On Populism and Democracy

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Abstract

Populism became the name of a form of government after the demise of Fascism. As a political form located between constitutional government and dictatorship, it displays family resemblances with opposite political systems, like liberal democracy and fascism. Today, populism grows within both democratizing and fully democratic societies although it takes its most mature riling profile in representative democracies, which are its real target. Historically, it used representation to construct a holistic image of the people that a leader promised to bring into power at the cost of downplaying pluralism and humiliating political and cultural minorities, thus twisting democratic procedures and institutions in ways that stretched it to democracy’s extreme borders. One of the core arguments of this article is that populism is a transfiguration of representative democracy that attempts once in government to reshape the democratic fundamentals, from the people and the majority principles to elections.

Keywords

populism – supranational populism – populism as regime type – Latin American populism – European populism – fascism – populism and democracy

Populism is now at the forefront of politics. From Washington to Caracas and from Budapest to La Paz, any understanding of politics needs to take into account a phenomenon that just some years ago was often relegated to the study of the margins of the West. This situation has changed, especially since
the election of Donald J. Trump in the United States. New studies of populism are surging, and yet this does not mean that the topic has not been studied before. Populism is not new. It had a long history before the emergence of Trumpism.

First born in the second half of the nineteenth century as an intellectual and political movement denouncing modernization, social plutocracy, and elected oligarchy in the name of ordinary people as the truest and more legitimate people, populism became the name of a form of government after the demise of Fascism. In effect, populism became a regime in its own right in the post-war period. Since then, as a political form located between constitutional government and dictatorship, it displays family resemblances with opposite political systems, like liberal democracy and fascism. Today, populism grows within both democratizing and fully democratic societies although it takes its most mature ruling profile in representative democracies, which are its real target. Historically, populism challenged democracy from within, eventually moved beyond denunciation, and wanted to substantially reshape it as a new political regime. In doing so, it used representation to construct a holistic image of the people that a leader promised to bring into power at the cost of downplaying pluralism and humiliating political and cultural minorities, thus twisting democratic procedures and institutions in ways that stretched them to democracy’s extreme borders. Unlike fascism, populism does not suspend free and competitive elections nor does it deny them a legitimate role. In fact, electoral legitimacy is a key defining dimension of populist sovereignty (Peruzzotti, 2008).

In this article, we combine our two disciplines, history and political theory to think critically the relationship between populism and democracy.

We argue that populism shows some blurring edges with fascism but is never identical to it; their differences pertain not only to the context of emergence but also the organization of the ruling power. Thus, historically, fascism destroyed democracy after having successfully used its means, while populism undermines democracy without destroying it (Finchelstein, 2017). Theoretically, one of the core arguments of this article is thus that populism is a transfiguration of representative democracy that attempts once in government to reshape the democratic fundamentals, from the people and the majority principle to elections (Urbinati, 2018).

Populism’s distancing from fascism became decisive after World War Two. It was then that populist regimes were born as a post-fascist rejection of the fascist legacy. This marked a turning point and actually a foundational moment in the history of populism because it was then for the first time that populism became a power regime. We might thus say that populism was contextually
created for a world order where fascism was no longer a viable anti-liberal option. But as a form of popular government preoccupied with reconstructing authority at the state level, populism nonetheless retained some key fascist features as it aimed to be a mass consented-regime ready to contest political tolerance and pluralism and limit the indeterminate character of the democratic people.

The reconfiguration of populism in post-totalitarian democracy first happened in Latin America. Countries like Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia and Venezuela significantly witnessed attempts to establish the foundations of a third way regime, against not solely fascism but also liberal-democracy and communism. Populism was against the two halves of the Cold War order after Yalta (Finchelstein, 2017). In short, populism has a long global, and thus connected, history that needs to be considered in order to understand its present world revamping. This history combines the national, the transnational, and the supranational. As we will argue in what follows, this last interconnected global dimension of populism has been remarkably underplayed in populism studies. In the first section, we outline critically the state of the art of populism's conceptualization, while in the second, we analyze the populist transmutation of representative democracy (Urbinati, 2018). We close by showing how, in today’s democratic societies, historical and theoretical analysis contribute together in guiding our knowledge of the populist phenomenon within and beyond its national boundaries. Studying populism makes us comparatists by necessity, not only because populism is deeply context-based and mirrors the cultural and social character of the society in which it rises, but also because its evaluation varies in relation to the forms it takes, namely as a political movement of contestation or as a form of government that empowers the majority.

