Chapter 2
Populism and Its Definitions: Interpretations and Perspectives of a Multifaceted Political Model

Antonio Maria Baggio

1 Multiplicity of Populisms and Their Definitions

The first attempt to clarify, by an international and qualified representation of scholars, what populism is, took place from 19–21 May 1967 at the London School of Economics and Political Sciences,[1] in the Conference entitled 'To Define Populism'.

1.1 From the London Conference to the New Populisms

Within a century, populism had appeared through a movement of anti-Tzarist intellectuals in imperial Russia, in the years following the defeat in the Crimean War (1856) and Tsar Alexander II's initiation of the emancipation process of serfdom. The Russian situation was a long way from that of the United States after the Civil War, but here too we find an agricultural sector undermined by the monetary policy implemented with continuity by the federal governments from 1868 onwards; the claim movement supported by debt-ridden farmers was also qualified as 'populist'

[1] The event was organised by the journal *Government and Opposition* in collaboration with the Humanitarian Trust. The Verbatim Report of the Conference is preserved in the School Library. Only the report of the debate of the last session of the Conference, devoted specifically to the issue of defining populism, was published by the journal that had promoted the Conference (Government and Opposition, 1968). The following year, the main reports were published – the first five dedicated to the analysis of cases (North America, Latin America, Russia, Eastern Europe, Africa) and the other five to in-depth theoretical analysis (Ionescu & Gellner, 1969).

A. M. Baggio (✉)
Sophia University Institute, Figline e Incisa Valdarno, Italy
e-mail: am.baggio@sophiauniversity.org

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and went so far as to create, in 1892, the 'People's Party' which was short-lived. Change century and continent, and we find movements defined as populist in Latin America in the first half of the twentieth century and, starting in the 1940s, the great phenomenon of Peronism in Argentina. There is a populist component within fascism, Nazism and Stalinism, in the processes of decolonisation in Africa, in some youth movements of the 1960s: recent phenomena for those who evaluated them in 1967.

As seen even then, 'populism' can take an autonomous, organised and visible form as a party, movement, ideology and mentality. It can also present itself as an internal component of political forces in which the official and explicit, or prevailing, orientation is not populism, but the right or the left, reformism, republicanism, nationalism or other. It may be institutional populism, that is, a component of an ideology imposed by the apparatus of authoritarian or totalitarian states, or states that are introducing transformations aimed at changing the balance of power and/or weakening the democratic order, or attempting to make it more inclusive. Even more generically, a political regime can be referred to as populist if, in its founding texts, it refers to the people as a political subject.

The London Conference takes into consideration this time span, this multiplicity of phenomena and theoretical possibilities. The debate is intense and opens up multiple research perspectives, not least because the participants belong to different disciplines and their languages capture different aspects of reality. The debate is not monopolised by a single discipline but open to political science, anthropology, social and economic sciences, psychology, political philosophy and the history of concepts and cultures. In essence, many of the questions we still face today in the study of populisms are set out, albeit in a profoundly changed world.

It is worth entering into this debate, to make our own the tools it provides and the perspectives it opens up. We will then try to follow – in the essentials – its progress through the generations of scholars and the variety of schools, because there is not only a history of populism that, until the first two decades of the 2000s, has produced unprecedented political phenomena; there is also a history of the study of populism that has experienced a real theoretical enrichment.[2] Knowing the main lines of this history allows us to better evaluate new theoretical proposals as well.

In fact, publications on populism have grown with considerable acceleration since the 1990s, in parallel with the emergence in Europe of movements and parties that defined themselves or perceived themselves as populist. Populism, in different forms, was not a new phenomenon in Latin America, but over the last two decades, three countries have experienced a radical left populism in power (De La Torre, 2019: 199–203; Weyland, 2013: 19–20) which radically changed the previous political framework: Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador.

[2] In this sense I find Manuel Anselmi's book, *Populism. An Introduction*, useful. It aims to take stock, synthetically, of the knowledge acquired so far through studies and debates on populism, introducing us to the thought of some of the authors – from Edward Shils to Yves Mény and Yves Surel – who have proposed, over the past decades, original reflections on populism. In the second part, he addresses some of the issues posed by more recent populism, from the perspective of political sociology (Anselmi, 2018).

The situation regarding populism has also changed a lot in Europe. In 2000, the negotiations to form a government alliance between the ÖVP (Austrian People's Party) of Christian Democrat tradition and the FPÖ (Austrian Freedom Party), considered a populist party, was the subject of a condemnatory resolution by the European Parliament. This considered the racist and xenophobic positions and expressions of appreciation for Nazism expressed by its leader at the time, Jörg Haider, to be contrary to European values. The resolution did not even hint at populism, but wanted to prevent the admission of FPÖ into the government from legitimising the extreme right in Europe (European Parliament resolution 3 February, 2000). At that time, in institutional political circles – and, to some extent, also in some academic circles, as we shall see – populism was directly associated with the radical and pro-Nazi right. Twenty years later, at least 27 parties considered or self-described as populist, including left-wing parties, have had or still have experience of government, in 19 European countries.

Other events that have increased interest in populism in the last decade were the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union (2020), the election of Donald Trump (2017–2021) to the presidency of the United States and the consolidation of 'institutional' forms of populism in some Eastern European countries, such as Serbia, Poland and Hungary – a trend confirmed, in the latter country, by the general elections of 2022. In the specific case of Poland and Hungary, it is appropriate to use the expression proposed by Mattia Zulianello, 'positive integrated populist parties' (Zulianello, 2020: 341), to refer to populist parties that integrate themselves into the system and, once in government, introduce laws that change the political regime by adapting it to their own vision. Within the European Union, we find the cases, in particular, of two parties leading their respective governments: the Fidesz (Hungarian Civic Alliance) in Hungary and the PiS (Law and Justice) in Poland. The European Union found that both countries violated certain principles of the democratic framework established by the Union's founding treaties, in some respects: the limitations imposed on freedom of expression (Hungary) and on the freedom of the judiciary in the Polish case. The Union's proceedings against the two countries obtained a Court of Justice ruling on 16 February 2022 (Court of Justice, 2022).[3]

Within the current dynamic and interesting framework of populism studies, we must also note certain limitations. The first lies in the fact that the interdisciplinary methodology widely applied in the London Conference has not been adequately developed over the next 50 years. It is to be hoped, for the future, that research conducted in interaction between different disciplines will multiply.

This interdisciplinarity has certainly had an influence in multiplying the number of possible definitions of populism. However, the plurality of perspectives should not be interpreted reductively as a state of confusion, but as an initial manifestation of a complex reality. Let us then consider some of the definitions presented then, which seem indicative of a nascent typology.

[3] Hungary and Poland had brought an action against the EU regulation that makes the disbursement of EU money to Member States conditional on their compliance with the principles of the rule of law. The Court of Justice of the European Union dismissed the appeal on 16 February 2022.

1.2 Populism as a Progressive Ideology of Transition

The first type of definition sees populism as a *transitional ideology towards autonomous development*, particularly in countries that have experienced or are undergoing processes of de-colonisation. Peter Worsley, a social anthropologist, places populist ideologies in the context of the 'undeveloped' countries that he studied in his book *The Third World* (Worsley, 1965) – an expression that was, at the time, a neologism. Populism is a typical 'development ideology […] of transition from "rural idiocy" to modernised society […] It was more often potential than realised' (To Define Populism, 1968, 156–157).[4] The class clash, in his view, does not play the central role in the Third World that it does in developed countries: the main clash is, rather, between society as a whole and the outside world of the former colonisers. The party-state is the engine of development. In some cases, populism has the task of developing a vision that brings together the party, traditional village life and the new autonomous activities associated with development processes.

Beyond the historical context of decolonisation, within which populism is placed, we encounter here *a vision of populism as a progressive ideology and movement*, a vision shared by some, but contrasted by others who oppose it by attributing to *populism a reactionary character*, of opposition to modernisation perceived as a threat. Here begins a debate that has never been concluded, in which each of the interpretations is supported by different cases of populism.

1.3 Populism as an Ideology Functional to Other Ideologies

Another definition in the context of *populism as a transitional ideology* is presented by Andrzej Walicki, social and political philosopher.

For Walicki, populism is *a form of peasantist oriented socialism*, through which a Westernised intelligentsia wants to achieve two main goals: a modernisation of 'backward countries' as an alternative to capitalist-type development and to rescue idealised pre-capitalist human relations (To Define Populism, 1968, 172).

Walicki connects these forms of de-colonisation populism with nineteenth-century Russian populism: he emphasises the leading role of an alienated elite that wants to return to its cultural roots. This is why it constructs a populist ideology that attempts the composition of contents peculiar to the national tradition with those more general of socialism – herein lies the new element. This type of populism, according to Walicki, can also easily combine its ideas with forms of nationalism and xenophobia.

[4] Arpad von Lazar rightly comments, in his review of *The Third World*, that Worsley is more familiar with the countries of Asia and Africa than with Latin America; Lazar, A. (1966). *The Journal of Politics*. Vol. 28, No. 2, 445–447. Review of (Worsley, 1965). In fact, Worsley during the Second World War was engaged in India with the British Army.

This idea was put forward in the debate by Ghița Ionescu (Ionescu & Gellner, 1969, 4). Walicki, agreeing with him, places it in a more comprehensive interpretative context. In this sense, the *concept of populism is introduced as a functional ideology of other ideologies,* i.e. *destined to become a component, an 'adjective', albeit an important one, of more structured ideologies*.

1.4 Populism Generated by a Social Situation

The definition given by Alain Touraine, sociologist of economics and politics, in his second speech reported in the report, defines populism as 'a movement or an ideology defending some traditional values and at the same time directly oriented towards problems of economic and social change. It was both backward and forward looking' (To Define Populism, 1968, 157).

The social situation to which Touraine links populism can be described through *three characteristics*. *The first* is the presence of 'a social category which was halfway engaged in a process of economic change, a category which was defined not by economic circumstances or as an interest group, but was in a process of collective social mobility' (To Define Populism, 1968, 158). This consideration opens up a field of research that will be much explored later – the fact that more social categories are involved in the process of change means that they can no longer recognise themselves on the basis of an ideological classification strictly linked to a role in the production process (such as 'class') or a social function. *The idea of the people, which imposes itself as a unifying subject beyond class differences*, seems to better express the need for belonging and identity reaffirmation of social groups placed in the uncertainty of change. Another avenue of research concerns the fact that *social mobility can quickly turn into political mobility*, causing a significant number of citizens to abandon traditional party affiliations (right, left) and open up to new political possibilities and electoral choices. This phenomenon is found in different eras and countries and has often accompanied the formation of populist parties both in the first half of the twentieth century and in more recent cases (Betz, 1994; Betz & Immerfall, 1998; Surel, 2003).

The second characteristic of the social situation conducive to populism is indicated by Touraine in the emergence of an economic power that appears 'alien' to society, as if in the hands of 'foreigners'. The most obvious example, of course, is the colonial situation, 'but an analogous situation could exist in a relatively traditional dual society where the power of the oligarchy could appear to be a foreign power for the rest of the society' (To Define Populism, 1968, 157–158). Such a situation was to be created in the countries of Eastern Europe after the fall of the socialist regimes, with a very rapid transition from a planned economy that was static, but capable of guaranteeing a minimum of security for the population, to a capitalist economy for which these peoples were not prepared (Heinisch, Massetti, & Mazzoleni, 2020) The perception of power as hostile materialised with the financial crisis that exploded in 2007. *Another important theme of analysis opens up here:*

that of the foreignness of economic power towards the whole of society, which, assuming the configuration of 'the people', presents itself as a whole in relation to a foreign body. In this way, Touraine observes a strong discrepancy can be created between political organisation (in which, I interpret, a popular will can be expressed) and economic power. This consideration by Touraine is part of a history, from the second half of the twentieth century to the present, that has produced a wide range of conflicts between governments and the economy, in which we find both cases of the dominance of economic powers over fragile states and, conversely, governments with strong populist elements that have rendered the economies of their countries fragile or even structurally damaged (Dornbusch & Edwards, 1991; Weyland, 2001, 2013).

