

On the eve of March, 1973, Pink Floyd published their most renowned and exciting album – at least according to many fans: *The Dark Side of the Moon*. The ninth song on the playlist bore the title *Us and Them*; the lyrics, written by Roger Waters, endorsed the vision of a class-cleavage embodied in the juxtaposition of ‘us’, poor and labouring people sent to fight a distant war by ‘them’, the ruling élite who cannot but command and exercise its power:

*Us and them*

*and after all we're only ordinary men*

*me and you*

*God only knows it's not what we would choose to do.*

*'Forward', he cried from the rear*

*and the front rank died*

*and the General sat, and the lines on the map*

*moved from side to side.*

*Black and blue*

*and who knows which is which and who is who*

*up and down*

*and in the end it's only round and round and round.*

*'Haven't you heard it's a battle of words'*

*the poster bearer cried.*

*'Listen, son', said the man with the gun,*

*'there's room for you inside'.*

It might seem odd to open a scientific paper quoting a rock song, but it is not. *Us and Them*, in fact, vividly portrays one among the traditional patterns of the logic of 'othering', anything but a distinctive feature of contemporary political theory and discourse - the belief, included, that populists make an exclusive use of it. The story of polarization, in fact, is much longer and its roots deep and plural; however, in the last 30 years on, the approach has undergone a remarkable metamorphosis. In this short paper I will try, at first, to present a concise sketch of the development of the us/them divide in the realm of political theory since the 18<sup>th</sup> century; I will subsequently highlight the changes undergone by the same within populist ideology and discourse.

### **Us and Them: to cut a long story short**

The us/them divide - that is, the call for identity - is as old as the world can be, anthropologists have often claimed (Berreby 2006). After all, it was Aristotle to state that barbarians were not entitled to the political privileges of the *polis* since «non-Greek and slave are in nature the same» (Aristotle 1998: 2 [1252b]). However only the eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of the first modern sample of the aforementioned dichotomy.

After the so-called 'Glorious Revolution', Great Britain saw the consolidation of the Whig regime, embodied by the long government of Robert Walpole, who served as prime minister 1721 to 1742 (Langford 1992: 9-57). Walpole's public policies, and the absorption of power in his hands, caused the rise of a strong opposition movement all across England, led by a group of intellectuals and politicians who labeled themselves and their acolytes 'country' in front of the 'court' led by Walpole and developed an innovative ideological stance grounded - broadly speaking - on natural rights, rotation of offices, separation of powers and accountability (Dickinson 1979: 90-192).

The opponents were mostly Whig - more precisely, the liberal-republicans who renewed the old, glorious tradition of the *Commonwealthmen* (Robbins 2004) - but alongside with a bunch of Tories led by the well-known Henry St. John, viscount Bolingbroke (Kramnick 1968). The men who built up the 'country paradigm' perceived themselves as 'other' from those who embodied real power and corruption, i.e. the government and the politico-economic élites whose closed ties with the Whig establishment they repeatedly denounced.

No surprise, then, that John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon - two renowned *Commonwealthmen* - maintained in one of their famous *Cato's Letters* (no. 62) that «whatever is good for the People, is bad for their Governors; and what is good for the Governors, is pernicious to the People» (Trenchard and Gordon 1995 [1720-23]: 423). The approach marked by the antagonism Country/People vs. Court/Governors rapidly gained popularity and ignited much of the ideological production at the time of the American Revolution (Wood 1998).

Still, so much more was yet to come. The early nineteenth century saw the rise of socialism in England, France and, finally, Germany (Newman 2005: 6-45). It was precisely in 1848 that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, prepared under request of the Communist League, that soon became a powerful tool for socialist intellectual and workers in order to spread their belief. The *Manifesto* was conceived by Marx - who wrote it almost entirely - as a summary of his and Engels' «joint efforts up to 1848», focusing on «the development of modern capitalism [and] its ruthless overthrow of older social and economic systems» to deliver his newly-coined doctrine of the class struggle and place «revolution at the centre of Marx's narrative» (Claeys 2018: 119-120). A revolution which was grounded on the premise of an irresistible antagonism between 'us' (the proletariat) and 'them' (the bourgeoisie):

*The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes. The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonism. It has but established new classes, new conditions*

*of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones. Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinct feature: it has simplified class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other - Bourgeoisie and Proletariat (Marx and Engels 2016 [1848]: 9).*

Near the end of the century, however, something started to change: the past two cleavages seemed to converge towards a new synthesis which appeared at first in the United States. A.D. 1892 saw the official birth of the People's Party, the first populist party to stand against traditional politics and reproduce the logic of othering following the pattern 'the people vs. the élite', where 'the people' were «the good rural farmers...who tilled the land and produced all the goods in the society», while 'the élite' was formed by «the corrupt, urban bankers and politicians» (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 23). An excerpt taken from the first party's electoral program, the so-called *Omaha Platform*, deserves to be quoted at length:

*We have witnessed for more than a quarter of a century the struggles of the two great political parties for power and plunder, while grievous wrongs have been inflicted upon the suffering people. We charge that the controlling influences dominating both these parties have permitted the existing dreadful conditions to develop without serious effort to prevent or restrain them. Neither do they now promise us any substantial reform. They have agreed together to ignore, in the coming campaign, every issue but one. They propose to drown the outcries of a plundered people with the uproar of a sham battle over the tariff, so that capitalists, corporations, national banks, rings, trusts, watered stock, the demonetization of silver and the oppressions of the usurers may all be lost sight of. They propose to sacrifice our homes, lives, and children on the altar of mammon; to destroy the multitude in order to secure corruption funds from the millionaires (People's Party 1892).*

And yet, while class and political cleavages combined in a patchwork synthesis, we can still trace back its expression to a number of traditional patterns. However, somewhere between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Europe witnessed the insurgence of a special blend of nationalism, one with a strong ethnic flavor where 'us' and 'them' responded to an anthropological divide, Drawing on an extensive intellectual framework outlined by many nineteenth century philosophers and political theorists (Todorov 1989: 105-308) and intertwined with coeval reflections on imperialism and racialism (Arendt 1962 [1951]:

3-302), in what has been called 'the short twentieth century' (Hobsbawm 1994) «ethno-nationalism draws much of its emotive power from the notion that the members of a nation are part of an extended family, ultimately united by ties of blood. It is the subjective belief in the reality of a common 'we' that counts» (Muller 2008: 20).

When the echo of such a dichotomy reached the shores of the institutional realm, it suddenly found a theoretical translation in the juxtaposition of the categories of 'friend' and 'enemy' within the political theory of Carl Schmitt. As he himself stated in his short essay *The Concept of the Political*, the significance of this opposition goes well beyond the traditional conceptual contrasts such as «good and evil in the moral sphere, beautiful and ugly in the aesthetic sphere, and so on»; being confined to the dominion of politics, and defining it as an autonomous dimension, it «can neither be based on anyone antithesis or any combination of other antitheses, nor can it be traced to these» (Schmitt 2007 [1932]: 26). More specifically:

*The distinction of friend and enemy denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation. It can exist theoretically and practically, without having simultaneously to draw upon all those moral, aesthetic, economic, or other distinctions. The political enemy need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; he need not appear as an economic competitor, and it may even be advantageous to engage with him in business transactions. But he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible. [...] The enemy is not merely any competitor or just any partner of a conflict in general. He is also not the private adversary whom one hates. An enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity. The enemy is solely the public enemy, because everything that has a relationship to such a collectivity of men, particularly to a whole nation, becomes public by virtue of such a relationship. The enemy is hostis, not inimicus in the broader sense (Schmitt 2007 [1932]: 26-27, 28).*

If it is true that the friend/enemy divide was conceived by Schmitt as a means of overcoming «the concept of a neutral liberal State» (Cassini 2016: 99), he pointed out, nevertheless, that his dichotomy served as well to surmount the «antagonisms among domestic political parties [since they] succeed in weakening the all-embracing political unit, the state»

(Schmitt 2007 [1932]: 32). And this, in turn, ignited Schmitt's holistic view of 'the people' and his denial of proceduralism and representation in favor of «a plebiscitary form of democracy» (Cassini 2016: 100).

No surprise then, as we shall see in the next paragraph, that populists learnt his lesson well and quickly in the aftermath of WWII. And this is why, according to Jan-Werner Müller, Schmitt has something to teach them yet (Müller 2016: 28, 56-7).

### **Us and Them, Populist Style**

Populism is by no means a contemporary phenomenon: its roots trace back at least to the end of the nineteenth century, as we have already noticed, with the birth of the People's Party in the United States (Kazin 2017: 27-48) and to the first decade of the twentieth with its Latin-American version (Conniff [ed.] 2012). Hints of its past are detectable in Western Europe as well, mostly in the 1940's and 50's, when Guglielmo Giannini in Italy and Pierre Poujade in France institutionalized the us/them divide as a pattern of their political discourse.

Giannini, founder and leader of the Everyman's Front (*Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque*; see Setta 2000), which won huge but short-lived consent, was crystal-clear in his depiction of an irreducible contrast between 'the crowd' (us) and the «poisonous professional politicians» (them), pleaded guilty of any social evil and asked by the crowd - literally - «to break not our balls anymore» (Giannini 2002 [1945]: 160, 184). Poujade, by his side, was more than ready to address a parallel rhetorical outline which opposed 'us' (common people represented by the members of his *Union et Fraternité Française*) to 'them' (corrupt minority of bankers, politicians and *polytechniciens*): «nous sommes le mouvement de l'honnêteté, de la probité, de la justice face aux vautours, aux politiciens, aux intrigants» (Tarchi 2015: 99). The approach was shared by the first, real founder of contemporary European populism, i.e. the Danish lawyer Mogens Glistrup, who in 1972 gave birth to the Progress Party on a no-tax and anti-immigrants platform which gained him and his party 28 seats in the 1973 general elections.