1 Theorizing Populism as Global History

Most theories of populism attempt to define it rather than explain what it does and why it does it. When and where populism became both national and supranational formations is also absent from the picture. In short, global history, a key approach for historians, is not involved in most theoretical reflections, and this can only limit our knowledge of populism, especially when theoretical closure seems to be the aim (Conrad, 2016). Indeed, throughout the years, the attention on populism has been the object of an intense hermeneutical and empirical analysis with the aim of achieving a generally accepted and minimal definition. Yet the term “populism” retains a persistent ambiguity, open to contradictory usages. As an ambiguous and ambivalent concept, it does not
have an “uncontested and uncontestable connotation” but can be both good and bad as it does not correspond to a truly desirable or a truly undesirable condition (Margalit, 2010, 6). Its ambivalence is directly connected to its historical character as a messianic, and often apocalyptical, response to the real or perceived elitism of liberal democracy or simply a factual condition of poverty and humiliation of the lower classes. Populism’s ambivalent nature and its deeply contextual character makes it hard to achieve a simple definition. This means that each interpretation that has been put forth contains a grain of truth, and populism resembles a collection of generalizations that are wanting in theory. Despite the powerful contrasts drawn by scholars sympathetic to populism, they have yet to converge on a shared definition, and populism remains still much more employed polemically than analytically, branded vis-à-vis actual political movements or leaders; this explains the “repugnance with which the words ‘populism’ and ‘populist’ are uttered” (D’Eramo, 2013). Thus, populism becomes an insult to stigmatize those who are, or pretend to be, against the status quo or critics of neo-liberalism and the established parties. These lax and demonizing uses of the term have prompted some scholars to deny the concept of populism any useful meaning. For them, populism is a marker of those who use it with the intention of affirming liberalism or proposing the model of liberal-democracy as the only desirable form democracy can take (Müller, 2016). Although effective in pointing out the problem of simplicity in the uses of the term “populism,” these critics themselves present a simplistic view of populism as a notion that single-handedly betrays the purported neo-liberalism of its users. They deny and strip populism of any conceptual or transnational diversity and downplay the very historicity of the term and its place in the history of ideas; they cannot explain how anti-fascist scholars like Gino Germani did not think of populism as a mere insult, and yet their research did not have “neo-liberal” motivations. Alluding to the famous case of an American Supreme Court justice who, when he was asked to define pornography, expressed difficulty in explaining it conceptually but nonetheless stated, “But I know it, when I see it”, Germani said with respect to populism, “I do not exactly know what it is, but I don’t like it” (cited in Werz 1998, 183). Germani, of course, was ironically highlighting the need not to conflate opinions and analyses after a life of analytical critique of populism from the left.

And yet ideas of an imminent death of democracy due to populism (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018) ignore the complex history of a phenomenon that involved both an increase in democratic participation for the populist majorities at the same time that it curtailed the legitimacy of the minorities as well as the complex fascist legacies within populist history. As Hans Vorländer stresses,
independently of one’s own opinions, and especially as opposition movements, populisms can be alternatively presented as “the good, the bad and the ugly” (Vorländer, 2011). This, as we shall argue, is the mark of its radical ambiguity.

With fascism, populism also shares a combination of nationalism with transnational forms of illiberalism. In fact, after 1945, populists reshaped but also continued the previous fascist attempts to construct an international front of extreme forms of nationalism and nativism. Much like liberal democracy and fascism, populism thus shows a tendency to expand by proximity and appropriation; and as we had an “age of fascism” and an “age of democracy,” to some we are today in the “age of populism.” But does this idea of a new age mean that populism is entirely new? This question needs to be answered by combining history and theory. This combination is peculiarly absent in recent approaches by new specialists. The same can be said about the influential work of Ernesto Laclau, Pierre Rosanvallon, or Margaret Canovan. These key authors also downplay the historicity of the phenomenon as well as its global and transnational links. In contrast, we argue that the new populisms do not represent a radical break with the global populist past but rather a new chapter in the long history of populist distortions of democracy.

On the other hand, particularly after the referendum on Brexit, politicians and opinion makers all over the world have labeled as populist all movements of opposition, from xenophobic nationalists to critics of neo-liberal policies, as if populists were potentially all those who do not rule and who criticize the rulers, regardless of the reasons why and in the name of which principles criticisms are made. The side effect of this polemical approach is to make politics consist of either managing institutions or populism. The result is to make populism essentially the name of a movement of opposition and democratic politics essentially an issue of governability.

Recent political events in Europe and the United States and recent scholarly production have helped shed light on populism, and some agreement is possible upon its ideological and rhetorical character, its relation to democracy, its strategy to achieve power, and last but not least its global dimensions. Although somewhat overlapping, there are three broad lines of interpretation in today’s scholarship regarding populism’s manifestations and theoretical components.¹ To some, populism is reducible to a peculiar form of ideology, a “‘thin’ or ‘thin-centered’ ideology ... that considers society to be ultimately separated into two

¹ Yet another issue would be that of the socio-economic conditions of populism, the object of a growing body of research in political science; we limit ourselves to mentioning a recent work by Gidron and Bonikowski (2016) in which all the main lines of interpretation are discussed.
homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people’ (Mudde, 2004, 543; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012, 9). To others, it is instead a form of discursive construction of the collective political subject, namely “the people,” and in this populism overlaps or even is identified with both politics and democracy (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2016). Finally, to others, populism is a battery of strategic devices that a leader or a party or both use in order to conquer power swiftly and preserve it as long as possible (Knight, 1999).

These theoretical approaches have greatly contributed to throwing light on some essential aspects or moments known as populist, although they remain partial because they stress one factor and tend to simplify the phenomenon. They also reduce its complexity in the attempt to render it a clear idea and minimal definition. The first offers a static ideal-type that is attentive to populism as a movement of opposition but tells us nothing about it as a ruling power and the form of representation that it puts in action through its leader. The second rests on a reductionist vision of politics as a rhetorical practice that mobilizes a large number of people around some unifying issues and under a ruling plan that seeks democratic majority through a representative leader. The Third undervalues significant ideological, social, economic, and cultural factors, with the consequence of merging all forms of oppositional movements. These important contributions are revealed to be limited when they deal with populism in the historical, political, and democratic contexts in which it is necessarily embedded. Our contribution wants to pick up from here and tries to keep together the comparative-historical aspects with the theoretical normative criteria that democracy in its broad meaning entails (from political emancipation and social and economic equality to the claim of citizens’ inclusion in the process of opinion and will formation). We therefore utilize all three of the aforementioned main lines of interpretation within a domain of research that is contextual, globally inclined, and politico-theoretical. Our goal is to evaluate this phenomenon in relation to challenges it poses to constitutional representative democracy.