The third characteristic indicated by Touraine is the *ambiguous position that can be taken by important components of the middle class*. It can ally itself with the popular classes against the oligarchy, and, at the same time, it can try to maintain a general balance between the classes. This theme has been addressed by numerous comparative studies on populism: exemplary, also methodologically, is Gino Germani's study on fascism and Peronism.

1.5 Extension and Intention of Definitions

Donald MacRae was one of the Conference speakers, on the topic of *Populism as Ideology* (MacRae, 1969, 153–165). In the course of the debate, he presented a 14-point definition of populism, in contrast to the authors we have dealt with so far, who had contented themselves with only 4 or 5 points (To Define Populism, 1968, 172–173).

The reason for this wealth of elements in the definition lies in the fact that MacRae links the populist phenomenon to two precise historical situations: 'When we talk of populism we think in the first place of imperial Russia and the late-nineteenth-century United States […] populism is typically exemplified in modern Russia and America' (To Define Populism, 1968, 172). However different the two populisms are (from each other and from many others), it is from them that MacRae derives the defining elements of populism as such. This process of generalisation, which also concerns other definitions presented during the conference, highlights a central issue in the defining processes of the empirical sciences: *the level of abstraction of definitions, linked to the relationship between connotation and denotation in definitions*.

The closer we bring the lens to a phenomenon, and thus the narrower the scope of the definition, the more observable elements that characterise the phenomenon we bring into the definition of it. Conversely, if we want to include in the same definition a large number of phenomena such as the many populisms of which we have knowledge, then their common characteristics are reduced: the definition includes many more phenomena, but can say less about each of them, as Irving Copi taught several generations of students: 'The *extensional meaning* (also called the *denotative meaning*) of a general term is the collection of the objects that constitutes the

extension (or *denotation*) of the term […] The set of attributes shared by all and only those objects to which a general term refers is called the **intension** (or *connotation)* of that term' (Copi, Cohen, & McMahon, 2011, 87).

1.6 Six Questions About Populism

It is logical then that Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, in presenting the book *Populism. Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, which contains the papers presented at the Conference, do not refer to a shared definition, but to six recurring themes during the London proceedings, which indicate as many fields for future and necessary research: 'There are perhaps six principal questions on which to base an assessment of whether populism is a unitary concept, regardless of the variety of its incarnations, or whether it is simply a word wrongly used in completely heterogeneous contexts' (Ionescu & Gellner, 1969, 3).[5]

The questions are as follows: first, are populisms ideologies or movements?

Second, perhaps 'populism is a sort of recurring mentality appearing in different historical and geographic contexts as the result of a special social situation'. This second path of research is very interesting; Ionescu and Gellner give one of the possible interpretations, assuming that it is the social situation that creates the mentality. But 'mentalities' are not created overnight; they have deep cultural roots: we could say that this mentality is not produced, but activated by a crisis, and we need to explain what it is and why it is a hidden, but permanent presence.

Ionescu and Gellner go on to indicate as a third issue the fear of conspiracy and the mania of persecution towards an enemy indicated from time to time in different subjects, but whose presence is always necessary to orientate the antagonistic sentiment. In fourth place comes 'negativism' whereby populism is always anti-something. Fifth, populism worships the people, always understood as miserable and related to the rural world. Finally, the 'recurring mentality' – as we read in Walicki's exposition – normally disappears to be absorbed within 'strong' ideologies.

1.7 Let's Give Cinderella a Shoe

Berlin was the chairman of the final session 'Towards a Definition' of the Conference, dedicated to the presentation and comparison of different possible definitions of populism. Berlin gave an important synthesis speech, most of which took up elements we have already mentioned and others to which we will return.[6] At the

[5] The six questions were anticipated by Ionescu during the final debate of the London Conference (To Define Populism, 1968, 168–169).

[6] Berlin did not publish any text. However, the 'Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library' makes available the verbatim of his speech (Berlin, 1969), which claims to be more accurate in some places than the one published by *Government and Opposition* (To Define Populism, 1968, 173–178).

beginning of the session, taking note of the plurality of positions, Berlin expounded the 'Cinderella complex', according to which every definition that seeks to construct the perfect model of a phenomenon – and therefore also that of populism – is comparable to Cinderella's shoe: perfect in itself, it finds no foot that corresponds exactly to it in reality. 'I mean the following: that there exists a shoe – the word "populism" – for which somewhere there must exist a foot. There are all kinds of feet which it nearly fits, but we must not be trapped by these nearly-fitting feet. The prince is always wandering about with the shoe; and somewhere, we feel sure, there awaits it a limb called pure populism. This is the nucleus of populism, its essence' (Berlin, 1969, 6). This idea of a perfect (and unchanging) model of populism is Platonic, not useful to us, according to Berlin. The meanings of words are not immovable like Platonic ideas (which are not given through experience in the sensible world, but are the result of rational hypothesis or contemplation) but change, especially if they have to do with historical or sociological subjects: we must not take this direction. 'At the same time, we must not be tempted in the other direction, which some have taken, to suppose that the word "populism" is simply a homonym […] Yet I also have a feeling that whenever a word is much used, even if it is an exceedingly confusing or over-rich word, like "romanticism", "idealism", "populism", "democracy" and so on, something real is intended, something, not quite nothing. There is a sense in which one should look for the common core' (Berlin, 1969, 7).

'Populism is something real'. The 'Cinderella complex' is therefore not an insuperable fate. It is very likely that, while we linger on explaining that populism is indefinable, Cinderella has already left with the Prince, and in her own shoes.

2 People or Populace?

Certain elements recur frequently in definitions of populism. The meanings attributed to them, however, are different. Consequently, the judgement of populism changes, but often, because we are focused on the differences between definitions, we do not notice that the nature of the 'people' to which populism refers also changes. We explore this dynamic with the help of four US authors – Edward Shils, Richard Hofstadter, Michael Kazin and Tom Nichols – who introduced new tools for understanding the debate between the 1950s and today.

2.1 At the Origins of Populism: The Catalysing Role of Resentment

The first is Edward Shils, sociologist. In his work *The Torment of Secrecy* (Shils, 1956), he examines resentment against the ruling class and the political and economic order it imposes on society as a whole. He considers it fundamental in the

formation of US populism, which began in the Middle West and South in the years following the Civil War.

We found this element in some of the definitions presented at the London Conference, which implement an initial generalisation of resentment, applying it also outside the US experience. Subsequently, in a large number of authors, it is considered as an essential component of populism as such. Its role is also recognised in the analysis of more recent populisms, active in the first two decades of the 2000s.

However, the focus on the concrete phenomenon that characterised Shils' analysis is often lost. The protagonist subject in his description is not 'the people', but the 'populace', a pejorative term compared to 'people': it indicates the baseness of customs, the mass, the uniformity or lack of individuality. The use of two different terms is effective because he intends to emphasise that populism is an expression of the people, not the populace. This dignity of the people leads to the reversal of the meaning – from a moral point of view – of the relationship of inequality: 'Populism is tinged by the belief that the people are not just the equal of their rulers; they are actually better than their rulers and better than the classes – the urban middle classes – associated with the ruling powers' (Shils, 1956, 101). But the presence of the 'populace' element cannot be ignored. There is thus a tension within populism between people and populace, which can make one or the other of the two elements prevail.

Resentment is accompanied by contempt for the political class and a willingness to directly implement the popular will. This entails the refusal to give any form of autonomy to parliamentarians: 'Populism inclines towards a conception of the legislative branch which may be designated as "identity" in contrast with "representation". Legislators are expected to be "identical" with the popular will rather than "representatives" who will interpret it' (Shils, 1956, 102). Regardless of the judgement on the feasibility of this direct action, we have a clear description of a second element characterising populism: the rejection of political representation. However, another aspect of this rejection must not be overlooked: the possibility of maturation, of a transition from populace to people, through participation in a political experience that fosters the emancipation of members of the people, orienting them towards an active exercise of citizenship, rather than towards riots and inconclusive protests.

This does not mean, according to Shils, that the populist movement refuses to have leaders, capable, from the earliest years, of organising a 'Farmer Alliance' and achieving significant electoral results. The populism of the following generations would evolve to the point of acquiring a certain idea of representation, managing to bring great politicians into parliament, capable of achieving a mediation between populist demands and the exercise of a parliamentary mandate, as in the case of Robert M. La Follette, senator from 1906 to 1925, a great accuser of President Wilson and political corruption. This introduces another issue of current relevance, given the large presence of populist parties in parliaments: is it possible to think of a representation compatible with the best demands of populism?

2.2 Ideology or Mentality?

This work by Shils also opens up another field of reflection that reaches to the present day: he develops the idea of populism as 'mentality' and never refers to it as 'ideology'. For Shils, ideology, to which he devotes the entirety of Chap. 12 of *Torment of Secrecy*, is a political extremism that can take various forms; thus populism, like other political movements, may fall into ideology, but is not ideology per se. What Shils is concerned with is the defence of pluralism, which he contrasts directly not with populism, but with extremism and the apocalyptic mentality:

> The apocalyptic mentality sees every issue as a conflict between diametrically opposed alternatives, and it sees the carriers of these alternatives as opposed to each other completely, fundamentally and continuously. The pluralistic mentality, believing the alternatives fall within a narrower range, believes also that the proponents of the alternatives also have more in common with each other than do apocalyptic politicians. (Shils, 1956, 226)

The 'apocalyptic mentality' that often enters into the definitions of populism (Hofstadter, 1969, 22; MacRae, 1969, 157, 158, 163; Worsley, 1969, 222) is intended to indicate precisely the absence of political planning, of the capacity to concretise the ideal vision within a historical progression. The populist mentality does not coincide with the apocalyptic mentality and, therefore, may be capable of historical sense and planning: but in what way can we do it? In fact, it is also different from the pluralist mentality that is characterised precisely by the 'way' of doing things that inspires the processuality of liberal democracy.

The 'mentality hypothesis' has resurfaced in recent publications, with good arguments. Marco Tarchi writes that 'the essence of populism is identifiable in a specific forma mentis, dependent on a vision of the social order at the basis of which lies a belief in the innate virtues of the people, whose primacy as a source of legitimisation of political action and government is openly claimed' (Tarchi, 2015 – 1st 2003, 52).

2.3 Conspiracy Against the People and Anti-intellectualism: A Model from the Nineteenth Century to Sars-CoV-2

Another element frequently present in both past definitions of populism and in many analyses of contemporary populisms is the belief in the existence of a conspiracy against the people and a consequent persecution mania that fuels both resentment and a mentality of generalised suspicion. Let us take as a reference author on these aspects Richard Hofstadter, who over the years, since 1963, has deepened the study of this mentality, which he considers a real 'paranoid style in American politics'. The sense of persecution is central to it and gives rise to grandiose conspiracy theories. This argument will be taken up later, as we have seen, by Ghịta Ionescu, who will speak of a 'political persecution mania'. Hofstadter, on the other hand, takes care to distinguish more clearly between the 'clinical paranoiac',

who feels the conspiracy directed specifically against himself, and the 'paranoid spokesman in politics', who 'finds the hostile and conspiratorial world […] directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others […] His sense that his political passions are unselfish and patriotic, in fact, goes far to intensify his feeling of righteousness and his moral indignation' (Hofstadter, 2000, 504).[7] Hofstadter offers numerous examples of this mentality, some typical of US history, others found everywhere, as we shall see.

