more efficient in leveraging the emotional sphere of many citizens and drawing an identity narrative which expressed people's frustration for its exclusion from political life. According

to Chantal Mouffe this is the place where the challenge for a left populism lies: the aim should consist in the adoption of an alike rhetorical pattern supporting an identity discourse set to build a collective opposition to the historical hegemonic élite while inclusive of any social force oppressed by the actual dominion, driving this emotional identification towards «better and more egalitarian perspectives inside the national tradition» (Mouffe 2018: 85).

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