From Peronism to Lepenism to Trumpism, populism’s growth and distinctive characteristics, which are contextual and thus never identical, point toward a political mutation that changes the tenor of public opinion and, when in power, may try to modify the functioning management of state institutions and administration. Yet it is the representative maker of this change that most qualifies populism—a real or imagined among many citizens perception of distress opens the door to some canny leaders, ready to exploit popular discontent in order to gain power quickly and once in power to stretch the rules of the
game, and even the constitution if needed in order to make it consistent with the leader’s decisive drive. Ideology and discourse construction shape a strategy for achieving power that a leader (within an established party or a newly made one) actualize through democratic means. Thus, the above-mentioned polemical use of the term indicates that populist supposedly “thin ideology” is connected to a project of power-seeking whose roots are contained within democracy as a claim of popular self-affirmation that re-emerges from time to time, particularly in conjunction with people’s (but in reality the operators’ of opinion) feeling of changes in their social condition that affect their ordinary life in ways they cannot control. There was populism at the origin of the modern process of democratization, and there is populism in the established phase of electoral democracy; therefore, to some, populism is associative with a disease of democracy in both its infantile and its senile moments (Revelli, 2017). Whatever the analogy, and moving beyond the issue of pathologizing politics, it is certain that in effect, populism has been since its early appearances in the nineteenth century a supranational phenomenon as much as the process of emancipation and democratization with which it went along. Like democracy and its several critics, in particular fascism (the deadliest of all critics), populism was always global. This was the conviction of the scholars who gathered at the London School of Economics in 1967 from different disciplines and countries with the goal of analyzing “the emergence of a new form of populism—global populism” (Government and Opposition, 1968, 3).

Attention to context and the global history of emancipation and democratization coming from London’s scholars seems to have dissipated. Populism has been abused as a term and broad international research on the topic underrepresented. Since many global instances of populism have been ignored (Moffitt, 2016), the stress on national cases as well as the focus on nationalist clusters is, of course, needed to correct the more problematic uses and abuses of the term. Populism is not immaterial, but especially the exclusive focus on global north cases is done at the cost of not analyzing historical itineraries and more transnational connections. This proverbial throw out the baby with the bath water approach in fact separates Europeans, or more broadly the global north, populism from its connections to the global south. To study populism in the breadth of our global and democratic context, we have first of all to distinguish between populism as a political form of contestation and populism as a movement that aims to achieve state power, a distinction that escapes many scholars still today. These two forms have not always gone hand in hand. Although at all times a global phenomenon, populism in Europe and the United States was until recently mostly a political movement of opposition and protest, while in Latin America it succeeded in becoming a power regime. As anticipated
above, when populism first emerged as a regime of its own—and therefore distinct from fascism and from constitutional democracy—it did so in Latin American countries in the early post-war period. This historical bifurcation has induced scholars to think that, even if populism was always part of a global history, the insistence on it as a ruling power did not pertain to its European center but to its margins instead. Within that traditional reading, Margaret Canovan (2005, 86–87) proposed a divide between populism in "economically backward" societies (in which it stretches to old-style dictatorial power like Caesarism) and "New Populism" or populism in modern Western societies (in which it can exist without charismatic leaders and can be made of generic people or a community of electors courted by politicians and not necessarily made of excluded and oppressed people who seek redemption). Within this bifurcation, the vision emerges of a problematic European exceptionality or a terminal difference with the rest of the world and leaves once again a complex phenomenon (the European phenomenon) without a history or only a history that is hardly distinguishable from electoral cases of silent majorities courted and conquered by skillful candidates and catch-all parties. In sum, until recently Western Northern countries (and particularly European ones) seemed to be immune to the “disease” that plagued peripheral countries with assaults on constitutional democracy and the creation of authoritarian governments. Recent events seem to change this adage since populism as a ruling power is making progress at the center of the West. Yet the language of exceptionality is still very appealing. Indeed, for Jaques Ranciere or Marco D’Eramo, for instance, the European extreme right cannot be confused with anything that happened previously, or concurrently, in Latin America. For Ranciere and D’Eramo, Perón and Le Pen, or Chávez and Trump are not much related in either history or theory and certainly constitute examples that are simply at the margins of the world of consolidated democracies. But their view renders Western populism as a “new” “national” phenomenon, part of the right-wing trend yet too “exceptional” and too unique to be connected or assimilated to non-Western populism. We disagree with this view.

