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Populism: A Brief Comparative History in Europe and the Americas

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The history of populism is closely intertwined with the evolution of the concept of populism. As a political category, this word has a dual origin, dating back to the second half of the nineteenth century.

In Europe, the term "populism" is derived from the name of a Russian political movement which referred to itself as the *narodniki* (from *narod*, i.e. people), often translated into English as "populists." Appearing in the 1860s and 1870s, this group of the Russian intelligentsia opposed the Tsarist autocracy and advocated a form of agrarian socialism to emancipate the peasantry. Its ideology proposed an improvement in the living conditions of the peasants and the former serfs (who, though enfranchised in 1861 by Tsar Alexander II, had not experienced an actual improvement in their conditions) through the realization of a socialism based on the Russian rural community, as an antithesis to Western industrial society (Venturi 1960). However, attempts to overthrow the regime were unsuccessful, not least because popular support was too weak and the peasants themselves did not trust these idealistic revolutionaries.

In the US, the term "populism" originated with the People's Party, which was founded in 1891 to advance the demands of small farmers and urban workers in the Midwest and Southern states. Its militants were called "populists" by the press. At the party congress in St. Louis in the winter of 1892, a 61-year-old Minnesotan named Ignatius Donnelly – novelist, amateur scientist, professional lecturer, Roman Catholic – emphasized the moral and political basis for the movement, setting out a collection of proposals he and other reformers had promoted for decades: a graduate income tax, the unlimited coinage of both silver and gold, government ownership of the railroads, and more (Kazin 1995: 28-29). Active until the presidential elections of 1908, the People's Party launched a crusade against the plutocracy, challenging the power of big business, corporate groups, the upper class and its political handmaidens, but it was too heterogeneous to be able to promote a program of reforms. Even still, its romantic vision of the people and their needs ushered in a political style that would have many followers throughout the 20th century.

Although the groups were deeply different – with the *narodniki* drawing on a Slavophile heritage and glorifying old Russian rural society and the People's Party focusing on a hard-working version of American dream – both of these experiences introduced the concept of populism into the political vocabulary of contemporary age. However, its meaning was rather vague, and even today the essence of the term is disputed. What is populism? A political movement? An ideology? A strategy? A way of making propaganda? Or indeed an analytical tool for political studies, sociology, history, and journalism? And whatever it is, what are the distinctive elements of populism? Scholars still fundamentally disagree on the meaning and usefulness of this concept, but its use has nevertheless gradually become more widespread, especially since the 1950s and increasingly in recent decades (Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo, and Ostiguy 2017: 9-10).

One of the reasons the term is ambiguous is that almost none of the political parties, leaders, movements, or regimes who are considered "populists" have called themselves "populist." As noted by the political scientist Margaret Canovan, "there has been no self-conscious international populist movement which might have attempted to control or limit the term's reference, and as a result those who have used it have been able to attach it a wide variety of meanings" (Canovan 1981: 6). Thus, even phenomena of the far past have been described as populist. For example, according to Pierre Rosanvallon (2008), populism has a long history beyond the Russian and American "populists" of the late nineteenth century, including protagonists as different as the "sycophants" of ancient Greece and the French revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat: the former took advantage of the right of every citizen to bring charges against officials and saw themselves as "the people's watchdogs," eager to protect Athenian democracy from oligarchic plots; the latter, publisher of the newspaper *L'Ami du peuple*, was unable to imagine the government as anything other than an implacable machine for conspiracy and intrigue against the people. Consequently, modern populism is the heir to these precedents, and "it combines its suspicious nature with a passion for denunciation that has more to do with a will to destroy than with anxious watchfulness" (Rosanvallon 2008: 269).

Similarly, other scholars – such as Guy Hermet (2001) and Michel Winock (1997) – have applied the notion of populism to the case of Boulangism in late

nineteenth-century France. Between 1885 and 1889, General Georges Boulanger coalesced exponents of various political currents (mainly monarchists, Bonapartists, reactionary Catholics, but also the most radical wing of the Republicans) who were united by the idea of overthrowing the Third Republic, which they judged to be ineffective, corrupt and led by an oligarchy distant from the interests of citizens. Appealing to the presumed values of the French nation, the Boulangist ideology was against parliamentarism and in favor of a plebiscitary solution in order to restore full sovereignty to the will of the people. In these respects – as Winock (1997: 80) underlines – Boulangism seems to possess all the requisites of "protest populism," as it was defined by Pierre-André Taguieff (2002): anti-elitism, distrust of the representative democracy, personalization of the movement through the figure of a "virile and honest" leader, interclassism and preeminence of national unity. In this sense, Boulangist populism looks like a forerunner to twentieth-century nationalist far right movements.

