

Populism, a Thread and a Chance. Between Demagogy and Participation

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This paper inquires into the concept of populism from a sociological perspective. This is done by highlighting the unstable co-presence of demagogy and participation through an intercultural analysis of the European and the Indian discursive approach and its construction of popular politics. The underlying understanding is that the concept is misrepresented by the equation of populisms with demagogy. The paper therefore builds on “participatory populism” to promote the expansion, rather than contraction, of the term’s ambiguity. The analysis accounts for the emergence of populisms as subaltern politics that are unable to subvert the political status quo but are able to enhance it morally. The study starts by problematizing the concept’s historical double movement that is at the basis of its demagogic and participatory features, then it focuses on populism as a signifier reinforced by the impasse between the two pillars of liberal democracy. Furthermore, by critically building on Laclau’s position, its social discursive formation is investigated. Chatterjee’s “political society” and the party-movements (the Aam Aadmi Party and the Movimento 5 Stelle) are two contradictory cases that are proposed to exercise an expansion of the concept.

1. Introduction

Populisms as socio-political phenomena are and have been core arguments in the field of political sociology of our time. Understanding them extensively is fundamental, particularly because sociology engages with the issue of social inclusion and political sociology especially inquires into the interaction between society and politics, and the inclusion of society within politics. While the dis-

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ciplinary approach of political science studies populisms mainly to investigate the impact it has in political institutions, forms and discourse, conversely, political sociology can penetrate their understanding in terms of social and democratic impact and can re-problematize the generic notion of populism in light of an expanded understanding of the relation between society and politics. Populisms then, taken from a sociological perspective, are social phenomena that carry political consequences, that voice societal conflicts, and the insufficient responses that the political establishment proposes to sort them out.

The relationship between populisms and demagogy is not straightforward. Most of the time it is studied as if populism, as analytical category, is a synonym of demagogy. This approach, however, leaves unseen the demagogy that is inbuilt in representative politics, along with the demagogy of the political establishment in disqualifying popular democratic phenomena. Populism is a pejorative definition to be employed top-down by the political elites to diminish the political identity of social struggles (Mendes 2005). It is also, however, a category adopted and employed bottom-up to potentiate the political struggles of local populations (Mendes 2004).

The following pages inquire into the roots of populisms as socio-political phenomena that are strengthened by the current phase of the political crisis which, in turn, develops from the dynamic between the two pillars of liberal-democratic regimes. The predominance of liberalism over democracy within the political sphere has not been compensated for by a redistribution in the social sphere (reduction of welfare), and has thereby led to populist opposition to the procedural and elitist mainstream form of liberal-democratic regimes. This paper explores the social formation of populist discourses (Laclau 2005a), critically builds on popular politics (Santos 2014), acknowledges its ambiguity and contextualises the democratic potential of popular democratic demands. To do so, the paper engages with the formation of populist politics from subaltern and informal “political society” (Chatterjee 2011) and elaborates on the participatory democratic potential of “party-movements” in electoral politics. Party-movements are social movements that bridge civil society with State institutions; in this study, they are analysed together with political society in order to understand populism in its informal and formal relationships with the state. This paper concludes by assuming that the category of populism must be contextualised and disambiguated from the assimilation with demagogy, because both demagogy and participation may coexist within the term. Populisms may not be the way out of the impasse between liberalism and democracy, but they help us to reconsider the broken relationship between society and politics and help us envisage an expansion of the democratic, inclusionary pillar of liberal-democratic regimes.

2. *Unveiling the demagogic double movement*

The limits of institutional proceduralism and elitism maintain a form of misalignment between the democratic aspirations of society and those of the political elites. When a society perceives the political elites' interests to be acting in a fracturing distance from those of whom they should be representing, the represented become unsatisfied and search elsewhere for forms to rebuild the representative link. Populisms then emerge as alternative outlooks because they promote the idea that representation can be different from what it is, and that it is possible to reinforce participation of the people within the institutional system beyond the electoral vote. The ambiguous presence of a charismatic leader, represents the hope for a different non-elitist political system (Santos 2016); however, it is reductive to identify populisms with leader centralism and indeed some of the so-called populist movements or parties respond to the representative delusion by expanding participation. In the blurred space opened up by populist claims, there is a great deal of bargaining taking place between demagoguery and participation.

The literature largely explores the fact that populism is not a solid political category, but rather, that it identifies a range of concepts and features that are generally and unsystematically grouped together to describe different phenomena (Taggart 2000; Gidron and Bonikowski 2013; Mudde 2004; Canovan 1981). In short, populism is a controversial label, a descriptive term used with very different acceptations in different political contexts. In its origin, in XIX century Russia and the USA, it identified the struggle for the rights and interests of the farmers and their inclusion in the area of representation (Canovan 1981; Collovald 2004; Collovald 2005). The acceptance of the term related to a valorisation of the people, especially the more vulnerable. It identified the spirit of democracy as the power shared by and for the people², an acceptance that is almost the opposite of the mainstream meaning assigned to the term during the last four decades, and increasingly so in Europe (Tarchi 2015: 7–17).

The current and most diffused acceptance of the term populism in Europe was defined in the 1980s (Taguieff 1984; Collovald 2004: 25; 79–90) to describe the extreme right party of the French Front National (FN – National

² The trilateral commission report of 1975 uses this acceptance as well: «[t]he democratic spirit is egalitarian, individualistic, populist, and impatient with the distinctions of class and rank. The spread of that spirit weakens the traditional threats to democracy posed by such groups as the aristocracy, the church, and the military.» However the commission straightforward underlines that too much democracy is deleterious: «a pervasive spirit of democracy may pose an intrinsic threat and undermine all forms of association, weakening the social bonds which hold together family, enterprise, and community» (Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki 1975: 162).