He also links the sense of persecution to an anti-intellectualistic attitude, which goes back to the original dream of US populism, in which the 'common man' possessed many different skills, indispensable in the 'initial' situation he experienced. He was convinced that he could manage, without specialised training, both everyday life and government. That is why today's 'common man' finds it so hard to accept the change in the situation, which has already taken place, and which puts him on the sidelines: 'Today he knows that he cannot even make his breakfast without using devices, more or less mysterious to him, which expertise has put at his disposal' (Hofstadter, 1963, 34). Intellectuals act as experts or ideologues and e 'in both capacities they evoke profound, and, in a measure, legitimate, fears and resentments' Hofstadter, 1963, 35).[8]

The two elements, persecution and anti-intellectualism, have continued to reinforce each other and evolve, presenting themselves in an acute form in times of crisis. In the first two decades of the 2000s, we could observe them in relation to the financial (and, consequently, economic) crisis that exploded in 2007. We experienced a subsequent acute phase with the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The mentality associated with the persecution/anti-intellectualism pair has spread both socially and politically.

First, on the social level, the anti-intellectualist tendency manifested itself through forms of explicit contestation to the decisions taken by governments to deal with the SARS-CoV 2 pandemic, especially in countries that had made the vaccine mandatory. Studies carried out shortly before the pandemic, such as that of Tom Nichols (Nichols, 2017), are very useful because they had already identified the specific anti-intellectualist mindset on which the No-Vax behaviour became socially and politically antagonistic. Nichols had updated Hofstadter's analysis of anti-intellectualism, freeing it from the assumption of the 'common man'. It is no longer a matter of misinformation or ignorance, but of *aggressively wrong*: 'People don't just believe dumb things; they actively resist further learning rather than let go of those beliefs' (Nichols, 2017, X–XI).

I report some brief testimonies of doctors from three Italian hospitals, collected in August 2021, just as an example (the number of such testimonies is enormous) of an ideological obstinacy that goes as far as death. In the Polyclinic of Modena,

[7] The origin of *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, as the author explains, is a Herbert Spencer Lecture given at Oxford in November 1963. An early version of the text was published by *Harper's Magazine* in November 1964. The text cited (Hofstadter, 2000) is the definitive one.

[8] Mauro Dorato (2019), in his research on anti-intellectualism, studies the principle of competence and links it to the functioning of democracy; Mattew Motta's (Motta, 2018) study is also relevant.

where nine out of ten intensive care patients are not vaccinated, the anaesthetist explains that the patients in his ward are divided into two groups: 'undecided who wait until the last minute to get vaccinated and arrive here very frightened, and 30% deniers who think it is a conspiracy to sell drugs. These we find in the hospital when they can no longer breathe'. A doctor at the Polyclinic Sant'Orsola in Bologna explains that patients are opposed to therapy or intubation and their relatives also have the presumption of knowing things, as they point out to the doctors the therapies they would like their loved ones to receive. A doctor in the reanimation ward of Parma Hospital said 'And then there are those who as a last resort, before being intubated, tell you: "if you vaccinate me I will denounce you"' (Baldi and Giubilei, 2021, 9).[9]

Conspiracy theories, resentment and presumption of knowledge with anti-intellectual aggression are what we find in the experience of the pandemic between 2020 and 2022 the elements pointed out by Hofstadter and Nichols. A paradoxical situation has arisen: just as it was becoming evident to all that everyone's health – and public health – depended on the ability of science and technology to prove their specific and elitist knowledge through the invention of vaccines, the conspiratorial and anti-intellectualist mentality has produced alternative explanations, imaginary but articulate, endowed with a certain internal coherence, capable of acting as 'theories' for improvised movements of contestation against the system. This production of structured ideological constructions can only be explained by the presence, prior to the pandemic, of the anti-intellectualistic mentality we are studying, on which the pandemic acted as a triggering event or, in many cases, as an opportunity to be seized by subjects already radicalised in antagonism, to implement 'anti-system' behaviour.

Second, on the political level, there is agreement among observers in explaining the multiplication of populist political movements and parties across Europe by linking it to the financial crisis (2007). Yves Mény emphasises three traditional components in the new populisms. The first is the change of adversary: it is no longer the other party, but the set of parties perceived as a caste, an elite that has lost its raison d'être: 'In the very name of the democratic principle (and not against it), the people, the source and foundation of all power, are put back in the center of the stage' (Mény, 2019, 219). A vertical conception of politics (people versus elites) replaces the horizontal one that saw the struggle between parties based on ideological and programmatic differences. The second, which Mény exemplifies with the French case of the 'Gilets jaunes' (yellow jackets), is an aggressive resentment: 'The rage converges and unites on the ground, depoliticized protesters, supporters of Marine Le Pen or Jean-Luc Mélenchon, employees and pensioners, craftsmen and shopkeepers. All united against the 'power' to overthrow it but without any ambition to take it' (Mény, 2019, 222). The third is mistrust in parties and the

[9] It is still too early for general and broadly comparative studies on antagonistic reactions during a pandemic. There are, however, good studies on limited cases, such as *Anti-intellectualism and the mass public's response to the COVID-19 pandemic* (Merkley & Loewen, 2021); vedi inoltre: Allcott et al., 2020; Allington et al., 2020; Bridgman et al., 2020.

perception of their incompetence in understanding real problems and solving them: this explains why French parties have competed in converging towards the center to win over 'moderate voters', while voters have gone the other way, moving towards radicalised movements and parties.

2.4 Populace Always Comes Back

Therefore, we can say, on the basis of the continuity of historical facts, that populism is not a transitory phenomenon linked to a particular epoch, but a constant presence in the US reality and in the realities of all democratic countries or countries in democratic transition (whether the liberal democratic regime is under construction or deconstruction, populism can in fact act in both directions). Shils focuses on the risk aspects for democracy, since populism has a tendency to disregard institutions and the rule of law, in particular the separation of institutional powers: 'The populistic mentality, when it has full sway, denies the claims to autonomy of the legislative which it views as its mouthpiece, of the executive which it views as its instrument and of the judiciary which it views as the resistant custodian of a law which sets itself above the will of the people' (Shils, 1956, 161). This aspect of the populist mentality can have very serious consequences for democratic systems: there is no room for political accountability.[10]

Shils had experienced first-hand the authoritarian forcing of Joseph McCarthy, who was only censured by the Senate in December 1954. It should be noted that McCarthy had unfairly attacked the very Senator La Follette, whom Shils referred to as the noble representative of US populism. McCarthy's action, according to Shils, rested on a populism that no longer had anything to do with the people: the 'populace', the other pole to that of conscious citizenship, had imposed itself, a possibility that populism can produce whenever non-respect for democratic institutions and their rules prevails. The diversity of subjects (people or populace) changes the nature of the phenomenon.

Shils took us from the 1860s of the 'Farmer Alliance', to the 1920s–1940s of La Follette, to the Cold War. Following his reasoning and using his vocabulary, we could bridge a further span of time and arrive, as an example of radical anti-establishment populism and a mentality characterised by constant suspicion of conspiracies and plots, at the 6 January 2021 assault on Capitol Hill, the seat of Congress, by an organised mob of followers of Donald Trump, defeated in the presidential election: what were the assailants, *people* or *populace*?

[10] On this topic, see Mark E. Warren's essay on *Accountability and Democracy* (2016, 39–54), in particular the 'Part III Accountable Governance' of *The Oxford Handbook of Public Accountability* (Bovens et al., 2016, 195–304).

2.5 Populism as 'Constitutional' Language

'Who speaks for the people *now*?' Michael Kazin wondered this in the 2017 *Preface* to his book *The Populist Persuasion* (Kazin, 2017, 1st 1995). The presidential election had recently concluded and Kazin observed that both the president-elect, Donald Trump, and his opponent Bernard Sanders, had run their campaigns using a traditional populist theme, namely attacking elites and the establishment in the name of 'hard-working' Americans. The two contestants represented two different traditions within populism that Kazin does not want to define as 'right-wing' and 'left-wing' populism, because these two expressions do not seem adequate for him to grasp the difference between the two languages. Sanders belongs to a liberal populism, which – according to Kazin – makes no distinction between citizens, directed exclusively upward, against the 'corporate elites' incapable of governing. Trump's definition of 'people', on the other hand, is ethnically narrow, privileging Americans of European origin and allied to a 'racial nationalism'. Beyond this, the populist roots of Trump and Sanders do not emerge with the strong characteristics they had in their predecessors, who addressed their parties by each aiming at a clear and robust identity, and not, predominantly, at antagonism towards the opponent:

> Neither Democrats nor Republicans have been able to formulate such an appeal today, and that failing is both a cause and an effect of the public's distaste for both major parties. It may be impossible to come up with a credible definition of 'the people' that can mobilize the dizzying plurality of class, gender, and ethnic identities which co-exist, often unhappily, in America today. But ambitious populists will probably not stop trying to concoct one. (Kazin, 2017, *Preface*)

On this basis, we can say that each of the two candidates presented an identity obtained by contrast and not by the development of their own content; they asked for votes against their opponent rather than for their own party. The political relationship between majority and opposition from the outset seemed, consequently, destined to become a risky radical antagonism, as in fact happened. From this point of view, the assault on the Congressional seat in January 2021 appears less unexpected, as it is the result of a populism that is more aggressive because it is more confused and culturally poor: we are in the risky situation of having a majority of populists, but not a clear idea of people. The question 'people or populace?' has been answered. This poverty of political language is dramatic:

> Whether orated, written, drawn, broadcast, or televised, this language [of populism] is used by those who claim to speak for the vast majority of Americans who work hard and love their country. That is the most basic and telling definition of populism: a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter. (Kazin, 2017, 1)

For this, 'American populism binds even as it divides'. Political actors fight each other, but "ver a shared set of ideals", and this has allowed the United States to avoid subordination to revolutionary ideologies such as fascism, Nazism, Leninism, Maoism and Iranian-style Islam. Populism itself, for Kazin's cultural current, is not an ideology. According to Kazin, an ideology is loaded with partisan content,

whereas populism – that of the people, not the populace – is directly connected to *shared ideals*.

Populism cannot be associated with being Unionists or Socialists, Democrats or Republicans: 'Populism, more an impulse than an ideology, is too elastic and promiscuous to be a basis for such an allegiance' (Kazin, 2017, 3). We can say, in short, that according to this perspective *populism is a constitutional language, hence the political language par excellence* that, in a given historical moment, is embodied by a movement that takes on the task of recalling the ruling classes to the founding values, to the Spirit of '76, in an attempt to 'straighten out' the country's path – a populism that is unable to express itself, consequently, that is unable to recover, in its own way, the language of the original foundation, denounces the weakening of shared ideals, the fragility of the political community.

The forms of populism that emerge not only in the United States with the assault on the seat of Congress but also in other countries with a democratic regime, and that express themselves by burning tyres, smashing shop windows, devastating religious sites and assaulting immigrants and ethnic minorities, is an indicator of the prevalence of populace, that is, of the disintegration of social and cultural identities – particularly those of the impoverished middle class – in the dust of the angry mob. This impotent populism, incapable of authentic political vision, must now be content with anti-institutional disorder, with rioting. Today, what Jacques Ellul wrote, in an entirely different context, 50 years ago in *From Revolution to Revolts*, is appropriate again: it is no longer the time for revolutions; 'revolt is still possible but it no longer leads to any revolution. Because it, the revolution, is precisely excluded – and if what is still called by that name seems derisory compared to what it was meant to be, reformists and revolutionaries now find themselves back to back, equal in their ineffectiveness. Technological growth has exceeded these conflicts […] This society can no longer be truly challenged. Only its appearances' (Ellul, 2011 – 1st 1972, 497–498).