Populism, we argue, has a history that is at different times global, national, and supranational. This history crisscrosses the global south and the global north, presenting important experiential distinctions but also marking important zones of confluence. The latter are related to a particular authoritarian understanding of how democratic politics and government should function. It is a disfiguration of democracy that takes away most of its open, pluralistic, and deliberative traits but not its institutions and procedures as such, although it may change them radically in the moment it makes them operate in the service of a homogenous representation of the “good” and “authentic”
people. Populism is therefore not only a style of discourse but also an attempt to reformulate democracy by reinterpreting its two fundamentals (the people and majority rule) in ways that are at the same time inclusive of the electoral majority and exclusive of the minority, paternalistic and at times autocratic, but not yet dictatorial (Urbinati, 2018). Having emerged together with democratization, populism has always tested democracy from within, and its character has mirrored the kind of democracy it challenged. We agree with Benjamin Arditi (2008) that populism should be studied today as an internal periphery of constitutional and representative democracy, the paradigmatic model of what we call democracy. To this issue, we now turn.

2 Populism’s Cockeyed Relation to Democracy

Populism represents a redirection of the notion of the people so as to replace its juridical and legal generality with a social and substantive one (Urbinati, 2018).

In this process of ethnicization and/or racialization of the political demos (as has been the case with many right-wing populisms) or the identification of the demos with the lower and middle classes unified under a representative leader against the few (as has been the case also with most left-wing populisms), democracy risks become the ruling power of a specific majority. This majority purports to be the “authentic” people and eventually rules as an “holistic party” (Rosenblum, 2008, chap. 1) or as if it were the only good majority and as if the opposition does not belong to the “authentic” people (Canovan, 1981, 3–16; Mudde, 2004). For populists, therefore, elections seem to be like a ritual to collect and reflect votes in order to validate a permanent truth that exists outside of specific electoral decisions. Elections show but do not create the majority; they work as the revelation of a majority that is said to already exist (the “good” or “authentic” people) and that a leader brings to the surface and makes victorious. The populist majority is not one majority among others but the “good” majority whose legitimacy is not merely numerical but primarily ethical (moral, social, and cultural) and also even theological and thus autonomous from and superior to procedures, and in this sense not merely political. Populism, one might say, uses elections as plebiscites and acclamations to confirm a form of popular sovereignty that belongs to a part of the electorate. Populism ultimately distorts electoral procedures by transfiguring them into rituals of political confirmation.

Of course, in a democracy, a majority manages the government and shapes the politics of the country according to its plans, which electors supported.
As Adam Przeworski reminded us, votes are power, hard power, and a majority tends to rule with all the strength and determination that institutions and constitutions allow (Przeworski, 1999). Yet the populist majority installs itself in power not as a temporary winner but as the right winner that has the mission of bringing the “true” country back. Therefore, even if elections are not erased and the populist majority is de facto and de jure transitory, it is the as if approach to the majority method that makes all the difference. Governing as if the government were the “right” one and its majority and people were the “true”, it entails using the audience (and eventually also the state) to denigrate those who are in the opposition, declaring and treating them as not being part of the “true” people (Rosenblum, 2008, 51–53). This is the climate in which it may happen that the majority is prone to operate at the expense of the rights and legitimacy of the minorities, and the populist government becomes a form of majoritarianism (Urbinati 2017).

Moreover, since the majority speaks through the mouth and words of its acclaimed leader, the effective (and not always told) risk is that democracy becomes the ruling power of a tiny elite that uses the mobilizing ideology of the “true” people in order to make a quick jump into politics and finally get into government. Populism in power signifies a calcification of procedures and a substantializing of the democratic process in the illusion that this reshaping will make the will of the people less of a matter of mediation among various and conflicting interests and parties, and more one of reassertion of an organic body that already exists and that the person of the leader brings to the surface and embodies. Populism replaces political representation with the delegation of the people’s power to the leader. Amending the rather Romantic view of populism as a “thin ideology” that opposes the “moral” and “pure” multitude to the “immoral” and “corrupt” elite, we propose to read populism as a canny and expediting strategy of power-climbing and achieving that uses the democratic method and procedures after twisting them in such a way that they can serve non-democratic ends, such as humiliating minorities, the independent media and oppositions as well as placing the leader above checks and balances through a mobilization of the majoritarian audience and on some occasions changes in the constitution. In this context, populism profits from an effective condition of distress and mistrust of large sectors of the population.

We also emphasize that, beyond its strategic impulses, populism potentially becomes a deeply authoritarian understanding of how democracy should be ruled. As a form of opposition, populism is indeed an ideological construct that depicts the many as legitimate and moral and the few as a disease or a disturbance. But once elected, the leader of the many acts unilaterally and decides without meaningful institutional consultation or mediation, albeit in
permanent communication with the people outside to reassure them that they are always the master of the game while he's their knight in the Capital city, as Donald Trump has repeatedly implied. Populism is indeed an ideological construct representing the many as “moral” and “honest” and the few as “corrupt” or “immoral”, yet this is hardly the creation of the many that have no voice and identity. The “thin ideology” of the politics of morality hides a clear strategy for power-conquering that has intolerant ruling at its constitutive core, as we can see from the way in which populist electoral victory is interpreted—namely, as “taking the people back,” as if the people were not represented before the populist leader was elected. The implication of this is not an innocent declaration of legitimacy but rather the presentation of all prior governments as morally illegitimate although formally legitimate. This is, in short, a radical disfigurement of the meaning of democratic procedures and process. Populism is thus not an ideology that wants simply to mobilize the people against the establishment or that wants to mobilize the people in order to make them the actor of their own emancipatory needs. Populism uses the “moral” people argument and asks the people to identify with a political outsider (thus “moral”) as their leader, and moreover to trust that the latter will work for their emancipation; more importantly, it claims that the leader will do it for them, not that they will do it by themselves. Thus, populism is not a species of direct democracy but is rather a form of “direct representation” or the making of the leader to be the representative by his direct and permanent connection to the people (Urbinati, 2015). It is the representative agent that is direct in his claim rather than the people in identifying with him.