Front)³. In this case, populism was defined as being a demagogic manipulation of the people by the ability of a leader who opposes the elite (singular) and establishes a direct, unmediated communication with the people. As a theoretical and demagogic consequence, the so-considered “non-populist politicians” and parties are franchised as those who are legitimate to represent the spirit of liberal-democracy.

This turn did not undermine the vagueness associated with the term. The literature continued to affirm that populisms are vague, undefinable empirical phenomena that are not generalizable and that without an understanding of them, understanding liberal representative democracy is impossible. Besides this vagueness, the literature refers to populism in the singular, Taggart provides its general characterisation by affirming that it is: hostile to representative politics; it identifies a community and a heartland; it has no core values; it is a reaction to the political crisis (but it contains internal dilemmas) and it is versatile (able to adapt to the environment in which it operates) (Taggart 2000: 1–9). Pasquino (2005) elaborates on the ideological, social and political conditions that make the emergence of populism possible: populist leaders who identify with the people⁴; the idea that the people are better than their rulers; rejection of politics, parties and politicians; demand for the abolishment of political intermediaries; political isolation and alienation of individuals who do not engage with associations and organisations; social malaise; urbanisation; the presence of a populist leadership providing solutions and the identity of the enemies; and the existence of a leader able to exploit social conditions.

The term populism continues to maintain its controversial characteristics in different political traditions. In India, the term is used to indicate popular mobilisation and policies benefitting the more marginalised social groups, although it may be coupled with authoritarian regimes such as Indira Gandhi's state of exception (Wyatt 2013; Subrahmaniam 2014). Suresh Sharma revives the controversial character of the term with two main features: first, the desire of politicians to be accepted by the people from which the idea of *demos* and participation in politics is derived; and second, the negative acceptance characterised by a tendency of simplification, unrealistic promises, abolition of the institutional mediation and the unquestionability of the leader (interview with Suresh Sharma, Venice 8/11/2014). The ambiguity of the acceptances of the

³ However scholars are aware that «[s]imply looking at the far right manifestation of populism in contemporary Europe misses much of the picture» (Taggart 2004).

⁴ For Taggart the leader embodies straightforwardness, simplicity and clarity (Taggart 2000: 7-103). Daiwiks (2009) identifies two basic characteristics such as the focus of the leaders on “the people” and its opposition to the elite or another group.

term populism in Europe and India revolves around the same parameters, besides applying to very diverse political subjectivities⁵.

In comparative perspectives, populism is a term that is used to identify different concrete movements that are contradictory among themselves and that incorporate ambiguities within themselves. It is a term that can be applied to an extremely wide range of political actors of any political orientation. At the Venice-Delhi seminars of 2014, talks were dedicated to the topic «Minorities and the Global Populist Tide», where the term was used for the so called «populist movements» of the extreme right, as well as for more recent movements such as the Aam Admi Party (AAP – Party of the Common Persons) in India, Podemos in Spain and the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S – 5 Star Movement) in Italy. During the same discussion, populism was used for conventional political leaders and incumbents such as Silvio Berlusconi, Matteo Renzi and Narendra Modi⁶. In other words, populism is not meant to relate to a specific or a definable kind of political subjectivity, but rather is used to describe a method implemented by political or popular leaders or movements to garner electoral support (see Taggart 2000: 107; Žižek 2008: 268).

The appeal to the people is not a prerogative of populist parties but pertains to all party families (Mastropaolo 2005: 59–60). Assuming “politicians populism” (Canovan 1981) as synonymous of the demagogy of a political leader to win electoral consensus and support, all politicians then resort to populism to some extent (Taggart 2000: 107; see also Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011). Mair argues that a version of populism (such as the one adopted by the labour party in the UK) is not a threat to constitutional democracy, but «may actually serve leaders’ interests by offering a means of legitimating government within a context of widespread depoliticisation» (Mair 2002: 90).

Unveiling the populist ambiguity is also fruitful for a contrary reason because populism cannot only diminish but it can also legitimise political ac-

⁵ Santos (2016) identifies four populist ambiguities: 1) the people as oppressed class and the people as wholeness of all classes; 2) the anti-system vocation cannot exist outside the system; 3) left-right differentiation is negated by, but re-emerges in, populist phenomena; 4) call for participation can be exclusionary of those allegedly not entitled to participate, such as immigrants.

⁶ Marco Revelli’s essay *Dentro e contro* (Inside and against, 2015) argues that the political stile of the then Italian prime minister Matteo Renzi created a form of “governmental populism” focused on the competitiveness of Italy in the global market. Consequently, the urgency of neoliberal reforms discursively compelled the government to be fast and effective in taking decisions and created the conditions for the concentration of powers – in defence of the principle of governability. The prime minister advocated a direct relation with the people that resulted in the diminution of the role of other social and institutional bodies (such as unions and parties); this relation was operationalised with attentive stimulation of, and response to, people’s opinion (using surveys).

tors in the democratic debate. Annie Collovald (2004) and Alfio Mastropaolo (2005: 48–64) proposes a critical reading of the use made of the term and its inadequacy to describe the right wing. Without assuming an apologetic position towards the term, Collovald demonstrates how the intellectual and political elites provide an entry space for extreme right parties in the democratic arena and underestimate their fascist and racist ideologies. Similar to what the French media and the intellectual elites have done and are doing in France, other political contexts in which the political experience does not comply with the parameters of the re-legitimation of representation are disqualified as “demagogic populism”. However, there is a substantial difference between an extreme right-wing xenophobic party and an experimental progressive party proposing, however contradictorily, to expand participation and devolution.