2.6 How Can We Read Populism? A Model of Historiographical Warfare

Conspiracy, resentment and anti-intellectualism – we have noted their presence in various phenomena defined as populist by their protagonists or indicated as such by various observers. They are elements of an oppositional nature, i.e. they are not, per se, bearers of the project contents that should characterise politics, but express themselves simply as antagonistic impulses, even though they may be accompanied, as we have seen, by an ideological apparatus. The role of these elements (or parts of them) in a good part of past and present populist phenomena is not in doubt. We must instead doubt two other things:

first, that they be always present in popular subjects who initiate public action: could not the elements characterising such action be others?

And *second*, that, if present, they always play the role of main catalysts.

We attempt to answer these questions in two ways: (1) through the analysis of a historiographical dispute concerning American populism in the nineteenth century and (2) through the acquisition of some new theoretical perspectives.

Richard Hofstadter, in the Introduction to his 1955 *The Age of Reform*, defines populism as follows:

> By "Populism" I do not mean only the People's (or Populist) Party of the 1890s; for I consider the Populist Party to be merely a heightened expression, at a particular moment of time, of a kind of popular impulse that is endemic in American political culture. Long before the rebellion of the 1890s one can observe a larger trend of thought, stemming from the time of Andrew Jackson, and crystallizing after the Civil War in the Greenback, Granger, and anti-monopoly movements, that expressed the discontents of a great many farmers and businessmen with the economic changes of the late nineteenth century. The Populist spirit captured the Democratic Party in 1896, and continued to play an important part in the politics of the Progressive era. While its special association with agrarian reforms has now become attenuated, I believe that Populist thinking has survived in our own time, partly as an undercurrent of provincial resentments, popular and "democratic" rebelliousness and suspiciousness, and nativism. (Hofstadter, 1955, 4–5)

Populism is characterised by what we might call the 'antagonist triptych' (conspiracy, resentment, anti-intellectualism); but in addition to these three descriptors – to which Hofstadter will also give attention in later works, as we have already seen – the greatest space is devoted to nativism, which must be understood, in this case, as the idea of protecting the 'myth' of the original culture of the rustic, honest and religious American pioneers, not only from the influence of waves of foreign migration but in particular from the transformations that industrial technology was introducing.

Hofstadter's book received immediate and wide acclaim and won the Pulitzer Prize for History the following year.[11] Hofstadter's assessment of populism became, within a few years, the 'canonical' interpretation for a considerable part of historians and educated public opinion.

But a historiographical line was also soon formed that opposed populism seen only as backward-looking. Norman Pollack contrasts the critics of populism with the research of what he calls 'earlier writers', who 'never challenged the fact of hard times' (Pollack, 1962, 3–6). Pollack refers to Solon Julius Buck and his history of the 'Granger Movement' (Buck, 1913), to Herman Clarence Nixon and the other 11 authors of *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Twelve Southerners, 1930), to Hallie Farmer, Raymon C. Miller and Alex M. Arnett.[12] To

[11] He went on to win it again in 1964, for *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, which I have already mentioned.

[12] Pollack merely names them, as he does with Norman C. Nixon. They are a varied but solid current of thought. I refer to some of their works, most of which study precise situations and historical moments, with extensive use of journalistic sources and administrative records: Miller, 1925; Farmer, 1924, 1926.

these he adds only one historian of the next generation, Chester McArthur Destler (1946).

More recent authors, he explains, have constructed a *retrogressive framework* that denies the factual content of earlier historical works. The basic criticism he makes of the opposing historians is their ignorance of sources, most of which are easily accessible.[13] Pollack's work was not solid enough and criticism was not lacking (Saloutos, 1964; Shapiro, 1968). We might call Pollack's book a 'militant text', but this does not mean that the archive sources he used are not true; on the contrary, they provide important information.[14]

The one who gives more solidity to a different account of US populism is Lawrence Goodwyn. And it is not just a question of populism: just as Hofstadter included populism in a general view of US history, so, with a different look, does Goodwyn. This 'historiographical battle' is interesting because it highlights the elements that we have seen come into play in the debates on populism within each country: the identity of a people and the meaning of its history are always questioned.

> These circumstances have created for the student of the agrarian revolt a number of conceptual hazards, securely grounded in the traditions of our history and culture. Primary among them is a generalized presumption about "politics" that proceeds from a deep and largely unconscious complacency about American democracy. This attitude essentially embraces three elements. At bottom is a romantic view about the achievements of the American past. The national experience is seen as both purposeful and generally progressive. The "system", though not without flaws, works. Lingering flaws will ultimately be diminished. Unarguably, this presumption is the conceptual centrepiece of that vast body of writing known as the literature of American history. However true or untrue this presumption may be, it incontestably prevails. Indeed, it is a central presumption of American culture. (Goodwyn, 1978, 128).

Goodwyn's greatest contribution to the history of the populist movement, in my opinion, lies in the reconstruction of its emancipatory and solidaristic factors. It was not easy to create a new democratic mass movement out of existing patterns in the United States of the 1880s and 1890s. Most citizens voted according to established party loyalties created at the time of the Civil War or determined by religious affiliation. The populism of the 1870s–1890s developed because it started from the social, from the real needs of farmers who created, through cooperation, an alternative network both to sell their products and to buy. In this way, the farmers tried to escape cash payment systems controlled by the big merchants and industry owners, which forced them to increase their indebtedness more and more. In this way, farmers also free themselves from an atavistic sense of subordination and gain an awareness of their rights. Through simple but intense experiences, a democratic culture begins to form: 'When a farm family's wagon crested a hill en route to a Fourth of July "Alliance Day" encampment and the occupants looked back to see thousands

[13] Pollack, at the end of his book, devotes a few pages (145–149) to the indication of archival sources, some of which he found had never been consulted.

[14] His is the editor of *The Populist Mind*, one of the most conspicuous and useful collections of sources on populism (Pollack, 1967). From the previous year is George Brown Tindall's *A Populist Reader* (Tindall, 1966).

of other families trailed out behind them in wagon trains, the thought that "the Alliance is the people and the people are together" took on transforming possibilities' (Goodwyn, 1978, 63–64).

In Goodwyn's reconstruction *we do not find nostalgia for an original rural community at all, but the economic and political project of a community to be built* in the present and the future. On the results of this attempt, which was nevertheless impressive, there can be different interpretations. Let us read Goodwyn's balanced assessment:

> The young organizer learned in 1884–1885 that cooperative buying and selling was easier to plan at country meetings than to carry out. Town merchants opposed cooperative schemes, as did manufacturers and cotton buyers. Indeed, the entire commercial world was hostile to the concept. Cooperation was not the American way; competition was. But if the new movement did not invariably achieve immediate economic gains, the cooperative idea spurred organizing work. The 1885 state meeting of the Alliance was the largest gathering of farmers ever held in Texas to that time. The order adopted a program calling on all members "to act together as a unit in the sale of their product" and to that end moved to have each county alliance set apart a special day for selling. Thus, Alliancemen began what they called "bulking". These mass cotton sales were widely advertised and cotton buyers contacted in advance, for the Alliance sought a representative turnout of agents who might themselves engage in a modicum of competition. (Goodwyn, 1978, 59–60)

The co-operative movement certainly did not change the structures of the then existing system. But neither can it be reduced to the 'retrogressive framework' constructed by Hofstadter and denounced by Pollack: some elements of the framework can be found in reality, but this interpretative scheme cannot explain the development of co-operation, the growth of the National Farmers Alliance which arose, on a local level, in 1877 and in a few years came to involve the entire Midwest and to support the People's Party, which constituted an important attempt at a 'third party' in the history of the United States: 'Since the National Farmers Alliance and the People's Party were sequential expressions of the same popular movement and the same democratic culture, the gradual evolution of the cooperative crusade that generated both was the central component of the agrarian revolt. This understanding came largely from primary sources' (Goodwyn, 1978, 363). The use of sources is the determining element and, on this level, the clash with Hofstadter is direct: 'He [Hofstadter] managed to frame his interpretation of the intellectual content of Populism without recourse to a single reference to the planks of the Omaha Platform of the People's Party or to any of the economic, political, or cultural experiences that led to the creation of those goals. Indeed, there is no indication in his text that he was aware of these experiences' (Goodwyn, 1978, 364).

In fact, here it is a question of taking the facts into consideration or omitting them; then, of course, one can evaluate the different interpretations. Reading the national press shows the movement's strong impact on public opinion. But in *my* opinion, the reading of the local press and of the 'rural weeklies' is even more interesting because it lets us enter the 'small worlds', the daily lives of farmers and workers, in some respects very different between the two groups; yet we find there some common elements linked to populism, such as the concern for community life, the care for education and the attempts to create a culture corresponding to the

emancipation process. On all this, the historians evoked by Pollack can help us. In them we find a concern for family life, for the 'minimal' aspects of material life, that historiography and literature will only discover a few decades later. And important contributions also came from historian of Goodwyn generation (for instance, Nugent, 1963; Clanton, 1969; Knapp, 1969; Clinch, 1970; Clanton, 2004).

3 Why Is It So Difficult to Define?

The 'historiographical war' is rich in lessons. The most recent historical research shows that it is not possible to define American populism in the nineteenth century solely on the basis of its antagonistic elements, which are 'empty', i.e. they can only be explained through the contents of another concept, that of the subject to which populism is 'against'. The well-documented research on the vital factors of populism, on the other hand, emphasises cooperation, the concretised solidaristic element, which is 'full', i.e. it has a content that depends on the relationship established between the members of the cooperating collective subject, without any need to be defined 'by contrast' (which is a form of subordination).

3.1 Retrogressive and Praegressive Frameworks: Populism as Complexity

In the case we have observed, the definitions based exclusively on *antagonistic elements* intercept certain behaviours that are actually present in populism, *reactive* behaviours that are caused by the adversary and therefore remain *subordinate* to his action. But only *protagonist elements*, *active* behaviours that depend on the free decision of the subject can explain its nature, the source of its strength and its project. Such *active* behaviours are not subordinate, but *superordinate* to the action of the adversary, i.e. *first*, they develop a project consistent with the nature of the acting subject and not merely imposed by circumstances, and *second*, they seize the opportunity of crisis to build a strategic human and political vision, which stands on a higher plane than a mere reaction to the adversary's action.

We note that relevant *protagonist* elements actually present in a phenomenon of macroscopic populism such as the one we have described, have been excluded or not adequately assessed to the point of not being included in its definition. And this was not the error of a single piece of research, but the 'vision' of an entire historiographic current. So perhaps it is not an episodic error, but one that is produced continuously and thus manifests the action of an ideological prejudice and/or what in ethics is called an 'erroneous conscience' (i.e. one that produces the error physiologically). Ideological prejudice produces a *Denkform*, a dynamic model of the movement of thought, adaptable to certain fields of knowledge.

It is a preforming of the path of reasoning, such that the intelligence is not free to explore the possibilities of reality and the thought that wants to know it, but is bound to reproduce a 'necessitated' logical sequence: this creates not a single error, but an *erroneous logic*, which 'produces error physiologically'. It is consequently legitimate to ask whether this bias is also at work in the study of other populist phenomena contemporary to us. In fact, the 'historiographical war' has taught us that entire currents of thought can be created that develop theories on the basis of ideological prejudice or, as Giovanni Sartori will shortly explain, on the basis of a logic that is fragile, but can be widely reproduced, out of laziness, for lack of original ideas or when academic relations of subordination between scholars dominate.