This brings us to the last aspect of populism that we intend to stress in its relation to representative democracy: the fact that it is an ideology based on trust through faith more than trust through free and open deliberation among the followers and between them and the representative, and in this sense a trust that is essentially linked to its opposite, mistrust. This mistrust, in turn, leads to the idea of dissent (or opposition to the leader) as a form of treason against the will of the people. Populism does not cultivate nor actually appreciate the idea of accountability but rather claims that to have a beloved and populist leader is enough condition for trust. This is, of course, an imaginary rendering and one that asks its audience to surrender demands for empirical demonstration. And in fact, the idea of the people that populism sponsors it is structured in a way that is congenial to this surrender by faith in the leader’s hand: The victory of populism is not merely the victory of the people but is also that of the “authentic” people that a representative leader purports to interpret in its right will and needs as nobody has done before, although ruling with the consent of a majority. In fact, at a certain point, the actual people are
transformed into an imaginary entity incarnated in the leader, who extracts the “true” people from the empirical people that inhabit a country or are subjected to a country’s legal order. Populism in power seems to make possible a post-fascism coupled with elections and the remaining democratic institutions, which a leader embodying the people as one entity is primed to re-legitimize. As Hugo Chávez declared after reaching power, he was no longer himself but the people: “I am no longer myself. I feel as incarnated in the people. Chávez became the people and now we are millions” (“yo ya no soy yo, me siento encarnado en el pueblo. Ya Chávez se hizo pueblo, y ahora somos millones”; cited in Ramonet, 2012, 1). Similarly Perón said that Peronism “became incarnated forever in the Argentine people” (“se ha encarnado para siempre en el pueblo argentino”; Perón, 1953, 82). And more recently, Trump stated in his inaugural speech: “It belongs to everyone gathered here today and everyone watching all across America. This is your day. This is your celebration…. What truly matters is not which party controls our government, but whether our government is controlled by the people. January 20th, 2017 will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again. The forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer.”

Born as protest movements or parties, populist rhetoric frontally assaults the method and style of representative democracy. This was Carl Schmitt’s starting point in his critique of liberal democracy, which is the lymph of contemporary populist theory. In criticizing the then-moribund parliamentarianism and speaking to the fascists and authoritarians of his times, Schmitt wrote that electoral accountability is a liberal concept that presumes a transaction kind of relationship, thus a set of rules and actors akin to market-like relations, not politics. The people—the actual existing people of the nation—is the right sovereign, and there is nobody outside that can question it or limit it; hence, the public manifestation of the consent of the people in the form of identification with and acclamation of “its” leader is the only valid accountability because it is only political manifestation of the popular will and is not procedural and formal. The intensity of the people’s acclamation is proof of their strength and their leader’s legitimacy (Schmitt, 2008, 370).