On the one hand, the equation of populisms and demagogy is misleading because it negates the inherent demagogy of representation. On the other hand, this equation is dangerous because it legitimises – and expands the visibility of – extremist forces in the representative arena. This is the case because populism is a contested but accepted term in liberal-democratic discourses.

Taggart maintains that populism refers to “the people” because of the vagueness of this concept allows populist leaders to refer to a big number of persons – the majority – which share a monolithic solidarity and a united view of self-awareness (Taggart 2000: 92). The acceptance of populism certainly depends on the meaning assigned to the concept of “people” (Biorcio 2015: 13). For example, the “people” of “demagogic populism” is the ignorant, diminished, unemployed, unskilled, unable and therefore easy to manipulate. This notion has its roots in the French revolution (Ruocco and Scuccimarra 2011; Ruocco 2009). It conforms with the colonial practice adopted in the global South to diminish colonised peoples and cultures as inferior, «popular, lay, plebeian, peasant, or indigenous knowledge» (Santos 2007: 46). It is no coincidence that the literature on populism in the second half of the XX century classified the political regimes of countries in the global South as populist to diminish their democratic character (Mastropaolo 2005: 52–53). Contrary to what Mudde (2010) maintains, the normalcy of the people is not ontological but is the condition of epistemic inferiority in which the people live in a «longstanding political and economic culture that erects the border in their mentality, [and that] is in all the sites they are exposed to (their homes and upbringing, the media and educational institutions, etc)» (Bilgrami 2009: 57).

Rancière underlines that the response of the political establishment to the emergence of democratic demands is polarising. This is as it groups together

several and heterogeneous forms of dissent, regardless of their political potential, by virtue of a supposed inferiority of the people emerging from the populist equivalence (regardless of their religious, racist or democratic origin). The establishment defends politics as a profession against the inexperience and simplistic approach offered by popular advocates. «Populism is the convenient name under which is dissimulated the exacerbated contradiction between popular legitimacy and expert legitimacy, that is, the difficulty the government of science has in adapting itself to manifestations of democracy and even to the mixed form of representative systems» (Rancière 2006: 79–80). In the mainstream elitist view, «politics is reduced to an inter and intra-institution game and to the rational application of measures outlined by the elites» (Mendes 2005: 173). Furthermore, populism is a discriminatory label adopted to «standardise and integrate in a negative form, protest actions or the dynamics of a more participatory citizenship or of mere presence in public space» (ibidem)⁷.

This vision entails the people-elite relationship from the elites' perspective (A. Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove 2014; Mudde 2004). Understood as oppositional politics, the label of populism is a political instrument used by the establishment to de-characterize social struggles and delegitimise political opponents. Taguieff maintains that the disqualifying use of populism corresponds to the second transformation of the term that occurred in the 1990s when political leaders bypassed party structures through the media when addressing the masses. Against them, from «[c]onceptual tool, populism has turned into ideological weapon» (Taguieff 1998: 6)⁸. The “people” of populism creates the dichotomy between the corrupted elite and the pure people, and populism is then stigmatised because its own ignorance allows the emergence and success of populist parties (Collovald 2005)⁹. The “people” of a non-demagogic reading of populism is subaltern to the political establishment and is hindered in its claim of a redistribution of power as it fosters democratic demands and participation of the *demos* (not *ethnos*) of democracy.

⁷ The use of the term is often mobilised as an accusation of false politics, «[w]hile it claims to be an analytical category, “populism” is however also a political insult» (Collovald 2005: 155), Mendes and Collovald insist on how it is propagated by the political and media elites alike.

⁸ I do not defend that “participatory populism” is exempt from demagoguery, nor that a participatory populist phenomena is static and does not degenerate; what I reject is the equation of populism with demagoguery *tout court*. This approach undermines the understanding of social, psychological and communicative transformation of politics which interest the daily life of a polity (Mancini 2015: 13–14 and 75ss).

⁹ It characterises pre-eminently the submission of the people, the manipulation by the leader and potentially the adoption of an authoritarian regime (Abts and Rummens 2007; Akkerman 2003; Urbinati 1998).

Taguieff (1998: 12–15), questions why is it so that populism is used as a synonym of demagoguery? He elaborates on the existence of two demagogies: the anti-populist demagoguery and the populist demagoguery. The latter is widely discussed in the literature while the former corresponds to the use of populism by moderate and conservative political forces to denigrate emerging political phenomena. The appeal to the people is enough to denigrate political enterprises, without considering their political proposal, and is a form of delegitimising those social groups holding weaker positions in power relations (Collovald 2004: 77–78).

Mény and Surel contend that it is a general tendency of political elites to apply a demagogic populist label, especially the political discourse of «representatives themselves who, more often than not, talk or act as if democracy were the pure expression of popular will» (Mény and Surel 2002b: 9), while they defend a vision of democracy based on the constitutional (liberal) pillar. In other words, the concept of people and of democracy stressed by populist parties or movements is the same as that of the “representatives” of other parties; however, these other representatives are also legitimated within the constitutional pillar due to adherence to a party structure (and establishment) that respects the liberal pillar. Populists lack a discursive consideration for those who manage the liberal-constitutional *status quo*, due to their anti-establishment discourse. Nevertheless, anti-establishment does not imply anti-democratic institutions. The French scholars miss the point when they affirm that «populist movements oppose[s] the institutions or procedures which impede[s] the direct and full expression of the people’s voice» (Mény and Surel 2002b: 9), because they may also oppose the non-participatory character of those institutions and procedures that, in turn, allow elites to become hegemonic over political power. Populism may be instrumentally used as a negative category because the political movements and parties labelled with this term denounce the intrinsic contradictions but constitutional aspects of liberal democracy as an enterprise that necessarily performs through elites.