Broadly speaking, and referring to the populist political discourse that has been constructed in Europe and the United States since the 1980's, I think we may identify at least three main narratives through which the us/them dichotomy has been developed and implemented:

- 1) the good and honest people vs. the evil and corrupted élites;
- 2) the people of our nation vs. the 'other(s)';
- 3) ordinary citizens vs. professional politicians.

Needless to say, these patterns are strictly connected the one with each other since they define a common framework «that simplifies the political space by symbolically dividing society between 'the people' (as the 'underdogs') and its 'other'», while it must be noted that «the identity of both 'the people' and 'the other' are political constructs, symbolically constituted through the relation of antagonism» (Panizza 2005: 3). However, it is also true that each one holds its own peculiar character, which we are going to sketch briefly.

As to the first, it is widely recognized that the fight against ruling minorities marks any type of populist rhetoric, though right and left-wing (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 11-16). In the last years, in fact, we had witnessed a growing accent on this feature, mostly in official/institutional occasions: for instance, Trump's election was celebrated by Marion Maréchal Le Pen as a «victory of democracy and the people against the élites, Wall Street and politically correct media» (Maréchal Le Pen 2016), while her aunt Marine Le Pen, running for the French presidency, claimed her being «the candidate of the people» set to «free the people of France from the rule of arrogant élites ready to influence its conduct» (Le Pen 2017a).

But it is in Donald Trump's political discourse that such a design reaches its climax. His inaugural address may be seen as a perfect manifesto of this peculiarly populist attitude:

*Today's ceremony...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 2017).

Trump's rhetoric is exemplary to understand, as well, the second pillar of the us/them divide. He has never ceased to boost the fear of the stranger, not merely the migrant but the 'other' at an almost ontological level: we just need to recall his long-lasting campaign against Mexicans («they're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime, they're rapists, and some I assume are good people», Vinattieri 2016: 45) and his promise that «from this moment on, it's going to be America First» (Trump 2017). But every populist leader relies strategically on the policy of fueling the ethnical separation of the citizenship of a given nation-State and anyone who comes from the outside, fundamentally described as a sort of free-rider.

All along her 2017 presidential campaign, Marine Le Pen repeatedly claimed the need to «re-establish the control of national borders and exit the Schengen agreement» in order to «find our liberty anew and restore the sovereignty of the French people», stop illegal migration and «reduce the number of legal migrants to a quota of 10000 per year» (Le Pen 2017c). The United Kingdom Independence Party, on the other hand, maintained (and still does) that Brexit was the only way of putting an end to uncontrolled immigration, that «has placed huge pressure on public services and housing. It has affected the domestic labour market, where wages for manual and lowpaid jobs have stagnated» and even «community cohesion has been damaged» (UKIP 2017a). The emphasis is placed here on what has been called the 'welfare chauvinism', a phenomenon perfectly highlighted by the guidelines on immigration submitted to public opinion by The Finns' Party in 2015:

*The asylum procedure was initiated to help people that were fleeing persecution but it has become the most important modus operandi for the present stream of migrants – many of which have questionable backgrounds as to whether persecution is the real issue. Extremely high unemployment, already existing throughout much of the EU, together with the present public sector austerity programs make the integration and absorption of a huge number of migrants prohibitive. Immigration will change, irreversibly, the host country's population*



*profile, disrupt social cohesion, overburden public services and economic resources, lead to the formation of ghettos, promote religious radicalism and its consequences, and foster ethnic conflicts. Actual outcomes of these factors can be seen in the many riots, brutal events, and the formation of violent gangs in a number of large European cities (The Finns' Party 2015).*

The most renowned and popular technique of implementing the us/them dichotomy, however, is seemingly the opposition drawn between common people and professional politicians. The Five Star Movement, once led by the Italian comedian Beppe Grillo, has built its own political reputation on a staunch and fervent campaign against '*la casta*' (the ruling élite), where politicians and technocrats are described as enemies of the people since «they have become our masters, while we play just the role of (more or less) unconscious servants» (Tarchi 2015: 342). To be sure, it is this precise issue that defined, at least until 2018 (see Jacoboni 2019), the identity of the movement, so that at the end of 2013, campaigning for the European elections to be held in May 2014, an article published on Grillo's blog announced that «the Five Star Movement isn't right nor left-wing. We stay on plain citizens' side. Fiercely populists!» (Blog delle Stelle 2013).