The main populist claim is that constitutional democracy can only serve the interest of the powerful and their supranational backers, which are conceived as the antithesis of the people. This means that the ideological discourse that opposes the “pure people” to the corrupt elite is like the top of the iceberg sustained by a theological view of the people and the incarnating leader that is autonomous from the political process that creates it (Arato, 2013). This form of leadership cannot be wrong because it is sovereign in nature. Populism combines electoral and mythical foundations. Affirming a notion of sovereignty
that relies on legitimacy conferred by elections, a leader who owns the truth and a vertical form of propaganda to sacralize him or her has always been central to the populist vision of democracy. (Finchelstein, 2017, 229). This populist form of sovereignty is embodied in the predestined leader and his or her people, both of which are conceived as almost infallible. As Paulina Ochoa Espejo writes, “Since they are the people, they cannot be wrong; since the people are sovereign, they cannot lose. Thus, when populists find themselves in the electoral opposition, they see that as itself a flagrant injustice that requires ‘taking back’ the country from whose who have stolen it from the authentic people” (2017, 94). Here, we come to see that the expression “‘taking back’ the country” betrays the cockeyed relationship of populism with democracy. To complete our analysis of how populism transforms democratic procedures, we presume certainly that the democratic principle of majority is directly linked to the idea that it is the will and opinion of the citizen that counts and must be counted equally. This entails that the people over there is never actually ... already there, but is formed in its political actorship every time votes are counted. Yet to use the electoral procedure in order to bring to the surface that which exists already—as populist parties claim—it entails devaluing democratic procedures and, more importantly, equal political liberty, which is the assumption of democracy as a form of politics and government that belongs not to the masses or a factual majority but to citizens as individuals and groups. It involves assuming that the majority has not an embodied might that counts more than a mere temporary quantity since it exists already like a sleeping “true” sovereign waiting to be awakened by the right prince. Clearly, in this case, majority would not be merely a method for decisions but would become a substance—a collective that already exists, with a specific culture, ethnic identity, religion, and interests and is ready to ward off the impostors and traitors (those that Perón and other Latin American populists termed the “anti-people”) who occupy the public sphere of opinion and institutions. Thus, the logic of the populists is essentialist rather than procedural, with the implication that within their rendering of democracy, the populist majority is the only legitimate majority. In many cases, as in that of Donald Trump, these majorities are more imagined (and mythical) than actual and are in fact pure rhetorical construction, with the function and power to make the imagined majorities look real. They represent slim political majorities, but the actual mathematics of electoral politics are not the only marker of sovereignty for populists anyway. Still, it is notable that the ideological rhetoric of sweeping electoral victories as the form of ultimate legitimacy for a leader who otherwise presents more theological forms of sovereignty remains an important political distinction between populism and its illiberal predecessor in power, fascism.
Predictably, the ideological dualism between the moral many and the immoral few is much more than simply a discursive construction since it reveals a conception of political power that twists democracy in the very moment it celebrates it. As Rovira Kalwasser argues: “Nonetheless, all kinds of populist forces are problematic for democracy in the sense that they utilize a moral language whereby the possibility of reaching agreements is extremely difficult, if not impossible—remember that populists believe not only that the people are pure and the elite is corrupt, but also that politics is about enacting the putative ‘will of the people’ which is that of the ‘pure’ people not any kind of ‘will of the people’” (2014, 12). To sum up, populism can be seen as strong majoritarianism, a post-fascism in which the issue of who rules or uses the procedures acquires much more relevance than the issue of how procedures are operated and used. More explicitly, in fact, the “who” is the sociological force that gives legitimacy to the procedural “how,” which comes to be seen and used as subjected to the will of the “who,” like a tool more than a procedure. It is a fact that, in all countries in which a populist force gets the majority, the tension within the powers of the state emerges and the contestation against the non-political institutions (like justice or bureaucracy) in the name of the superiority of the political institutions starts. This primacy of politics is key. Populism is impatience with constitutionalism as we know it or as a system of division of powers (and in some countries of checks and balances) that regulates the functioning of state institutions whose basic authorization comes from the people via elections (and on some occasions referenda). Reaching power through mobilization, a populist leadership can consolidate and perpetuate it through patronage or clientelism. A democratic Machiavelli would say that, in that case, it would not be the people sovereign “over the law” but the leaders who win people’s consent to their plans. Political scientists call this “discriminatory legalism”—the idea that “everything for my friends; for my enemies, the law” (Weyland, 2013, 21).

This is what populism may do when it succeeds in conquering consent and changing the procedures of constitutional democracy. Populist leaders or parties that have enough power are not content with simply winning a majority but want a more unbounded power and want, moreover, to stay in power as long as possible; they “will seek to establish a new populist constitution—in both the sense of a new sociopolitical settlement and a new set of rules for the political game” (Müller, 2016, 62). This is what in some European countries is today happening with the emergence of strong populist nationalist leaders and parties. Just to offer an example, the Hungarian Civil Alliance (Fidesz) won a supermajority of the seats in Parliament and since 2012 used it to scrap the old Constitution, write a new one, and amend it continuously, entrenching its
own political vision at the expense of opposition parties and an independent judiciary (Arato, 2016, 205–222). Similar forms of populist “constitutionalism” recurrently appeared in Latin America, from Perón to Chávez.

In conclusion, when the voice of the majority wants to impose itself as the “true” voice of the sovereign, the result is that a part purports to be the whole and democracy becomes dangerously a regime of the majority against the minority, be the minority the opposition or those parties and citizens who lost the elections. The redefinition of the people in such absolutist and substantialist terms makes populists conclude that single electoral decisions are a proof of the consecration of the people and its leader. In turn, the idea of a single unified people is used to justify a presentation of the others as radical adversaries and even “enemies of the people” (Trump) or as the “anti-people” (Perón). These several characteristics have very distinctive histories. As we said at the start, a historical reading of populism entails a necessary stress on transnational variations and contextual specificities. Thus, Trump’s populism is surely different from Peron’s just as Hugo Chávez’s regime was different from Silvio Berlusconi’s. Yet this difference pertains to the constitutional regimes in which populism emerged, more than to the style of populism.

3 An Old Story: Then and Now

Some of the predominant studies on populism treat populism as an essence. Essentialism is often translated into polemical rendering as either anti-populist or pro-populist that purports populism to be a myth or an ideal-type. The ideal-type is made to work not as a guide to understanding but as a hypostatization that stays for the several histories of populism. And yet these histories need to be acknowledged in their specificity and be told in both national and transnational terms. Populism first appeared in the mid- and late nineteenth century in Russia and the United States respectively with the narodniky (the early meaning of the word nadodnichestvo was given by Lenin to what then was an intellectual phenomenon more than a political movement) and the People’s Party, which is the first populist expression of democratic mobilization (Walicki, 1969; Kazin, 1995). In the twentieth century, with the defeat of Nazi-fascism and the reconstruction of constitutional democracies in Europe and the United Nations’ Declaration of Human Rights, modern populism re-emerged, although the new political and normative environment changed its character and for the first time made it reach power. After campaigning like its populist predecessors as the essential form of plebeian and anti-political uprising, populism finally became a regime in post-war Latin America.
Then, in Cold War Europe, populism was identified mainly with anti-politics as populism movements militated against political parties and party democracy. Thus, in the one case, populism was identified with a ruling power and, in the other, it remained a movement of opposition against the democratic establishment. The latter is the result of a European context in which, with a number of important and uneven exceptions (Italy, Austria, Hungary, Finland, and Poland), populism has always remained in the opposition. But populism is not only or simply a movement of protest; in effect, without a ruling ambition and structure, it remains an incomplete populism. It remains a sacrosanct expression of dissent and criticism. On the other hand, there is populist rhetoric and populist power when a movement does not want to be a constituency independent of the elected officials or an ideological expression but seeks instead to conquer the representative institutions and win a majority in order to model society on its own ideology of the people. Populism in power can jeopardize constitutional government.