3. Facing the impasse of liberal-democratic regimes

Having such a role in expanding the debate on the form and substance of democracy, populism is increasingly being studied by the philosophical, political and sociological scholarship. Mudde maintains that we live in a “populist *Zeitgeist*” because populism is part of the politics of western democracies and it is a thin-cantered ideology that can combine with other ideologies of the left

and right (Mudde 2004)¹⁰. Canovan maintains that «populism is a shadow cast by democracy itself» (Canovan 1999: 3), while Panizza (2005) sustains that it is the mirror of democracy that can degenerate and also reinvigorate its promises. Is it possible that demagoguery has become the shadow of populism?

Populist movements and parties emerge as a response or reaction¹¹ to the impasse of the two pillars of liberal-democratic regimes, which constitutes the predominance of liberalism over democracy. This is as they centre their political message to appeal to the people and expose the limitations suffered by the democratic pillar in liberal-democratic regimes¹². Since the liberal pillar, through its representative procedural form, is unable to provide a satisfactory democratic penetration in society (at least in the social and economic spheres), populists demand an expansion of the democratic pillar within constitutions and institutions in order to devolve the power to be able to decide on economic and social redistribution; and some do so through participation. Be they within or without institutions, participatory populists are anti-establishment not anti-system. These are an «active anti-politics» that are characterised by opposition to «a particular arrangement of politics, its actors, its current mode» (Raffini and Viviani 2011: 24). This is more evident when the tension between liberalism and democracy is more critical, that is the moment when people feel that demands from below are not met by the political establishment (Laclau 2005a: 139).

¹⁰ Mudde (2004) also maintains that contemporary populism (since the 1980s) is mainly characterised by right wing parties prioritising strong leadership rather than participation. However, he does not make the difference among different populist parties, generalising the application of the thin ideology to all parties contraposing the people to the elite. The literature on right wing populism in Europe is extremely wide, see also (Mudde 2007; Betz 2002; Kitschelt 2002).

¹¹ Santos (2016) maintains that right wing populism is a reaction to the consequences of austerity politics with claims of protecting welfare and rights for those “entitled” and “deserving” them. On the contrary, left wing populism emerges from the causes of austerity as unjust political options, the expansion of welfare and rights would contrast them.

¹² Liberalism and democracy are the two theoretical pillars of liberal-democratic regimes. Giovanni Sartori (1993: 209) identifies the distinction as follow: «liberalism is above all the technic of the limits of State’s power, while democracy is the introduction of popular power in the State». This vision is echoed in the literature with the two pillars assuming different connotations: constitutionalism and popular democracy (Mény and Surel 2002b); state’s institutions as the pillar of the political system and informal role of civil society in the public sphere (Habermas 1996); governmentality and popular sovereignty; (Chatterjee 2004); liberty and equality (Mouffe 2000). Fukuyama (1992: 43–44) maintains that «liberalism can be defined simply as a rule of law that recognizes certain individual rights or freedoms from government control. [...] Democracy, on the other hand, is the right held universally by all citizens to have a share of political power, that is, the right of all citizens to vote and participate in politics».

As «a primal political reaction of the ruled against the rulers» (Taggart 2000: 109), populism can be read as a disaffection for liberalism but not for democracy: while the elites are accused to be anti-democratic (limiting sovereignty), populists are accused of being anti-liberal (anti-elite) because they oppose the elitism of the constitutional pillar of liberal regimes (Krastev 2013). Taggart concludes one of his books by maintaining that populism is not good or bad but that it needs to be understood in the context, something that is paramount in contemporary politics (Taggart 2000: 115–18; see also Quijano 2000: 231). Pasquino considers populism to be an alarm of liberal-democratic institutional excesses and asserts that populism «must be considered an indication that a specific democratic regime does not work or perform satisfactorily» (Pasquino 2005: 31). If so, how justifiable is such an alarm and how should we analyse it in order to dig into the alternative potential of such an alarm and avoid considering it a mere form of protest for the supporters of populist movements? In addition, if it is an alarm, what kind of response is expected? Would it be enough to minimise and shut it off by defending the political *status quo*? These questions remain to be responded to by political practitioners.

4. *The democratic discourse makes the people*

Laclau does not support the vision of populism as an alarm. He maintains that understanding populism is not merely necessary to understand the political sphere but also because it represents the space in which politics takes place. In that sense politics is populism:

Since the construction of the people is the political act par excellence – as opposed to pure administration within a stable institutional framework – the sine qua non of political are the constitution of the political frontiers within the social and the appeal of new subjects of social change – which involves, as we know, the production of empty signifiers in order to unify a multiplicity of heterogeneous demands in equivalential chains (Laclau 2005a: 154).

The elitist attempt to demote populism is revealed by Laclau while investigating the origin of the dichotomy between normal and pathological in mass psychology in the XIX century: «[p]opulism has not only been demoted: it has also been denigrated. Its dismissal has been part of the discursive construction of a certain normality, of an ascetic political universe from which its dangerous logics had to be excluded» (Laclau 2005a: 19). Since liberal democratic regimes are centred in elitist and procedural dimensions,

the quality of the democratic participation of the people and their wider integration in the political sphere is seen as a pathology. The denigration and dismissal of populism to some extents overlaps with the dismissal of the masses and with the defence of a structure and institutional crystallisation of the political (Laclau 2005a: 63).