The presence of *protagonist* elements does not eliminate the fact that *antagonistic* ones are also present: it is not a question, therefore, of 'beatifying' populism, but of recognising, in addition to its destructive components, also its constructive components – when there are any – because the only way to overcome the problems that populisms can create is to satisfy the 'constitutional needs' of which they can be bearers. The social sciences, empirical by nature, must create descriptors of reality not only for the 'retrogressive framework' – transforming it from an ideological bias to a research hypothesis – but also descriptors for a 'praegressive framework' capable of detecting protagonist elements (see Table 2.1).

A definition of 'populism' that uses only antagonistic elements describes, in reality, the 'populace', not the 'people' and prefigures populism as an exclusively negative phenomenon, to be considered as a dangerous antithesis for democracy. Such 'prefiguration' leads one to find, in reality, only what one wants to find, namely negative 'descriptors', the only ones considered. We must try to avoid these reductionisms that lead to definitions that are not such and that easily fall into nominalistic arbitrariness (Chibbaro, Rondoni, & Vulpiani, 2014, 99–120). It takes an effort of open-mindedness and, also, the ability to accept uncertainty, for example, to accept, at the outset, the probabilistic hypothesis that populace and people can both be present within a populist phenomenon (as, in fact, often happens), assuming different roles as situations and contexts change. If it is established, for example, that within a populist movement there are components that are open to democratic rules,

Table 2.1 Recognition and Intuitive Evaluation of Retrogressive and Praegressive Items of a Populist Phenomenon

	Retrogressive framework antagonist definition	Rating					Praegressive framework protagonist definition
Behaviours	Reactive behaviours	–	–	?	+	+	Active behaviours
	Subordinated to the opponent's action						Superordinate to the opponent's action
Descriptors	Resentment						Solidarity
	Conspiracy/suspicion						Cooperation/trust
	Anti-intellectualism						Cultural formation
	Anti-politics						New political representation
	Exclusion						Inclusion
	Closed society						Open society

of which they demand a more credible application, then collaboration with liberal democratic parties is possible. If, on the other hand, these components are neither seen nor considered, there will be a push toward the radicalisation of populism. A free, non-ideological intelligence can accept that what is called populism is a complex reality, hence a whole comprising sub-systems or a sub-system interacting with other sub-systems and that, because of this, it cannot be explained by a single universal law nor by a single definition.

Political science will never be *physical science*. I can assure you that I never accompanied Immanuel Kant on his walks through Könisberg – although my students seem to think otherwise – when he wondered whether metaphysics could become a science. But I do know that the fascination with number made him make heroic but clumsy attempts (as he did in 1763: *An Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy*, a text in which Kant, in order to measure phenomena, had to renounce all human meanings that could not be expressed through numbers). Let's not put ourselves in the same situation. On the difficulty of defining, we will return later, with the help of Giovanni Sartori, meanwhile, not to take definitions from strangers.

Table 2.1 summarises what was written in Sect. 3.1. It is an attempt to visually differentiate the 'Behaviours' and 'Descriptors' that can be attributed to the two opposing conceptual frameworks that characterise the two historiographical orientations described in '2.6 How Can We Read Populism? A Model of Historiographical Warfare'. The third column, 'Rating', is a tool for a possible exercise: one scores each 'Behaviour' or 'Descriptor' by placing a '+' or a '−' in each of the five corresponding boxes: at the end, the count of '+' and '−' will indicate adherence to one or the other of the frameworks and the possibility of modifying or supplementing them. If this exercise is done individually and before conducting proper research, the 'Rating' simply serves to highlight the opinion each person already holds on populism. Everyone will resort to intuitive theories, which are, very often, wrong. It is interesting either to construct roleplays based on the different opinions or to repeat the exercise after discussion or after some study of populism.

3.2 Searching for the Concrete

1956 is an important year for our discourse, because in addition to *The Torment of Secrecy* by Edward Shils, Robert Dahl's *A Preface to Democratic Theory* is published. With two different languages, both take a position within the ideological conflict that, at the height of the Cold War, pitted antagonistic political and economic systems against each other. Both works, through the study of populism, question democracy. The same attention to the concrete that leads Shils to distinguish between people and populace guides Dahl in the comparison between 'Madisonian democracy' and 'populist democracy'.

At the beginning of his reflection, Dahl takes care to remove the reader from any certainty: 'One of the difficulties one must face at the outset is that there is no

democratic theory – there are only democratic theories' (Dahl, 1956, 1). This consideration is followed by a list of six different types (among the many he considers possible) of theories that can be used for democracy. This is why Dahl limits the focus of his research to the *Preface* of a (future) 'Democratic theory' for which political science is not yet ready: 'But democratic theory itself is full of compromises – compromises of clashing and antagonistic principles. What is a virtue in social life, however, is not necessarily a virtue in social theory […] What I am going to call the "Madisonian" theory of democracy is an effort to bring off a compromise between the power of majorities and the power of minorities, between the political equality of all adult citizens on the one side, and the desire to limit their sovereignty on the other. As a political system the compromise, except for one important interlude, has proved to be durable. What is more, Americans seem to like it. As a political theory, however, the compromise delicately papers over a number of cracks without quite concealing them' (Dahl, 1956, 4). As for the populist theory of democracy, the principles it deals with (political equality, popular sovereignty, majority rule) are present throughout the history of democratic theories. Dahl begins his analysis of the populist theory of democracy with a series of quotations on democracy taken from Aristotle, Locke, Rousseau, Jefferson, Lincoln and Tocqueville, which he recognises to be at odds – as regards the modus operandi of democracy – with the *Madisonian* perspective.

How does Dahl compare the two theories? Let us take a specific point in his reasoning as a useful example for our way. He tries to explicate the contents of the principle of the 'absolute sovereignty of the majority' in order to understand in what ways it can be applied. Let us take the fourth definition, whose assumption is 'Proposition 1: The only rule compatible with decision-making in a populistic democracy is the majority principle'. This is followed by 'Definition 4: The Rule': 'The principle of majority rule prescribes that in choosing among alternatives, the alternative preferred by the greater number is selected. That is, given two or more alternatives: *t*, *y*, etc., in order for *x* to be government policy it is a necessary and sufficient condition that the number who prefer *x* to any alternative is greater than the number who prefer any single alternative to *x*' (Dahl, 1956, 37–38). The application of this rule must take into account the time between the manifestation of the will of the people and its execution: 'How long a delay is compatible with the Rule? The theory of populistic democracy provides no answer; it is a static system, not one constructed on a time sequence' (Dahl, 1956, 57).

Dahl's reasoning is not specious. The 'time' factor is essential. It involves the intersection between the theoretical proposal, the rules established for the political process, the mobilisation of institutional decision-makers (government, parliament, etc.) and the evolution of public opinion, which may change in the course of the process. All this only applies within a representative democracy, in which the time required by the various steps is a substantial part of the political choice they produce. Rapid decision-making can only occur in political systems in which the decision-making process is simplified, because it is the prerogative of a small ruling group (dictatorial oligarchy, one-party system, military regime).

One of the empirical problems that the populist theory of democracy does not answer concerns the actual possibility of majority rule. On this point, Dahl refers to Gaetano Mosca's position 'whose objection can be paraphrased as follows: Every society develops a ruling class. Widespread popular control (certainly rule by a majority) is impossible'. And he concludes 'the majority never rules, and consequently it can never tyrannize; only minorities rule, and consequently tyranny is always carried on by minorities' (Dahl, 1956, 54–55). Dahl does not say, here, whether he agrees with Mosca, but the important thing is that, in any case, the populist theory of democracy does not give an answer.

The difference between the Madisonian theory of democracy (with all its uncertainties and frailties) and the populist theory of democracy, however, is very clear: the former has proven to find an application, to somehow manage to function, while the latter does not: 'the theory of populistic democracy is not an empirical system. It consists only of logical relations among ethical postulates. It tells us nothing about the real world. From it we can predict no behavior whatsoever' (Dahl, 1956, 51). The conclusion is 'it is clear that one must go outside the theory of populistic democracy to empirical political science' (Dahl, 1956, 52). But it is a political science that fails to produce an acceptable theory of democracy. Moreover, the inability of the theory of populist democracy to grasp reality does not eliminate the actual importance of the concepts it uses: they continue to have meaning in the real world (Dahl, 1956, 60). The problem, therefore, remains open.

This was taken up the following year by Giovanni Sartori in *Democrazia e definizioni* (Sartori, 1957), which was published in English 5 years later with a title rather far from the original: *Democratic Theory* (Sartori, 1962). In contrast to the *Traité de science politique* in which Georges Burdeau expounds the concept of 'governing democracy', Sartori criticises the idea of 'populistic democracy' by distinguishing it from the ideal of the will of the people: 'Yet I fail to see how mass democracy can be understood as a genuine incarnation of the will-of-the-people ideal of democracy, and I find it even harder to believe – as Burdeau asserts – that some countries, notably the so-called popular democracies, have actually achieved the stage of a governing democracy' (Sartori, 1962, 86). At the date of the Italian edition of the book, the invasion of Hungary by the United Socialist Soviet Republic, which had taken place the year before, was still at the centre of the political debate, especially that of the European communist left, a part of which was beginning to question the ideal and political link with the USSR.

For Sartori, demagogy should not be confused with *paideia*, since 'Demagogy only shifts popular sovereignty from the locus where it maintains a capacity for judgment and reasonableness to situations where it loses it […] By this path, then, we arrive only at democracy by acclaim, that is, at a massification of popular sovereignty which reduces the actual will of the people to a sham' (Sartori, 1962, 87). For Sartori, the popular will needs places, such as political representation, where decisions can be reached through rational and in-depth debate. As we can see, the processual factor returns, the dimension of time and mediation to guarantee effective democracy, which rescues the 'masses' from manipulation by leaders: *paideia*, in democracy, is the reciprocal circular education that should take place through the

decision-making process, and this is what makes it possible to move from the condition of 'masses' to that of citizenship.

A significant proportion of scholars who have written on populism since the London Conference of 1967 refer to the work of Giovanni Sartori. Quotations are frequent, but they are generally limited to briefly mentioning the question of the relationship 'between the extension (denotation) and intention (connotation) of a term' (Sartori, 1970, 1041), which we have already mentioned in citing the work of Irving Copi (Copi et al., 2011, 87), who was also a point of reference for Sartori in matters of logic. One understands that this particular point is important because it directly touches on the construction of definitions of populism and remains a hard nut to crack. But this aspect is embedded by Sartori in a much broader discourse on political science and only within this framework can its significance be fully understood.

3.3 A Logic for Political Science

In *Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics*, Sartori referred to a 'golden' definition that Charles Wright Mills had given, a few years earlier, of the conscious thinker: 'a man at work and aware of the assumptions and implications of whatever he is about. To be mastered by "method" or "theory" is simply to be kept from working' (Wright Mills, 1959, 27) (Sartori, 1970, 1033)). The political science of his time, Sartori commented, was mostly in the hands of two unsound extremes: on the one hand, a majority of unconscious thinkers and on the other, a minority of overconscious thinkers, who tried to develop political science by taking their models and methods from the physical sciences, understood as 'paradigmatic': a 'Kantian' situation recurs.