However, different case studies have shown that populist movements usually tend to be amalgams of contradictory ingredients, mixing progressive and reactionary features. From this perspective, Ronald Formisano (2008: 3) has argued that, "since at least the early nineteenth century, populism has been a central element of, if not *the* dominant theme of, the political culture of the United States." Well before the People's Party, between the Revolution and the Civil War, populist tendencies were present in many forces of North American politics, often generated by fear of centralized power on the part of some local communities which tried to safeguard their political autonomy and economic interests. These movements held both democratic/progressive and conservative/reactionary positions. For example, some tended to lift women out of traditional gender roles and to promote an incipient feminism in the public sphere, while others defended the gender hierarchy and enhanced masculinity (Formisano 2008: 10-13). Many groups exhibited liberal and illiberal leanings simultaneously. From the Anti-Federalist Legacy to the Know-Nothing movement, a tendency towards populism marked the history of the unfolding American democracy, with the idea that sovereignty comes from the people and authority should be exercised directly by the people. This ideal is hardly feasible and, "in promising more than it could deliver, led to instability and challenges to authority during the early years of republic and well into the nineteenth century" (Formisano 2008: 18).

These examples drawn from nineteenth-century history all had some things in common: their direct appeal to "the people" as inherently virtuous and disadvantaged, their opposition to the economic and political establishments of the time, their belief that democratic politics needed to be conducted differently and closer to ordinary citizens, and their native or nationalistic pride (Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo, and Ostiguy 2017: 4).

While in the United States and Europe (particularly Russia and France) phenomena characterized by populist leanings appeared as early as the nineteenth century, in Latin America the first experiences of populism – or rather, so defined by historians and political scientists – date back to the beginning of the twentieth century, with the rise of Hipólito Yrigoyen (1916-1922) in Argentina and Arturo Alessandri in Chile (1920-1925). Yrigoyen was the first president to sustain a nationalist ideology, convinced that the country should manage its own currency and credit, and most of all, have control over its transports, energy sources, and oil exploitation, in order to contain the expansionism of the big foreign economic groups that were active in Argentina. However, he was unable to maintain unity within his party, which was divided between the more conservative wing and the more radical, and properly populist, wing. During his first presidential term, Alessandri launched a vast program of social and economic reforms including administrative decentralization, women's suffrage, separation of Church and State, income tax, institution of a central bank, and government control of the nitrate industry; but he too was weakened by divisions within his coalition government to carry out these policies.

A further example of early Latin American populism was Peruvian leader Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, who, while exiled in Mexico, founded the *Alianza popular revolucionaria americana* (APRA) in 1924 to promote an inter-American political movement. The two main goals were to pass a vast agrarian reform to emancipate native rural communities and to nationalize major industrial enterprises. Consequently, the main enemies of the "people" were identified in the administrative and financial elites of large urban centers and in the class of wealthy landowners: two oligarchies that dominated a population primarily composed of Amerindians who had preserved their language and some indigenous features. Because of certain ideological connotations,

APRA's program echoed Marxist positions, but actually had no link with Leninist orthodoxy and Communist internationalism. Rather, APRA was influenced by an indigenous nationalism based on an abstract vision of the past, an idealized conception of Native American ethnic groups, and on the belief in the function of a demiurge capable of creating a direct relationship with the masses. This claim for charismatic leadership fostered the rise of those who aimed to establish a personal dictatorship or authoritarian regime by appointing themselves as servants of the nation (this was the case, in the 1930s, with Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico and Getúlio Vargas in Brazil). As an Italian historian has argued, the leftist populism inaugurated by Haya de la Torre and other Latin American leaders in the first decades of the twentieth century provided the cover for self-styled "popular democracies," with plebiscitary tendencies and egalitarian programs, as charming as they were vague. These were systems of power that represented themselves as the defender of the rights of the "true people," but that in reality were authoritarian regimes (Castronovo 2007: 12).