Rejecting the equation of populism with demagoguery (2005a: 67), Laclau approaches the subject by exploring the root of such an equation in mass psychology and semiotics in order to explain its political implications (Laclau 2005a: chapters 1-3). Weber maintains that for Laclau «the term “populism” itself is a signifier without any significant content of its own, a signifier that harbours a void» (Weber 2011: 13). The void means that there is no equation of populism with demagoguery or participation. While both could exist, the distinction between populism and demagoguery is necessary, especially due to the negative acceptance obtained by the term in the last four decades. In fact, Laclau underlines that the literature on the subject diverts its attention from the political dimension of populism by trying to identify it as a pathology that can be characterised by a number of elements that are themselves void inside and are to be found in different political experiences, diverse geographical locations and in various historical contexts. By dismissing populism, the literature misses its democratic potential and the very place in which the political is defined. As a result, populism is deprived of intrinsic rationality (Laclau 2005a: 16–17). Laclau makes a sociological inquiry by digging into the relationship between society and populism by elaborating *On Populist Reasons*. From this he considers the discursive formation to be not merely related to language but is also integrated in the relational dimension among people. The discourse represents and reproduces the objectivity of the experience because «elements do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it. Thus “relation” and “objectivity” are synonymous» (Laclau 2005a: 68).

The discursive creation of the “people” takes place in the populist dynamic through the emergence of individual “democratic demands” which represent unsatisfied social claims and create dissatisfaction and a dichotomy in a part of society from the political establishment. As more democratic demands are grouped together, they become “popular demands” which constitute a heterogeneous but united front of demands, which share an equivalent contraposition and dissatisfaction to the establishment. This is what Laclau calls the “equivalential chain”, which constitutes the structure of populism as “equivalence” of popular demands in opposition to the political establishment and “difference” between demands. The impossibility of the chain of equivalence to express all democratic demands is the reason for the hegemonic presence of an “empty signifier” as the symbolic representation of the entire chain (Laclau 2005a: 69–71;

Laclau 1996: 36–46)¹³. The emptiness of the signifier is far from being restricted to what the literature considers part of populist vagueness, for it is precisely the political potential of populism «empty signifier arises from the need to name an object which is both impossible and necessary» (Laclau 2005a: 71). The empty signifier aggregates democratic demands and forms a popular front to give relevance to the political. Although it is unable to identify individual demands, all of them are encompassed in the emptiness of the simplification.

Laclau maintains that the people does not abstractly exist before the experiential formation. It is created in the process in which an excluded part of the whole population, the *plebs*, identify themselves as *populous* – that is the totality of “the people” and differentiates themselves from the elites which are the source of exclusion through the non-satisfaction of popular demands (Laclau 2005a: 94). The populist leader is constitutive of the empty signifier and decisive in establishing the populist identity and symbol, and so therefore their role is not accessory but foundational (Laclau 2005a: 99, 160; see also Arditì 2010).

The irrationality of populism is a false critique because of the fact that populist signification is built on reason and affect. The reason being that the associations of signifier and signified are regulated by the unconscious (Laclau 2005a: 111). The frontier of populism, as well as its chain of equivalence, is blurred and the demands included and excluded in the chain of equivalence are not fixed. As a result of this, its language is also imprecise and mutable «not because of any cognitive failure, but because it tries to operate performatively within a social reality [context] which is to a large extent heterogeneous and fluctuating» (Laclau 2005a: 118). Populism emerges as a protest against the political establishment and proposes a radical alternative, «populism presents itself both as subversive of the existing state of things and as the starting point for a more or less radical reconstruction of a new order whenever the previous one has been shaken» (Laclau 2005a: 177). Where the democratic pillars of liberal democracy have succumbed to the impasse of the liberal pillar, populism attempts to democratically reconstruct it.

5. *Asymmetries and perversions of populism*

Laclau’s main work on populism has collected a series of critiques. Arditì criticises the gap in which the political potential of populism is inscribed, since

¹³ When popular demands are partially encompassed by the political establishment, the empty signifier fluctuates across different political frontiers and in this case it is a fluctuating signifier (Laclau 2005a: 131–33).

it can work as a rupture but not as a reformist potential of an institutionalised system (Arditi 2010). Žižek has also raised some objections, including the missed acknowledgment of the predominance of class struggle among other subjectivities fighting against capitalism. Žižek contends that the «proliferation [of political subjectivities], which seems to relegate “class struggle” to a secondary role is the result of the “class struggle” in the context of today’s global capitalism» and he does not «accept that all elements which enter into hegemonic struggle are in principle equal: in the series of struggles (economic, political, feminist, ecological, ethnic, etc.)» (Žižek 2000: 320; see also Žižek 2008: 264–333; Weber 2011). Laclau instead contends that capitalism is socially constructed in discourse through various subjectivities where class cohabits with new social subjectivities that are defined in the very process of populist identity formation (as explained above). This is why Laclau argues that «the anti-globalization movement has to operate in an entirely new way: it must advocate the creation of equivalential links between deeply heterogeneous social demands while, at the same time, elaborating a common language» (Laclau 2005a: 231)¹⁴.

Waisanen (2012) contends that Laclau’s theory does not elaborate on the perversion of the discourse that is internal to populist movements and that may lead to anti-democratic developments. I believe that the problem stands in the original appreciation made by Laclau to the individual demands that come to form the chain of equivalence of the populist identity, which he calls “democratic demand”. He maintains that they are democratic because they are proposed by underdogs to the political system and because they are egalitarian and presuppose suffered exclusion or deprivation (Laclau 2005a: 125–28; see also Laclau 2005b: 37–43). To challenge this position, I present the case of xenophobia connected to immigration, something that is becoming increasingly common in Europe today. A racist claim against immigrants can be egalitarian within a certain conception of community as it can be motivated for the purpose to influence immigrants in the community’s “traditional” living space and working conditions. The demand of the community to the political system would be a defence of the community against immigrants. In this case, Laclau would object to the notion that the immigrants are the un-

¹⁴ The principle of “intercultural translation” and “ecologies of knowledges” support the identification of equivalential links departing from a diatopical hermeneutics (Panikkar 1982; Panikkar 2002), that are preserving the social identities and context of the different subjectivities; they are viable instruments to work towards a common language and produce a collective discourse which is popular but not populist (Santos 2014). Through the populist appeal, the popular demands gain electoral success, which means that popular demands open a breach in politics through populism.

derdog and not the community and that the principle of equality must include both the community and the immigrants¹⁵. For this reason, the demand is not democratic, however it does concur in the creation of the populist identity. In fact, Laclau affirms that a «[f]ascist regime can absorb and articulate democratic demands as much as a liberal one» (Laclau 2005a: 125)¹⁶.