Both types of thinkers use increasingly sophisticated technical research tools, and this shared refuge confuses the real difference between them and, above all, confuses science with technique, due to a generalised fragility in thinking logically:

> Most of the literature introduced by the title "Methods" (in the social, behavioral or political sciences) actually deals with survey techniques and social statistics, and has little if anything to share with the crucial concern of "methodology", which is a concern with the logical structure and procedure of scientific enquiry. In a very crucial sense there is no methodology without *logos*, without thinking about thinking. And if a firm distinction is drawn – as it should be – between methodology and technique, the latter is no substitute for the former. One may be a wonderful researcher and manipulator of data, and yet remain an unconscious thinker. The view presented in this article is, then, that the profession as a whole is grievously impaired by methodological unawareness. The more we advance technically, the more we leave a vast, uncharted territory behind our backs. And my underlying complaint is that political scientists eminently lack (with exceptions) a training in logic – indeed in elementary logic. (Sartori, 1970, 1033)

Within this general framework, according to Sartori, what has happened is that we have taken the easy way out by expanding both the meaning and scope of concepts, producing increasingly vague and amorphous conceptualisations. Conceptual

stretching has become habitual: 'A major drawback of the comparative expansion of the discipline is, then, that it has been conducive to indefiniteness, to undelimited and largely undefined conceptualizations. We do need, ultimately, "universal" categories-concepts which are applicable to any time and place. But nothing is gained if our universals turn out to be 'no difference' categories leading to pseudo-equivalences' (Sartori, 1970, 1035). The problem is that conceptual stretching evades the question: what is it possible to compare? Ancient political theorists, Sartori points out referring to Aristotle, did not fall into this error precisely because they asked themselves. And the answer was not entrusted to a single genius thinker, but to a well-defined methodology:

> As indicated by the terminology, their comparisons applied to things belonging to "the same genus". That is to say, the background of comparability was established by the *per genus et differentiam* mode of analysis, i.e. by a taxonomical treatment. In this context, comparable means something which belongs to the same genus, species or sub-species – in short to the same class. Hence the class provides the "similarity element" of comparability, while the "differences" enter as the species of a genus, or the sub-species of a species – and so forth, depending on how fine the analysis needs to be. However, and here is the rub, the taxonomical requisites of comparability are currently neglected, if not disowned. (Sartori, 1970, 1036)

The comparison described by Sartori is nothing other than the Aristotelian definition by genus and species. The question 'what is man?' is answered: 'he is an animal (genus) that is rational (species)'. Aristotle arrives at taxonomy after having constructed logic in the books of *Organon*. It certainly has a technical aspect, but it is the result of a prolonged theoretical elaboration by the philosophical school, which goes back two generations before Aristotle. It begins with Socrates, for whom philosophical dialogue, developed in a rigorously rational manner and has a direct political significance; in fact, he debates in public spaces, in the street and in the *agora*, because he believes he has a duty to the city, where he develops critical thinking that will cost him the death sentence. Plato, after the death of Socrates, set up the Academy, the philosophical school in which he collected the Socratic teachings and developed them. Aristotle, at Plato's school, receives and deepens the entire methodological heritage of the philosophical tradition and formalises this method in the *Organon*.

Sartori's reference to taxonomy shows that he grasps the importance of the definitional procedure in order to place definitions in the right relationship, among themselves and with respect to reality. Philosophical logic allows Aristotle to construct different degrees of abstraction (and thus progressive generalisation) from reality, always distinguishing them. This method allows for comparison, which Aristotle achieves not only in animal taxonomy but, what interests us here, in the comparison between political regimes and in that between the different disciplines that study reality: political science, for Aristotle (*politikê epistêmê*) is the most 'architectural' of the practical sciences and has for its object the good of the city (*polis*).

Reality always presents itself, in the first place, as single things, and, as such, cannot be defined. I cannot define Albert Einstein in his uniqueness, but only by

determining his belonging to groups of 'similars' that I express through abstractions of different levels, from the most general: 'Albert is an animal' to be progressively more specific ones: he is rational, he is a male, he is German, he is a scientist, etc. Each abstraction assimilates Albert by separating him from his individuality and putting him together with others who have the same characteristic. It is still Albert, but each definition/abstraction produces two effects: firstly, it creates a discontinuity between the single existing reality, which contains in itself, *synthetically* and in the concrete of existence, all that I can say about it and the various abstractions that I *analytically* derive from it and that describe it, assimilating it to other similar realities: it is necessary to be aware of this loss of individuality and that knowledge *by abstraction* is knowledge *by separation* from the real subject. *Secondly*, each definition/abstraction introduces both a membership and a non-membership, i.e. it delimits the subjects whose concept corresponds to the definition: it delimits, that is, the members of the group. The defining process 'isolates' different elements of a real subject that can be composed of each other in different ways; it depends on the question asked, i.e. on the definition we want to obtain, e.g. 'Is Albert German?' and 'Does Albert know mathematics?'. Answers can be given to these questions, which we can consider partial definitions, but of what level? 'Albert is German' tells the truth about Albert, but he shares it with several million Germans. And I certainly cannot say that, as a consequence, all Germans are male or that only males are scientists. It is important to place each definition at its proper level of abstraction, which is assigned to it by the relationship between extension and intention it contains.

I wrote that conceptual knowledge is knowledge by abstraction, which proceeds by separation from the real subject. Greek culture, which provides us with the language that allows us to deal with this subject, was, as we have seen, aware of this detachment. But it was equally aware that everything starts from the encounter with reality. In the ancient Greek language, the verb 'to know', *eidènai*, is derived from the same root as the verb *ideîn*, 'to see' and is related to the thing that is seen: *tò eîdos*, *hē idèa*. Knowledge has its origin and foundation in 'seeing', in a direct contact with the real subject. It is a cognitive realism, that is, based on knowledge that comes from an encounter: knowledge is linked to the vision or memory of a vision that has taken place. 'In the ancient philosophical conception,' writes Stefano Maso in his *Dictionary of Philosophical Greek*, from which I derive the analysis of verbs, 'the perspective is always "realistic": what "is known" is something concrete that the knowing subject has the possibility of attaining. Just as happened in "vision": what "is seen" is something really existing that the subject has the possibility of grasping when he has prepared himself properly. And what "is seen" is, in itself, what "appears" to the one who is looking; it is the "phenomenon" […] (tò phainòmenon)' (Maso, 2010, 183).

Each abstraction, each concept we produce about a given object, brings us closer to it, because, from concept to concept, we give an increasingly precise description of it: but all the conceptual abstractions we can add will increase the approximation, without ever letting us touch the uniqueness of the object we experience in the 'vision'. We must be aware of the imperfection of conceptual knowledge, accept the

limitation of our definitions and stop, time after time, at the one where the balance between what it says about the object and the number of objects to which it applies, which makes it effective.

How far can we move away from the real subject without losing contact with it, i.e. without forgetting the synthetic 'vision-knowledge' we had in the encounter with it? Sartori, concluding his analysis of 'conceptual stretching', emphasises one important thing: 'While there are many reasons for our neglect to attack the problem frontally, a major reason is that we have been swayed by the suggestion that our difficulties can be overcome by switching from "what is" questions to "how much" questions' (Sartori, 1970, 1036). The 'what is' is the encounter with reality: 'the issue must be joined from its very beginning, that is, on the grounds of concept formation' (Sartori, 1970, 1040).

3.4 Populism, Authoritarianism and Totalitarianism

One of the fields in which definitions of populism should be particularly accurate concerns the relationship (proximity, assimilation, difference?) between certain populist phenomena and authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. We could therefore use this terrain to assess the logical awareness – which we have treated with the help of Giovanni Sartori – with which some studies, representative of different interpretative currents, have approached this issue. However, since this is a highly contentious issue in contemporary political debate, I will remain within examples from the 1900s in order to have the necessary detachment.

One of the reference authors is Hans-Georg Betz. In *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* (994), Betz criticises Lipset's interpretation of fascism as an expression of the extremism that the German middle class reached, in Lipset's opinion, in the years of the Weimar Republic (Betz, 1994, 23–24; Lipset, 1981, 489). Leaning on Thomas Childers and Jürgen Falter, Betz rather believes that the Nazis arose from a long-term dissatisfaction that had accumulated in German society, even beyond the confines of the middle class. Betz elaborates on what Childers had called 'congenital dissatisfaction' (Childers, 1983, 264)[15] in the belief that the two scholars' analyses of Nazism contribute substantially to the understanding of the right-wing movements of the 1980s and 1990s: 'During the past decade politics in Western Europe has increasingly come to be dominated by a climate of resentment and alienation. A majority of citizen in most Western democracies no longer trust political institutions that they consider to be largely self-centered and self-serving, unresponsive to the ideas and wishes of the average persons, and incapable of adopting viable solutions for society's most pressing problems' (Betz, 1994, 37). Incapacity to react on the one hand and resentment and alienation on the other trace the framework within which populism develops, feeding on two other elements,

[15] See also Falter (1986, 1990).

which Childers and Falter had noted in their explanations of Nazism, but which Betz also seems to apply to the right-wing parties of his time: the abandonment by many voters of their loyalty to the traditional centre-right parties, in response to an effective strategy of attraction (catch-all party) towards the many 'politically homeless' voters. For Betz, 'the Nazis' precisely because of their ability to go beyond the traditional cleavage-based parties, 'represented a fundamentally new and thoroughly modern type of party' (Betz, 1994, 26).

Betz points out that 'the interpretation of the rise and success of radical right-wing populist parties proposed in these books closely follows this model' (Betz, 1994, 26). The problem is that this model does not clearly distinguish the concepts of right-wing parties, populist parties and Nazism, conveying the idea of a natural transition, so to speak, from the political right to Nazism. This way of reasoning then transmits into everyday political debate, after having been eased by the cautionary precautions of academic phraseology, the intuitive conviction that a right-wing voter will, sooner or later, become radicalised, if the situation creates the opportunity. The definitional confusion denounced by Sartori seems to find an example here.

Betz also recovers, in part, the approach of Lipset, who saw modernisation as the structural explanation for the emergence of right-wing movements and parties: 'The central argument guiding the analysis is that the political changes reflected in the emergence of the radical populist Right are largely a consequence of profound transformation of the socioeconomic and sociocultural structure of advanced Western European democracies. In the literature this transformation is usually characterised as a shift from the industrial to the post-industrial capitalism' (Betz, 1994, 26–27). With this consideration, however, the time span of application of the same model is considerably broadened, covering both the transition from pre-industrial to industrial society and the subsequent post-industrial historical phase.[16] It is clear that these transformations also influence populism, but not only populism, nor as the sole cause.

Peter Worsley, in his paper on *The Concept of Populism* at the 1967 London Conference – unlike the articulated definition he would later expound during the debate – had proposed a minimal definition of populism, inspired by Shils, based on only two elements: the supremacy of the will of the people and the direct relationship between the people and the government, understood as 'popular participation in genera' (Worsley, 1969, 244, 246). One may disagree with him, but Worsley attempts to use a definition that not only identifies the elements of populism, but does so in such a way – as logic correctly requires – as to exclude all other phenomena, and applies it consistently in a situation of social transformation similar to that envisaged by Betz's 'model' (from agrarian to industrial society in the United States in the 1800s) when he writes: 'These organized populist movements, as we have seen, have taken both left-wing and right-wing forms (more commonly, left)'

[16] This approach is reiterated both in Betz's *Introduction* and in Stefan Immerfall's *Conclusion*, in a later-collected text (Betz & Immerfall, 1998).

(Worsley, 1969, 241). Turning to the same 1900s phenomena considered by Betz, Worsley draws a very different picture from his definition:

> Ideological radicalism of the Right, with its mass roots in the *menu peuple*, as we have seen, is no new phenomenon. Over the centuries, it has taken such forms as the traditional alliance between king, church, and city mob. The twentieth century has similarly converted large segments of the lower orders into the organized mass base of totalitarian parties and has not hesitated to use appeals to popular sentiment – as well as force, blandishment, patronage, etc. – to recruit them. But these movements were anything but "populist" overall: not for nothing are labels like "authoritarian", "fascist", or "totalitarian" used normally to describe them. Populism is only an element, not the dominant feature of this kind of movement. (Worsley, 1969, 243)

Betz closely links populism to the radical right without adequate explanation. This excludes left- and centre-right forms of populism and sets up the slide towards Nazism. It is worth noting that the social groups indicated by Betz as predominant 'among the radical Right's constituency – blue-collar workers, artisans, and entrepreneurs running small and medium-sized businesses' (Betz, 1994, 189) largely correspond to both the composition of American populism in the 1800s and that of the Sans-culottes in the French Revolution 1789–1794 (Baggio, 2022, 11–12). Without a clear (albeit imperfect, as we have seen) definition of populism, all these phenomena with similar social characteristics would remain indistinct.