At the same time, new political movements in other parts of the world were taking on populist features, in some cases seizing power and becoming right-wing dictatorships. The paradigmatic model is provided by Fascism in Italy. The early developments of Fascist ideology included arguments with a clear populist tone. Even before the Great War, when he was still a militant in the Italian Socialist Party, Benito Mussolini resorted to rhetorical elements of the "protest populism" (Milza 1997) – so much so that in 1914, after being expelled from the party, he called the newspaper he founded *Il Popolo d'Italia* ("The People of Italy"). Then, in the aftermath of the war, Mussolini's speeches were not only full of attacks on the parliamentary system, the liberal government, and the establishment, but also made references to other topics of populist propaganda: the exaltation of the "people" and the division of the national community between "people" and "anti-people;" the claim of a direct link between the leader and the masses and the rejection of intermediate bodies; the idea of realizing a form of self-government of the *produttori*, those who had put their work at the service of the nation during the Great War. On the one hand, Mussolini emphasized the direct relationship between the speaker and the audience, underlining his belonging to the same social origin as the listener. He thus began to spread the image of "the leader who comes from the people," which would represent a leitmotif of the Fascist propaganda

throughout the *Ventennio*. On the other hand, Mussolini launched the slogan of the "third way," as alternative both to the Right and to the Left, which provided for the overthrow of the old liberal order and the birth of a corporatist regime, based on the direct political representation of the *produttori* and on the self-government of the economic categories. Therefore, corporatism became a key element of Fascist populism, as an anti-systemic project born of a critique of established power and the ambition to build a new political-social-economic order, and in the name of the "people" as the "healthy force" of the nation.

On these bases, several scholars have considered fascism – as a general phenomenon, and not only the Italian prototype – to be a populist movement. In particular Roger Griffin, in his definition of the concept of "generic fascism" as "a palingenetic form of ultranationalism," has written that fascism was also a "peculiarly undemocratic mode of populism" (Griffin 1991: 26). Indeed, at first the unfolding fascist ideology was full of populist overtones. And, at least in part, this recurring presence of populist features in the ideological discourse helped the fascist movements to represent themselves as revolutionary groups, as new, anti-systemic, and inter-classist forces, fighting against the "establishment" and on the side of the "real people." As Peter Fritzsche (2016: 5) stated on the German case, "populism is a useful category of analysis with which to regard National Socialism [...] because of the centrality of the construct of the 'people' in the party's presentation of itself. The aim of Nazism was the realization of a racially purified 'people's community' or *Volksgemeinschaft*, which relied on violence and exclusion even as it promised to overcome the deep divisions among Germans. The idea of the 'people' was both the rhetorical ground on which the National Socialists operated and the horizon for which they reached." Likewise, Geoff Eley (2016, 25) points to the Nazis' populist language as a key factor in explaining their success: "combining together widely disparate and heterogeneous interests and demands, the ideal of the *Volksgemeinschaft* promised to make a damaged and corrupted Germany once again whole."

However, we have to remark a strong ambiguity between populism and fascism, especially in Italy and Germany, where these populist-fascist movements came to power and became regimes, imposing a new establishment. In fact, the expectation of a "third way" or a *Volksgemeinschaft*, which was supposed to increase social equity and create a

palingenetic new order of national unity, achieved the opposite: namely a state-controlled, authoritarian system, based on the functional centrality of the single party rather than on a framework of corporatist organs. From this point of view, it is enough to recall the use of violence against the workers' and peasants' movement and the defense of the interests of traditional social hierarchies (agrarians, entrepreneurs, etc.). Instead of a "classless society," the fascist regimes violently re-established a hierarchical social order, and their populist dimension was reduced to mere demagogy.

The collapse of the fascist regimes did not mean the end of populism. On the contrary, after the Second World War, the global diffusion of new populist experiences opened the phase of maximum global expansion of the phenomenon. At the same time, numerous scholars devoted increasing interest to the study of populism, opening a debate that is still ongoing today.

In Europe, the emergence of two movements like *Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque* ('Common Man's Front') in the late 1940s in Italy and *Poujadisme* in the 1950s in France marked the birth of a new form of populism. The first was a short-lived right-wing populist, monarchist and anti-communist political party, founded in 1946 by the Roman journalist Guglielmo Giannini. The Front presented itself as an anti-party movement and opposed both the professionalization of politics and ideological discussion. It demanded a minimal state and a purely administrative type of politics, led by officials who would be directly accountable to the voters. Although the Front dissolved in 1949, it left one long-lasting influence in the Italian political discourse: even today, *qualunquismo* is a common derogatory term for a non-committal attitude, cynical political disinterest, and lack of social responsibility (Tarchi 2003). The second owes its name – *Poujadisme* – to that of its founder: Pierre Poujade. Arising out of an anti-tax protest, Poujade formed a movement – the *Union de Défense des Commerçants et Artisans* (UDCA) – that defended the interests of small businessmen and shopkeepers and was based on anti-establishment sentiment. The UCDA was successful in gaining elected deputies to the National Assembly in 1956, but its trend ran out of steam at the subsequent elections in 1958. Nevertheless, it provided the basis for a more recent manifestation of populism in France, namely the *Front National*, born in 1972 and still

active; in fact, its founder Jean-Marie Le Pen had been one of the *Poujadist* deputies in the 1950s (Fieschi 2004).