How does one consider a chain of equivalence in which democratic and undemocratic demands co-exist? How can we measure the populist democratic potential emerging from this mixed domain? Laclau allows less optimism than Rancière concerning the democratic outcome of populism (Laclau 2005a: 176–77; 246–47) as it is a structural part of the discursive formation of populist identities because the individual demands that come to constitute the populist chain of equivalence may be both democratic and undemocratic¹⁷. Through the epistemologies of the South, Santos (2014) contends that “democratic demands”, in order to be such, must target one or more of the three modern major forms of social exclusion: colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy. In other words, populism is the terrain of the political, but to be the terrain of democracy, it must account for the democratic value of its original individual demands and on the resulting democratic value of the chain of equivalence of populist demands.

The possible disaggregation of populism and democracy (Panizza 2005) is further intensified by the electoral process. This occurs, for example when the empty signifier of a populist party gains passive participation (see also Erfani 2007) via the banalisation of voting. The possibility to express a void choice among the party options that are present on a ballot (and not a political option in details) (Santos 1998a), implies that the possible democratic value of the signifier emerging in that chain of equivalence is lost. That is, when the populist identity is ultimately channelled in electoral politics and disaggregated from its social root, does not represent democratic demands but rather mere empti-

¹⁵ Badiou maintains that «“democracy” is what regulates politics in respect of communitarian predicates, or predicates of subsets. Democracy is what maintains politics in the realm of universality proper to its destination. It is what guarantees that all nominations in terms of racial or sexual characteristics, or in terms of hierarchy and social status, or statements formulated in terms of problems such as “there is an immigrant problem”, will be statements that undo the conjunction of politics and democracy» (Badiou 2005: 94).

¹⁶ Populism as fascism does not relate only to the historical forms of fascism of the XX century. Amongst the six forms of social fascism, “populist fascism” implies for Santos the definition of socio-political passivity as the legitimate form of democratic participation. Populist social fascism takes place in capitalist societies through the creation of an immediate identity with consumeristic life styles that are unachievable for the majority of the people (Santos 1998b: 25–26).

¹⁷ On commonalities between Rancière and Laclau on populism see Arditì (2010) and Bowman (2007).

ness. Participation of those who demand popular democracy to the demagogic emptiness of the populist signifier are those who maintain democracy, therefore populism without participation is mere demagogy. The incompleteness and inconsistency of the people and its representation cannot be structured and crystallised in a pure democratic institutional form without placing into hibernation the continuous emergence of democratic demands. Therefore, institutionalisation hinders the inclusion of their popular demands. In other words, populism pushes to the extreme the discourse of popular participation. This is one reason why – based on form rather than the substance – populism has largely been undermined in contemporary politics.

To conclude, the populist perversion results when it incorporates undemocratic demands or when it comes back to the *status quo*, thereby renouncing the social enterprise of voicing democratic demands and pertaining itself to mere electoral demagogy.

6. *Opening up to a different perspective*

As seen above, it is fruitful to divide populist phenomena between those that refer to the people as *ethnos* (generally identified with the right wing), and those who focus on the rehabilitation of social engagement in the democratic process through popular participation pushing for pluralist *demos*. What I call “participatory populism” combines participation and representation in a political dynamic that may open up a “loophole” in the elitist self-reproduction circle and thereby bring about marginal or substantial changes in the regime. These may include the increase of forms of political participation and the advance in social equality. In order to do so it is important to read the phenomena from a subverted perspective.

The epistemologies of the South advance a non-populist (but popular) approach of populism and propose alternatives to the causes of the current political crisis (Santos 2015)¹⁸. Referring to Laclau, Santos (2016) maintains that the emptiness of the signifier is a political consequence and not a *status quo* that needs to be hurdled; it follows the void of key categories such as democracy, freedom, civil society, equality, social contract and so on; in that light populism is a consequence of the loss of meaning of political categories. To this

¹⁸ The position of Boaventura de Sousa Santos is not apologetic of a specific form of populism; however, the recent Master class cited here (Santos 2015) presents an argument that echoes the position of this paragraph when reading the populist experience in a non-monolithic sense and it opens up the possibility of interpreting Santos’ position in the form proposed here.

extent, populism encompasses political values emerging from the impasse of liberalism and democracy. Therefore, a non-demagogic analysis of populism implies responses that are encompassed in the potential of “participatory populism”. This includes the analysis of political discourses and practices addressing: democratisation of democracy, increased adoption of participatory structures in political parties, revitalisation of representation through participatory democracy, loss of the monopoly of political organisation by political parties, increase of the role of social organisations and movements, popular councils in support of social politics, re-foundation of the state (Santos 2015).

I extensively argue that the relationship between populism and demagoguery is not exclusionary; it can be combined with participation. A purely demagogic reading of populism – or “demagogic populism” – is the opposite of “participatory populism” inscribed in the original and subaltern socially relevant acceptance of the term that is defined by expanded participation and inclusion of a plurality of populist demands in the political sphere. Collovald (2005) demonstrates how the use of the term may refer to the participatory exercise developed by “the people” to overturn elitist representatives when the democratic demands of the people are neglected by the establishment. In its original meaning «“the appeal to the people” was both the practice of mobilising disadvantaged groups via the existing system of social and political domination and enterprise (which in retrospect can be judged to have been wrong, failed or illusory, this is irrelevant here) intended to give a political voice to those who had none» (Collovald 2004: 91; Collovald 2005: 159). Political society employs a bottom-up usage of this kind of populism. Therefore, the question is: is it possible to think of a similar dynamic when the populist demand emerges from the top – that is from a party or political movement? In order to respond we need first to subvert the bottom-up perspective.