We find a completely different approach in Gino Germani in his *Authoritarianism, Fascism and National Populism*: 'The theory of mobilisation and the hypotheses on the role of social classes do not exhaust the analysis of the genesis of authoritarian movements and regimes in the modern world' (Germani, 2021, 3). This assessment is the consequence of an analysis of the generalisation processes used by researchers in the study of authoritarian regimes. The theoretical frameworks used at the beginning of the studies – e.g. on Italian fascism – were applied to well-defined socio-cultural areas. Subsequently, interpretations reached a wider range of generality:

> With the spreading of totalitarian movements and regimes in the world, especially after the advent of Nazism and the emergence of the Stalinist form of the Soviet regime, the discussion was considerably enlarged: there appeared hypotheses based on the role of the middle classes, mass society, psychosocial changes induced in all industrial societies, and other theorizations of a much wider range of application. Above all, the theme of modernization appears in various ways […] Finally, in this widening of the explicative schemes, the historical specificity of fascism or of modern authoritarianism may become completely lost. (Germani, 2021, 3–4)

Germani's work is expressed through a more rigorous methodology: 'The theoretical analysis developed here is placed at a specific level of generality, both in terms of sociocultural contexts and of historical epoch' (Germani, 1978, 3). Germani uses the notion of 'type', for which the different levels of generality and the different evolutionary phases of the phenomena are specified. From a temporal point of view, he distinguishes between modern society (of which he gives a definition) and the preceding epoch, moving on to gradually more precise collocations of the phenomena considered. He also constructs a useful scheme to clarify the different levels of generalisation and, in particular, that in which his study is situated: 'The theories on

authoritarianism which emphasize the role of social classes are placed in the medium range, here identified with the process of national development of the countries used as an illustration' (Germani, 2021, 4–5).

3.5 The Populism as 'Thin Ideology'

Cas Mudde's methodological approach in his 2019 study of the same topic, in *The Far Right Today*, is based on a theoretical framework far removed from Germani's, but is equally accurate. I quote from this popular text because the author makes the structure of the argument more clearly visible. Mudde's object of study is the post-war far right in the twenty-first century, during which 'radical right parties have become mainstreamed and increasingly normalised' (Mudde, 2019, 4): the symbolic event of this process is the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States.

Cas Mudde, in the *Introduction*, presents a sequence of definitions starting from the broadest one, which concerns, on the basis of Norberto Bobbio's thought, the distinction between right and left; then he descends into the defining levels within the right. The right that is hostile to liberal democracy, which can be defined as 'anti-system', is called the 'far right'; it is divided into the 'extreme right', of a revolutionary character, which rejects democracy as such, and the 'radical right', of a reformist character, which accepts 'the essence of democracy', but rejects 'minority rights, rule of law, and separation of powers' (Mudde, 2019, 7), which are descriptors of democracy. The extreme right is not populist, while the radical right, 'predominantly', is. Mudde comes to this last conclusion after giving a definition of populism – based on the proposal he developed together with Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser – as 'thin ideology'.

The definition of populism in *The Far Right Today* coincides – except for the use of synonyms in secondary words – with others, given in earlier texts (Mudde, 2004, 544, 562; Mudde & Rovíra Kaltwasser, 2017): 'I define populism as a (thin) ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the pure people and the corrupt elite, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' (Mudde, 2019, 8). What does this definition contain? In search of the answer, I choose a text by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, which I find very rich in the citation of certain authors such as Sartori, Goertz and Taggart, and in the observations around the definition itself (which repeats, quoting it, the 2004 text):

> How to develop a concept of populism that overcomes normative and regional biases? In our opinion, the most promising way is to follow Giovanni Sartori's approach (Sartori, 1970), which is characterized by the promotion of minimal definitions. These include only the core – necessary and sufficient – attributes of a concept. The advantage of minimal definitions is that, because they are based on a reduced number of attributes (little intension), they can be applied to analyse a great range of cases (high extension) […] in the real world populism hardly ever exists by itself. It has a "chameleonic" character: populism can be

> left-wing or right-wing, organized in top-down or bottom-up fashion, rely on strong leaders or be even leaderless. At the same time, by identifying two opposites of populism, we propose a conceptual approach that is helpful for drawing the boundaries of the phenomenon in question. (Mudde & Rovíra Kaltwasser, 2013a, 149–150)

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser connect to Michael Freeden's reflection on the concept of 'thin ideology'. Freeden devotes a short chapter to it in *Ideology. A Very Short Introduction*: 'A thin ideology is an ideology that, like mainstream ideologies, has an identifiable morphology but, unlike mainstream ideologies, a restricted morphology. It separates itself from broader ideological contexts by deliberately removing or replacing many concepts that we would expect an ideology to include. It does not embrace the full range of issues that macro-ideologies do, and is limited in its ambitions and scope' (Freeden, 2003, 98).

In his earlier and major work, *Ideologies and Political Theory* (Freeden, 1996), Michael Freeden had made a more articulate reflection on thin theory, a concept that he, in turn, acquired from John Rawls. Rawls introduced the hypothesis of thin theory as a 'theory of the good' and in the context of 'the choice of principles in the original position' (Rawls, 1999 – 1st 1971, 349). The subsequent debate on Rawls' theory, among many other things, questioned both thin theory per se and the possibility of moving from 'thin' to 'full theory'. We cannot go into that debate here. In my opinion, Michael Freeden has taken Rawls' original idea out of its context and problematic, in order to construct a completely different conceptual framework, which allows for the composition of effective concept maps, with a distribution (or hierarchization) of concepts according to their definitional relevance. This aspect of usefulness makes the 'thin ideology' appear as a simple solution to a complex problem and is easily adopted. In reality, Michael Freeden's attempt – like that of Destutt de Tracy – is much broader and more articulate. I refer not only to his major work but also to his article *Ideology and Political Theory* (Freeden, 2006) in which he also gives an account of the reception of his work.

The path of Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser is interesting. In Mudde (2007, 13), the 'thin ideology' is only hinted at, in the context of a broad exploration aimed at outlining a 'conceptual framework' for the study of populist radical right parties in Europe. The text Mudde and Rovíra Kaltwasser (2013b) highlights the 'positive' definition, similar to those already mentioned, and the 'negative' definition, which emphasises (as is logically required) what the definition excludes, i.e. what populism is not. The text of *Populism. An Ideational Approach* (Mudde, 2017) is appreciated for the space devoted to emphasising the role of taxonomy, which we then find clearly exemplified in the text, cited above, from 2019. These are logical insights – within a specific field – that Giovanni Sartori had, on a theoretical level, foreseen as physiological for a scientific methodology (Sartori, 1970, 1975, 1984). Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser acquired them bit by bit, until the theory was complete. Was it therefore really necessary to resort to 'thin ideology', since we already had at our disposal the logic appropriate to the social sciences, which guides us, also through Sartori, towards 'minimal definitions'? Perhaps it was sufficient – and I think it still is – for the development of the investigation of populism, to simply follow the 'logic of the thing': once the three 'core concepts' had been identified, it was logical to

construct a typology of a dynamic type through the combination of subordinate concepts or those linked to the particular historical forms of populisms.

The inclusion of the definition of populism in the context of Freeden's theory of ideology, in fact, on the one hand provides an already organised conceptual framework (the 'thin ideology') but on the other hand brings with it the problematic issue of the debate on ideology, with its complex history and boundless literature. As for me, taking into account the historical course of the concept of ideology in the various currents of thought, I have always distinguished between 'ideology' in the negative sense – i.e. as erroneous thinking, a definition of which I have briefly given here, in 3.1, that is prevalent within philosophical and political philosophy studies (and which I too have used most frequently: Baggio, 1990, 1993; 1994), and that of ideology as 'political culture' without any prior evaluation. This distinction makes it possible to develop, on the one hand, research on the origin of ideas and their dynamics, which involves gnoseology, logic, anthropology, symbolism, linguistics, etc. and, lastly, neuroscience; on the other hand, it makes it possible to safeguard the tradition of critical thought that begins with Socrates and develops throughout the course of the West, through the critique of idols carried out by Augustine of Hippo, Francis Bacon and Giambattista Vico and which continues to the present day.

I can assure you – although my students seem to think otherwise – that I was not in prison with Destutt de Tracy when on 27 July 1794, 2 days before being tried by the Revolutionary Court, Robespierre fell, and Destutt, having miraculously escaped the guillotine, decided to start thinking about how the hell certain ideas came into his head, since he still had it stuck in him. It was he, however, with his *Elements of Ideology* (1801–1815), who opened up in modern terms, over two centuries ago, the question of ideology, which has continued to be enriched and rethought to this day; it is unlikely to be closed any time soon and populism will certainly not make things easier for us.

3.6 Canovan and Wittgenstein: From 'Essentialist' Definitions to the Typology of Populisms

There are other ways to arrive at satisfactory definitions of populism, such as the one proposed by Margaret Canovan back in 1981. She questions whether the term 'populism' is more confusing than useful. In order to get away from the 'conflicting statements' produced by the attempt to grasp its 'essence', she believes that one way forward is to establish a 'range of populisms' linked together by the 'family resemblances' proposed by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*. After history and logic, it is the philosophy of language that crosses over into political science.

Wittgenstein, to introduce the concept, gives the example of 'games', of which there are very different types: board games, card games, Olympic games, etc. But one should not think that there must necessarily be something common between all

of them: 'For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that' (Wittgenstein, 1958, 31e). The result of the game research suggests that there are similarities common to some types and not to others: 'And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail […] I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. — And I shall say: "games" form a family' (Wittgenstein, 1958, 32e).

On this basis, Canovan explains why the construction of a single definition does not seem useful to her: 'The range and variety of movements lumped together under the general heading of populism make it clear that what we need is not a single essentialist definition, but rather a typology of populisms – one, moreover, which is capable of accommodating a wide range of different phenomena seen from different analytical viewpoints' (Canovan, 1981, 12–13). She begins by distinguishing populisms into two 'families': 'agrarian populism, which is a kind of rural radicalism' and 'political populism' that 'seem to focus upon political problems of democracy' (Canovan, 1981, 8). Imperfect as it is, this division implements a first approximation to reality. Canovan abandons the idea of constructing a universal and 'essentialist' definition of populism, in favour of a typology.

I note that, in reality, even this procedure presupposes the determination of one, or more, distinctive features of populism; otherwise it would not even be possible to recognise and distinguish the two 'families'. Canovan's typological approach cannot be seen as a substitute for previous – and subsequent – attempts at definition (she herself will do further research on populism in other respects), but it does constitute an important eye-opener.[17]

The typological procedure requires careful conceptual work, as Irving Copi explains: 'In fact, description itself is based on, or embodies, hypotheses. Hypotheses are as critical to the various systems of classification in biology as they are to interpretation in history, and as they are to all knowledge in the social sciences' (Copi et al., 2011, 529). However, description requires maintaining a binding contact with reality in its various aspects; the descriptive process leading to classification, if applied correctly, must always specify the level of abstraction: 'classification and description are, at bottom, the same process […] Scientific classification involves not merely a single division of objects into groups, but further subdivision of each group into subgroups and subclasses, and so on' (Copi et al., 2011, 530).