It was in Peronist Argentina but also briefly later in Brazil, Bolivia, Venezuela, Ecuador, and other countries that populism first became complete as a movement and system of power. Thus, for the first time, a modern populism in power emerged after 1945 in Latin America with “classical” formations such as Peronism in Argentina and Varguismo in Brazil; later, it emerged in Africa and Asia in the 1960s in coincidence with the wars of emancipation from colonial domination (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969). In time, with the end of the Cold War, it made its appearance in some member states of the European Union, both in Mediterranean and in Eastern countries. It was thus only after the Cold War and with the erosion of ideological parties capable of unifying popular claims toward social reformist politics that Europe started experiencing populism, not merely through movements of opposition but also through parties that sought and sometimes achieved state power democratically (Mény and Surel, 2002; Mair, 2002; Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015). In western Europe, former neo-fascist organizations (notably in Austria, France, and Italy) turned to populism as the pre-eminent political form to acquire support from large audiences in order to continue and reformulate the legacies of old authoritarian nationalism and even fascism in a democratic key, as Perón had done after 1945. This is also the recent case of Hungary, as we saw, and of Poland with the electoral victory of Kaczinski’s PiS after 2014. Therefore, populism’s post-fascism arrived belatedly in Europe at the end of a bipolar international order after first appearing in South American and post-colonial countries in the early Cold War (Finchelstein, 2010 and 2017).2

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2 On populism as post-fascism in Europe, see Griffin (1996) and more recently Traverso (2017).
The factors of populism’s renaissance in Europe and now also the United States are several and complex, and their analysis is not our topic and domain of expertise. Scholars refer to the decline of economic growth with the end of 1970s and the first oil crisis and then the end of the bipolar order that had contained and ruled regime change within countries of the two blocs (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2016). Recently, the new success of populism within the general public and its consolidation as a regime are symptomatic of increasing inequality (populism had a pick after the financial crisis in 2008), immigration from destabilized and poor countries, radicalization of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism, and the political transformations in representative government in stable and new democracies as well (Berezin, 2009, Mair, 2013). More generally, scholars agree that populism is the sign of a critical perception of political representation by an audience full of resentment per effect of the decline of the well-being of the middle class and working class along with a detected dissatisfaction in the “mainstreamism” that existing parties have adopted; the erosion of authority of the sovereign state to rule borders and the economy add to the distress of contemporary democracy. New populism reflects these conditions and takes the color of the political order against which it militates. Today’s milieu is a cosmopolitan and universalistic conception of democracy as a project not simply of national reconstruction after the defeat of totalitarianism, but of an ethical and religious reconfiguration of the relationship between peoples and among states (Skocpol and Williamson, 2012). This is the context in which we have to situate the challenge of populism to democracy, a context wherein democracy acquires an ideological meaning and is not solely a set of procedures and rule. If, as Benjamin Arditi (2008) consistently argued, populism is parasitical on democracy, we have first of all to understand what kind of democracy we deal with when we want to detect populism. In this article, we propose to consider populism in power as a form of radical majoritarianism. As such, it is for the first time at the center of the Western world attacking its most ambitious ideological and institutional constructions; populists hit at the core of the “center” and not only at its southern “peripheries.” While in Latin America, throughout its complex history, and from left to right, populism has mostly stood for regional integration, generally replacing the diversity of citizenry with a unified demos that reclaims voice and inclusion in the name of the sovereign people; in Europe’s nation-state based democracies, populisms have been more frequently right-wing phenomena aiming at transforming the democratic peoples into domineering intolerant national majorities, thus scrubbing rights or making them the possession of the “true” people. Latin American populism, even when it was originally born out of a post-fascist reformulation of fascism, explicitly left behind most
fascist forms of racism and xenophobia, while Europopulists tend to return to these major tenets of fascism without aiming explicitly for the fascist establishment of a dictatorship. We think that populism is also in Europe a periphery of constitutional democracy, not just another regime outside democracy.