Chatterjee resonates with Laclau by affirming that «populism is the only legitimate form of democratic politics» for what he considers the second last strata of Indian society and which he names “political society” (Chatterjee 2011: 15)¹⁹. In this definition, Chatterjee includes urban squatter settlers and informal workers in India along with documented and undocumented immigrants in the west (Chatterjee 2011: 24; Chatterjee 2004). Referring to the Indian context,

¹⁹ Chatterjee assumes the contribution of Laclau (2005b) in order to propose to consider that democracy is populism in aggregating heterogeneous democratic demands emerging from the bottom up. The fact that populism is based on an empty signifier, or a hegemonic force, implies that democracy is not achieved in the ideal of a political equality. Nevertheless, this is not due to the impossibility of democracy but instead to the lack of homogeneity in the human experience which derives a variety of democratic (and undemocratic) demands. They are combined in the political trough the creation of populist demands.

Chatterjee argues that these social groups create informal associations to struggle in the defence of their moral (rather than legal or political) rights. They do not dispute that they are infringing on the law with their settlements and work (i.e., property right or trade regulations), but they do demand that the «authorities make a political judgment to use the sovereign power of the state to declare their case an exception to the norm laid down by law» (Chatterjee 2011: 16).

Chatterjee's political society plays a role in the urban economy as it offers cheap services to the middle class, and thus, its forceful removal would imply a high political cost for the elites. By negotiating through political mobilisation and forming alliances with other political groups, political society demands that it be an exception to the norm and it co-opts the demagogic populist dynamic. Chatterjee maintains that the people define their demands and the politicians incorporate them into their political promises in order to obtain political support. The role of the populist leader, the empty signifier and the use of demagogic discourse are created from the bottom up on the base of fundamental moral needs to subsistence and livelihood. In this context, populism is a strategy that is employed to force the political establishment to act without questioning its status. Populism here does not aim to change the law but rather aims to protect the precarious conditions of subsistence, which the law permits. «This is the stuff of democratic politics as it takes place on the ground in India. It involves what appears to be a constantly shifting compromise between the normative values of modernity and the moral assertion of popular demands» (Chatterjee 2004: 41; see also Chatterjee 2013).

On these grounds, the demagogic side of populism reverts into an utterly moral one; it is democratic but not liberal because it defends the basic claim to survival and a livelihood of the worst off and it neglects the property rights and business regulations inscribed in the law and constitution. However, the democratic burst of this kind of populism does not intend to shift the liberal pillar but simply aims to create an exception to it. Consequently, the political *status quo* is unquestioned. The state remains the main actor of change, but to do so it will need to give normative, institutional recognition to political society. For Chatterjee the problem stands in the scheme (norm/universal vs. deviation/exception) which characterises Western modern political normativity, of which he asks if it is possible to think beyond this paradigm. What Chatterjee eventually asks for, resounds in the core assumption of an epistemological demand, that the moral or meta-right be normatively defined according to respect for both equality and diversity, thereby reinvigorating the quest for epistemological equality and recognition of difference: «[w]e have the right to be equal whenever difference diminishes us; we have the right to be different whenever equality decharacterizes us» (Santos 2001: 193).

7. Party-movements and populism

By affirming that «all populist movements speak and behave as if democracy meant the power of the people and only the power of the people» (2002b: 9) Mény and Surel sustain that populist movements neglect the constitutional pillar of liberal democracy, which supports the institutional system. But they also highlight that «populism constitutes the most acute tension between the power of elites and the role of the masses [...] It does not fully accept the usual instruments of representative democracy, but neither does it adopt strictly unconventional forms of political participation» (Mény and Surel 2002b: 17). This inversion demonstrates that the literature on populism, with its impossibility to provide specific arguments for different political phenomena, tends to assign a negative formulated label to all non-traditional parties or movements. The whole volume that they edited (Mény and Surel 2002a) inclines to shine a light on this aspect, that is, to understand populism as a democratic component that can serve the theorisation of democracy. While political society pertains to non-institutional politics, it is appropriate to investigate if “participatory populism” applies also to political parties, or political phenomena that attempt to enter or work within state institutions.

So-called populist movements and parties may have many of the same characteristics of “demagogic populism” that is listed above and, at the same time, may strive for forms of democratic innovations that are based on participation rooted at the local level and that fight against the establishment’s *status quo*. They create a new enthusiasm for democracy in contrast to political disenchantment, something that is fundamental and which Canovan (1999) underlines very well.