But they are not alone in their contempt for *la politique politicienne*. According to Marine Le Pen, politicians (herself excluded, of course) 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). Quite similarly, the UKIP leaders have always stressed their being close to the people (a collective, powerful 'us') and thus structurally different from their opponents whose lack of transparency endangered democracy in Britain:

*People see a lack of democracy and connection with the three old parties. UKIP brings a breath of fresh air into politics and offers the electorate a real alternative to the old status quo. We now ask you to continue to vote UKIP in order to ensure that the politicians are reminded that real people must not be ignored (UKIP 2017b).*

All in all, each one of the narratives which we have rapidly outlined may be understood if, and only if, a further question is answered: who are 'the people'? If it is true that «'the people' is a construction which allows for much flexibility» and for that reason «it is most

often used in a combination...of three meanings: the people as sovereign, as the common people and as the nation» (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 9), populists often go far beyond any flexibility.

Delivering a speech in the middle of his party's (Akp) electoral convention, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan derided his opponents addressing them a provocative (and staggering) question: «we are the people, who are you?» (Müller 2016: 5). Additionally, the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, interviewed by the journalist and anchorman Giovanni Floris, some months ago innocently stated that «'the people' is, first and foremost, the aggregate of the shareholders who support our government» (Conte 2018), i.e. the electors who voted for the Five Star Movement and the League, being these parties involved in the coalition which backs the so-called 'yellow-and-green government'.

And even though it was Ernesto Laclau who notably highlighted the fact that «populism requires the dichotomic division of society into two camps — one presenting itself as a part which claims to be the whole» (Laclau 2005: 83), it seems quite hard to view such a phenomenon, even in the light of a so-called «'return of the political' after year of post-politics», merely as «a discursive strategy of construction of the political frontier between 'the people' and 'the oligarchy'» - which should define, more than ever, left-populism (Mouffe 2018: 6). It rather feels like a rhetorical plan aimed to weaken the substantive features of liberal democracy, to begin with the same existence of a majority and a minority: both, in fact, must acknowledge the legitimacy of each other while the us/them divide, where 'the people' is confronted with its enemies, hinders any room for dispute, bargaining and compromise.

As things stand, if populism may be correctly viewed as «a growing revolt against politics and liberal values», it is highly questionable to consider «this challenge to the liberal mainstream...in general, not anti-democratic» (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018: xi). In fact, as Jan-Werner Müller has correctly pointed out, «in addition to being antielitist, populists are always antipluralist. Populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people» (Müller 2016: 2). That's why almost any populist leader or movement shows a deep despise for constitutionalism and its tools, imperfect as they are, designed to enable but check popular sovereignty, grant individual rights and guarantee socio-political pluralism. And here, in the end, we are confronted with the biggest shift which the us/them paradigm has experienced

so far.

## Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have tried to draw attention to the metamorphoses undergone by a peculiar pattern which has embodied – in the public realm – the logic of othering, i.e. the dichotomy of ‘us’ and ‘them’ as a means of framing the political arena, that has recently regained a certain popularity because of its massive use in contemporary populist rhetoric and ideology.

Along with posing a threat to liberal democracy, some scholars are beginning to notice its impact on fundamental constituents of public life and culture, for ex. the pursuit of truth as a shared social goal. Analyzing the connections between populism and ‘post-truth’, i.e. the «circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief» (Oxford Dictionaries 2016), Silvio Waisbord wrote:

*The root of populism’s opposition to truth is its binary vision of politics. For populism, ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’ hold their own version of truth. Preserving a populist, fact-proof narrative is necessary to safeguard the vision that truth is always on one the side and that lies are inevitably on the other side. Facts belong to one or other camp. Facts are not neutral, but they are politically owned and produced. They only make sense within certain tropes and political visions. Facts that contradict an epic, simplistic notion of politics by introducing nuance and complexity or falsifying conviction are suspicious, if not completely rejected as elitist manoeuvres [...] Post-truth communication is exactly where populism wants politics to be – the realm of divided truth, binary thinking, and broken-up communication. Populism rejects the politics of deliberation and truth-telling; it thrives amid the deepening of rifts in public communication and society. It appeals to identity politics that anchor convictions unconcerned with truth as a common good. Populism’s glib assertion ‘you got your truth, I got mine’ contributes to fragmentation and polarisation. Public life becomes a contest between competing versions of reality rather than a common effort to wrestle with knotty, messy questions about truth (Waisbord 2018: 26, 30).*

Whatever accurate and appropriate this description may be, it shows quite evidently how much the logic of othering and the us/them divide are shaping our public sphere almost anew. In the era of social media, after all, like never before «the medium is the message» (McLuhan 2003 [1964]: 7). Something we should definitely be aware of.

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