It was Latin America, however, that experienced the greatest spread of populist movements and leaders in the postwar era. In a continent that in the previous era had been fascinated by fascism and was now facing the problems caused by a process of profound socio-economic transformation, with massive migration from rural areas to the metropolises and a growing demand for social inclusion, populism offered a political model to mobilize the masses. Among the several scholars who addressed this issue, probably the most influential analysis is the one advanced by Gino Germani, an Italian intellectual who escaped Fascism and migrated first to Argentina and then to the United States. In his opinion, the abrupt modernization process experienced by many Latin American countries in the twentieth century fostered a kind of populist wave that "usually includes contrasting components such as claim for equality of political rights and universal participation for the common people, but fused with some sort of authoritarianism often under charismatic leadership" (Germani 1978: 88).

The paradigmatic case of this Latin American populist wave was represented by Argentine Peronism. When he became president in 1946, Juan Domingo Perón built a regime that on the one hand resumed certain fascist leanings, but on the other preserved a democratic institutional framework (Finchelstein 2017). A crucial aspect of his ideology was the lack of an explicit agenda and the flexibility of positions, for example by implementing social reforms to improve the conditions of workers in a difficult economic situation with high unemployment. The government also promoted a significant increase in state aid in the fields of health care and public education. And despite the cultural traditionalism of Peronism, it is worth underlining the importance of Perón's second wife for the collective imagination: Eva Perón played a decisive role in consolidating the relationship between the leader and the people, showing how populism, despite its inherent tendency towards male chauvinism, sometimes found an ally in women.

According to Federico Finchelstein (2017), on the international backdrop of the Cold War, Argentine Peronism was the first attempt to "democratize" the legacy of fascism. In the Latin American context of contradictory economic development and expansion of state interventionism, other movements followed the same path (Conniff

ed. 2012): among the main cases, we can mention the second experience of Getúlio Vargas in Brazil (1951-54), the post-war governments of José Maria Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador (1944-47 and 1952-56), of Rómulo Betancourt in Venezuela (1945-48), of Gualberto Villarroel in Bolivia (1943-46), and even the reformist program of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in Colombia. These were nationalist and anti-communist movements often supported by military forces, which sought to govern the modernization processes of their countries in an authoritarian way, repressing opposition and altering institutional systems, but without destroying democracy altogether. Once the fascist option had disappeared, a new form of ruling populism was born in Latin America, which would represent a large-scale model, and to which more recent experiences – such as those of the Kirchners in Argentina (2003-15), Evo Morales (2006-19) in Bolivia, Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) and Nicolás Maduro (since 2013) in Venezuela – have also referred.

On the other hand, between the end of the twentieth and the beginning of twenty-first century, further experiences of various kinds were added, diversifying from this "classic" model of populism. Some political leaders and their governments can be enrolled in the category of neoliberal populism, such as Carlos Menem in Argentina (1989-99), Fernando Collor de Melo in Brazil (1990-92), Alberto Fujimori in Peru (1990-2000), Silvio Berlusconi in Italy (1994-95, 2001-06, 2008-11), and Donald Trump in US (2017-21). In some European countries, new movements have arisen claiming to be neither right-wing nor left-wing: for example, the *Movimento 5 Stelle* ('Five Stars Movement') in Italy and *Podemos* ('We Can') in Spain. Other movements, mostly small opposition groups, express a more radical far-right populism: among the major, the *Front National* (FN) in France, the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV, 'Party for Freedom') in the Netherlands, the *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (PEGIDA, 'Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident') in Germany, or the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in England. And finally, still other phenomena belong to a different type of religiously motivated populism, such as Recep Tayyip Erdogan's regime in Turkey. Overall, this multiplicity of cases demonstrates the versatility of populism as an idea of authoritarian democracy that is on the rise around the globe.

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