Evaluating the possibility of achieving a more participatory democratic system Macpherson confronted «the vicious circle: we cannot achieve more democratic participation without a prior change in social inequality and in consciousness, but we cannot achieve the changes in social inequality and consciousness without a prior increase in democratic participation» (Macpherson 1989: 100). Party-movements are those political parties that emerge from civil society with a participatory discourse. They are especially characterised by their openness to put forward candidates and representatives that are extraneous to the political establishment, examples of which include the AAP and M5S.²⁰ They engage with participation in the formulation of party candi-

²⁰ For an introduction on the M5S see (Biorcio and Natale 2013; Biorcio 2015; Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013; Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013; Corbetta and Vignati 2014; Lanzzone 2014), for the AAP see (Kejriwal 2012; Wyatt 2015; Sachdeva 2014; Tripathi 2013; Kumar 2013; Roy 2014; Rao 2016). See also (Gianolla 2017; Khosla 2013).

dates in elections. Similar to primaries, this exercise is a cornerstone need to rebuild the trust between society and politics, although it can become also be an instrument of manipulation (Raffini and Viviani 2011). They provide a discursive response to Macpherson's dilemma by working on the societal as well as institutional level. Their populism may serve to fortify the way out of the paradox if it brings a democratic progression towards the institutionalisation of participation to de-institutionalise political inequality. Entering the institutional complex by means of procedural elitism (i.e., winning elections) in order to expand the democratic pillar and contract the liberal one, they expand the participatory potential of the political system. Moreover, party-movements can trigger the public political education that is needed to go against the "epistemic weakness" identified by Bilgrami in liberal political theory²¹. In other words, party-movements contest the concept of the people as inferior and politically inept. They tackle this inferiority especially as far as they represent continuity with civil society. By reshaping the state-civil society relationship they undermine an elitist diminishing of the concept of the people, and, in the trade off with contingent-led interests (that may head towards a more or less suffused nationalism), they obtain the electoral support needed to be successful in elections.

Party-movements focus on popular participation and attempt to find a political viability to the de-radicalisation of representation and combine it with participatory methods and forms. Labelling them simply as "populist" without dissimulating the prejudicial political use made of the term, creates a discursive confusion around the emerging alternative and results in the defence of the *status quo*. The dual acceptance of the term populism as demagoguery and participation may be applied to party-movements in order to understand if they practice simply demagoguery or if they embrace also some level of participation and to what extent. Both examples of party-movements that have been presented here have a participatory approach and stress their potential to innovate democratic practices. Participation does not exclude demagoguery, and indeed both the AAP and the M5S employ a large amount of demagogic discourse and political forms, with participation asymmetrically open in different scales and permitting a centralised party organisation. The balance is not black or white, as they do offer some innovation and a certain level of centralism. The main reason for this contradictory approach is precisely their presence in the representative arena. Without solid leadership, voters disqual-

²¹ Bilgrami affirms «popular movements are a necessary [and non-sufficient] site and condition for such public education that will remove cognitive deficits and remove the mental and frames-configuring boundary I have identified» (Bilgrami 2009: 57).

ify party-movements, but with the presence of excessive centralism demagoguery increases and thereby reduces participation, the popular dimension of their populism, and therefore democratic potential.

Party-movements refer to people as “common person”, “citizen” or “people of the web”, this is a moralised vision of “people” coming from the rejection of its diminished understanding and of the restriction of the democratic pillar in favour of the liberal-constitutional pillar that is centred in representation. Participation for them is a new characteristic of the moralised “people”. This approach is justified by the origin of the M5S and the AAP being based in civil society as opposed to the political establishment and by their political discourse. Although a moral acceptance of the people is present in populisms more generally speaking, the role claimed for the people in achieving the moralisation of politics is different with party-movements stressing the participation as a moralising effect of the people²². This is the novelty of the democratic power that is shared – at least to some extent – among those who participate as opposed to the elites that are elected to take decisions. Populisms expand the democratic debate of both their own democratic criteria and life spheres. Party-movements show how the collection of the democratic demands in the populist “empty signifier” makes populism vague and demagogic as well as a democratic potential that can be achieved through experimentalism and practice (Laclau 2005a).

8. Conclusions

To understand the relationship between populisms and demagoguery we need to analyse populism in a non-demagogic way; demagoguery by populist movements is not undone by the demagoguery of traditional parties. On the one hand, the equation of populism and demagoguery is misleading because it negates the demagoguery inherent to representation. On the other hand, this equation is dangerous because it legitimises – and expands the visibility of – extremist forces in the representative arena.

Above, I identified two main reasons that disqualify an elitist view of populism. First, populism is historically and socially recognised as a bottom-up

²² The lack of a participatory discourse in other populist movements is especially visible in right wing extremism. «Very little empirical information is available on the internal life and structure of populist radical right parties» (Mudde 2007: 264) and their leadership obstacles its own replacement (ibidem). The AAP and the M5S put forward participation as methodological post-ideological positions (Gianolla 2017) although the leadership centralism (and its change) is among their biggest contradictions.

insurgency of the people against their representatives and as an alarm for the malfunctioning of democracy. Second, through populism, demagoguery makes a “double movement” as it is adopted by different party traditions. Thus, applying it only to emerging, radical or extremist parties is misleading, especially when they complement representation with participation. While political society and party-movements encompass populist features, it is political myopia to discharge their political discourse, innovation and prospective contributions by using this ever so wide and all-embracing label. Populist movements can bring forward a moralised notion of the people that they operationalise through a bottom-up participatory approach. By disqualifying populist movements, one discharges the leader’s demagoguery as well as the democratic demands that he or she incorporates.

Populist phenomena are contradictory and may be residual or transitory but they express a potential to analyse. Democratisation is a process that benefits from small steps and it cannot avoid taking a vast and vague lesson of populism. Populist phenomena reduce their democratisation potential when they come back to the *status quo* (i.e., electoral politics), renouncing the social enterprise of voicing democratic demands. They are dangerous when they completely pervert themselves by incorporating undemocratic demands. However, these phenomena indirectly or directly affect the relationship of state and civil-society, besides the fact that there is no definitive solution for the impasse of liberalism and democracy.

In the populist bargain between demagoguery and participation, it is doubtful to restrict the analysis on one of these two extremes. What is especially suspicious is the use of populism as a negative ideological tool to be mobilised to disqualify emerging political forces. Conflagrating the ambiguity of populism into one term implies subsuming the subaltern with the concept of the people diminished by an elitist view.

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