Like the different attempts at a fascist international and its totalitarian global struggle against democratic movements and polities as well as their neo-fascist configuration after 1945 (Ledeen, 1972; Cuzzi, 2006; Herren, 2016; Mammone, 2015), the current populist moment is a supranational phenomenon; it often crisscrosses the Atlantic as well as up and down the Western hemisphere and across Africa and Asia (De la Torre, 2015; Moffit, 2016; Finchelstein, 2017). In Latin America, movements like Peronism and Chavismo attempted and ultimately failed in creating longstanding transnational ideological alliances among the region’s varied populist movements and beyond. Perón tried unsuccessfully to export “justicialismo,” Chávez was relatively more successful exporting his Bolivarian model of change (Finchelstein, 2014, 90–92 and De la Torre, 2017). In Europe, populism, especially on the right, is clearly a pancontinental phenomenon that embodies the reversal of the very values and principles that have made the European Union, beginning with the Treaty of Rome in 1957: religious toleration, the culture of rights, the openness of society to foreigners, or more radically the traditional roots of the continental union—namely, Christianity. Both in the Western countries of Europe where Christianity is de facto the name of a secularized subjective morality, and in the Eastern countries where Christianity is a metaphysical and nationalist heritage, the renaissance of populism has taken the color of a kind of religious war opposing Christian Europe to non-Christian immigrants. This makes sense of the character of Europopulism which, Rogers Brubaker writes, modulates its inborn dualism between “we” and “them” in relation to the kind of “them” that the context offers: In today’s Europe, Muslims are the “them,” and the opposition against them takes the character of both a moral fight between civility and incivility and a religious-ethnic fight between the religion of Europe and that of its enemies (2017). In some countries, the combination of these several socioeconomic and cultural factors, plus the increasing EU neo-liberal emphasis on technocratic decisions to economic and political crises, have made the general opinion prone to accept ideologies and political majorities less open in their interpretation of democracy and in some cases deeply majoritarianist and prone to violating the rule of division of powers and the autonomy of the judiciary in order to strengthen the will of the majority against internal and external enemies, be they cosmopolitan financial elites or the wretched of the earth. The recent historical trajectory of Europopulism confirms our idea that populism in its different histories and manifestations puts forward a
defacement of democracy that, in the name of the “right” people that it claims to represent and protect vs. the “inauthentic” one (generally speaking, minorities, whether numerical or economic or cultural or religious), entrenches a given majority and is primed to jeopardize the systems of rights in which modern constitutional democracy consists.

Populism in history combines inclusionary and exclusionary moments at the same time. It represents a sense of participation and strong feeling of political inclusion and incorporation among its followers, many of whom now sense they were previously unrepresented in politics; it also represents the determination to exclude those who are dubious of the leader’s absolute claims and positions or are identified as the enemy of the “authentic” people. This is the kind of request that makes movements that are different (like the Front National or the Five Stars Movement or Chavismo and Peronism) come to agreement when reasserting populism’s dualism between “folk democracy” and “established democracy” or popular democracy and constitutional democracy, and swear to get rid of the political “establishment” or what lies in between the “us” and the decision-makers. This was also the core theme of Trump’s inaugural address, when he claimed: “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.” But Trumpism did not only mean a national phenomenon as it put forward its ideals of America First; it also wanted to be the icon of supranational anti-establishment needs of different national peoples on a global scale. This was early recognized by the likes of Marine Le Pen. And this was also the sense that Trump’s UN representative, Nikki Haley, wanted to convey in her famous speech at the Council of Foreign Relations in early 2017: “The U.N. is missing the growing discontent and growing distrust among the people it’s supposed to represent ... The fact is, a wave is building throughout the world. It’s a wave of populism that is challenging institutions like the United Nations and shaking them to their foundations.”

4 Conclusion

In this article we have proposed an alternative conceptualization for the history and theory of populism, Most existing theoretical interpretations of
populism have tried to explain this phenomenon within an essentialist paradigm and contain it within a label or closed concept. These uses displace the global histories of populism to the background of a novelty that cannot be explained in its own terms. They have a propensity for a term that denotes some exceptional event or a pathological anomaly in the health body of liberal-democracy, the universal model with which democracy has been identified since 1945. Combining theoretical and historical analysis, our goal in this article has been to suggest an interpretation that integrates (and in this sense amends) existing interpretations. We stressed the need to contextualize populism in order to underline its different social dynamics as well as its key historical distinctions and global continuities. Using Laclau’s effective expression, we wanted to vindicate the multi-dimensional character of this phenomenon, yet within a common political trajectory that is internal to representative democracy. Above all, post-war modern populism left behind its fascist genealogy and effectively became a form of post-fascism which narrowed down democracy without destroying it (Finchelstein, 2017). Thus, populism is a transfiguration of the fundamental elements of representative democracy (Urbinati, 2018) and to better understand it, we have to analyze the interconnected global and historical dimensions of populism.

To adopt an oxymoron, populism imposes itself as a form of “direct representation” or the representation of the people as a collective one that a leader constructs without or outside the intermediation of political associations (traditional parties), at times by creating new movements that better allow his direct relation with the audience (Mair, 2002; Manin, 1997). Within post-party democracy, in which the appeal to a generic audience replaces antagonism among partisan groups, the sacred sovereignty of the majority opinion achieves strength beyond the procedural counting of votes. It also claims its superiority in value over that of “formal” representation through elections, and resorts more enthusiastically to a plebiscitary politics in which the messianic populist leader is in constant campaign mode. In this context, election actually takes the form of an acclamation. In this, populism corrupts the principles, procedures, and quality of democracy. In the diverse, and even conflicting, interconnected histories of populism in the north and in the global south, populists claim the sovereign power of the “true” people and put forward a form of legitimacy that exists before voting and which the rule of majority simply certifies as the voice of the victorious many. We have thus presented populism as a postwar power regime, an extreme majoritarianism, a form of democracy that can jeopardize its own open character in the very moment it determines the people and their leader to be socially specific and for this very reason the “true” ones.
Bibliography