[17] Canovan distinguishes, within Agrarian Populism, three types of populism: (1) peasant radicalism as in the US People's Party; (2) peasant movements in the Eastern European Green Rising; and (3) intellectual agrarian socialism (*narodniki*). Within political populism, Canovan places (4) populist dictatorship (e.g. Peronism); (5) populist democracy (direct participation, e.g. referendums); (6) reactionary populism (George Wallace); and (7) politicians' populism (attempt to build coalitions with an appeal to the unity of the people) (Canovan, 1981, 13).

Moreover, once we have taken note of the complexity of phenomena, the different viewpoints from which we can study them, if expressive of reality, are not mutually exclusive, Copi also emphasises, confirming Canovan's methodology which, as we have seen, sought to relate 'different analytical viewpoints' through typology: 'The theoretical object of classification is less obvious. Alternative schemes of classification are neither true nor false. Objects may be described in different ways, from different points of view. The system of classification adopted will depend on the purpose or interest of the classifier' (Copi et al., 2011, 531). Of course, in this way our knowledge of populism will no longer be as monolithic as a stone we can keep in our pocket to throw at someone, but if the goal is to know and not to prevail in the dispute, this could be considered an advantage.

4 From the Mob to the People: The Role of Civil Society

The analysis carried out so far has highlighted two relevant phenomena within democratic societies:

Firstly, a consistent difficulty in recognising 'shared ideals', i.e. those 'founding truths' that have enabled each political society to constitute itself as such.

Secondly, a widespread social and cultural fragmentation into groups that self-define themselves through complete ideologies, creating worlds apart, self-referential, often antagonistic.

We have also seen that it is necessary to distinguish the 'populace' from the 'people' and that only the latter is the guardian of 'shared ideals'. We must therefore try to answer two questions: *the first*: what are 'shared ideals'? and *the second*: who are 'the people' really?

4.1 Share Ideals and Factual Truths

Regarding the first question, Tom Nichols went very far in his analysis, drawing from it political consequences that were as realistic as they were devastating: 'To reject the advice of experts is to assert autonomy, a way for Americans to insulate their increasingly fragile egos from ever being told they're wrong about anything. It is a new *Declaration of Independence*: no longer do we hold *these* truths to be self-evident, we hold *all* truths to be self-evident, even the ones that aren't true. All things are knowable and every opinion on any subject is as good as any other' (Nichols, 2017, X).

We are experiencing this phenomenon in all democratic regimes worldwide. It is referred to as an inherent fragility of democracy, which would determine the structural weakness of the West. These arguments are mainly developed by authoritarian and totalitarian regimes as a propaganda weapon, especially after the outbreak of

the Sars-CoV-2 pandemic and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is true that this is a degenerative phenomenon that has many causes, but it is made visible and multipliable by the structure of democratic pluralism. Similar phenomena exist in unfree countries, but in the absence of the freedom guaranteed by pluralism, they have less chance of being noticed.

However, the problem exists. We can say that a considerable proportion of citizens, within democratic countries, do not believe, or no longer believe, in their own 'Spirit of 76', that is, in the contents of the founding political event; they are unable to share principles and ideals that previous generations held to be true, as if the 'we' of 'we hold these truths', did not refer to the 'one people' subject of the first line of the *Declaration*, or of other texts that contain the 'visions' that other peoples have of themselves. Hannah Arendt is right in arguing that, unlike the *Declaration of Independence*, those truths are not self-evident, although Jefferson thought so (Arendt, 2006 – 1st 1968, 242). I agree with Arendt's assertion, but respectfully disagree with her underlying reasoning (Baggio, 2013, 56–59) and think that the explanation may be different.

'These truths' does not only mean 'values' or 'common principles', but refers to a shared history, to a journey that led 'one people' to the decision to found a new political institution in which their identity is expressed and recognised by mankind ('a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires…'). A consensus was created in the course of the history of that people, a consensus not 'by convention', i.e. not based on a stipulation (stipulative definition) that could be wrong, nor even on an untouchable block of 'objective truths' (dogmatic definition), but 'by discovery' and 'by construction' of a shared reality that manifests itself to all as true. For the French of the *Maquis* or for the Italians of the resistance – to give examples – who were experiencing not only a war against an external enemy but also an internal war, those truths that, if shared, constitute the root of common belonging, were not at all evident. Those truths had to be reconquered, above all by re-experiencing them, by re-creating an underlying unity capable of ensuring that different – but not mutually destructive – visions of life and politics could coexist. Hannah Arendt calls them 'factual truths': 'Factual truth […] is always related to other people: it concerns events and circumstances in which many are involved; it is established by witnesses and depends upon testimony; it exists only to the extent that it is spoken about, even if it occurs in the domain of privacy. It is political by nature' (Arendt, 2006 – 1st 1968, 233–234).

Factual truths are lived and discovered by people in civil society,[18] in the people, not by the state that is based on them. They have to be guarded, interpreted and re-interpreted and continuously updated:

> And if we now think of factual truths […] we at once become aware of how much more vulnerable they are then all the kinds of rational taken together […] The chances of factual truth surviving the onslaught of power are very slim indeed; it is always in danger of being maneuvered out of the world not only for a time but, potentially, forever. Facts and events

[18] I refer, for studies on civil society, to *The Idea of Civil Society*, by Adam Seligman (1992) and two fundamental collections of essays: (Keane, 1988; Cohen & Arato, 1992).

> are infinitely more fragile things than axioms, discoveries, theories […] produced by the human mind. (Arendt, 2006 – 1st 1968, 227)

In the case of the United States, the people is the subject that, at the time of the declaration, already exists and wants to give life to a state that does not yet exist. The state will always have to refer to what comes before, to what it owes its construction, in order to have any notion of its values. But they are, at the same time, immersed in the dynamics of the different interpretations that the people, a unitary and plural reality, experience in the course of history: in this sense, populism can be understood as language, in the meaning of 'constitutional language' that we have derived from Michael Kazin's reading, but it is an 'evolutionary constitutional language'. John Kennedy, on 16 April 1959, when the climate created by McCarthy and which Shils has described to us was still in the air, posed this very question, which could be posed again today:

> The basic question confronting us today is whether these fundamentals still hold true, whether we really believe in this idea of a republic, whether today the American people would ratify the Constitution and adopt the Bill of Rights—or whether the dangers of external attack and internal subversion, promoted by a foe more sinister and more powerful than any our Founding Fathers knew, have so altered our world and our beliefs as to make these fundamental truths no longer applicable. The Constitution, of course, is still in force—but it is a solemn contract made in the name of "We the People"—and it is an agreement that should be renewed by each generation. (Kennedy, 1963, 162)

It is clear that this is not only the situation in the United States: in many states, the subjectivity of the people has a constitutional basis, from which political actors can draw inspiration. Hannah Arendt is aware that factual truths can be easily manipulated, as everyday politics demonstrates. Germany, for example, she writes in the *Truth and Politics*, invaded Belgium in 1914: this is a fact. The opposite statement is absurd but can have political significance as an attempt to change the situation by using lies as a form of action. The *Truth and Politics* was first published in *The New Yorker*, 25 February 1967, following – as the author explains – the controversy aroused by the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt, 1963)[19]: at stake in the trial against Otto Adolf Heichmann were precisely the factual truths about the Holocaust, which not even many of the victims had been able to communicate. Yet Arendt seems to describe, in some respects, our current situation:

> The same is true when the liar, lacking the power to make his falsehood stick, does not insist on the gospel truth of his statement but pretends that this is his "opinion", to which he claims his constitutional right. This is frequently done by subversive groups, and in a politically immature public the resulting confusion can be considerable. The blurring of the dividing line between factual truth and opinion belongs among the many forms that lying can assume, all of which are forms of action. (Arendt, 2006, 245)

Can the liar be prevented from acting politically in this way? To some extent yes, but only in those rare cases where it can be shown that he is breaking some law, and

[19] Hannah Arendt had followed the trial and published five articles for *The New Yorke*r in February and March 1963, later collected in a book.

even in those cases, the liar has already acted. What is certain is that the best forces of democracy should be devoted to educating: that *paideia* overcome *demagogy*. In democracy, freedom can become a weakness, if people allow it, but it is meant to always be an asset.

4.2 Who Is the People?

The second question is who really is 'the people'?

Hannah Arendt does not use 'populace' but, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, clearly distinguishes between 'people' and what she calls 'mob', a term that describes the 'populace' in its aggressive aspect, as a crowd that is either willing to engage in violence or is engaging in it. Arendt describes as a 'fundamental error of regarding the mob as identical with rather than as a caricature of the people. The mob is primarily a group in which the residue of all classes are represented. This makes it so easy to mistake the mob for the people, which also comprises all strata of society' (Arendt, 1958 – 1st 1951, 107).

The people is characterised by an open pluralism, and it is possible to distinguish it from the 'mob': the latter, in fact, always tends to subordinate itself to some 'strong man', to the 'great leader'. The people, on the contrary, 'in all great revolutions fight for true representation' (Arendt, 1958 – 1st 1951, 107).

Margaret Canovan knew deeply Arendt's thought[20] which provided her with many stimuli. The English scholar made a significant contribution to populism studies by progressively shifting the focus of investigation towards the analysis of the 'people' and the – culturally plural – history of its concept. The direction of the research is well represented by the titles of the first and last work: from *Populism* (1981) to *People* (2005). Already in *People*, *Politicians* and *Populism*, she analyses three meanings of 'people' that are in common use in modern English[21]:

1. The People as Nation. We often use "people" to refer to a whole political community or nation, as in "the Polish people", "the people of New Zealand". The usual implication is that all those native to a particular country are included, and that together they form a community with a common life.
2. The People as Underdogs. In a more restricted sense, the term can be contrasted with some kind of elite or upper class to refer not to the whole community, but to the less privileged majority of its members, as in the expression, "a man of the people".

[20] I will leave aside the numerous articles and simply point to the two volumes: *The political thought of Hannah Arendt* (Canovan, 1974) e *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (Canovan, 1992).

[21] Canovan presenterà tre diverse varianti interpretative di 'people' in *Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy* (Canovan, 1999).

3. People as Everyman. Besides using the word with an article – "the people" or "people" – we talk about "people" in general, as in "there were a lot of people at the meeting". That is, "people" can mean individual human beings. (Canovan, 1984, 314–315).

Canovan describes the people 'as Nation' in reference to the native population creating a community. The creation of a community, however, is not only a feature of the people as Nation, which, Canovan writes, does indeed have affinities especially with conservatism. People as underdogs' does as well: 'Nevertheless, there can be no question of the term being monopolized by the Right, for in the second of the senses already listed it is a vital rallying cry for the Left […] Although this left-wing people [as Underdogs] includes less population of any given country than its right-wing counterpart, this is compensated for by its links of solidarity with the (lower-class) peoples of other countries […] Right and Left alike conceive of the people in collective terms as a community of one sort or another, even though they disagree about the boundaries of that community' (Canovan, 1984, 315–316). Consequently, one cannot agree with Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser when they argue that the concept of 'Nation', when based on 'Nativism', is essentially xenophobic and characterises the contemporary populist right parties in Europe (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015 – 1st 2013, 502); if anything, the way those parties interpret nativism (as an ideological form) is xenophobic, but neither the concept of 'native' nor that of 'nation' is. The discourse could be extended, for example, to 'American Native Peoples', for whom 'native' status is a source of personal and collective rights. It is clear that Canovan's aim is not to justify anti-democratic parties, but to preserve the constructive and democratic potential of the idea of people and nation.

In reflecting on the concept of nationhood, we must bear in mind the events that had changed the reality of Eastern Europe during the 1980s and up to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. These were events in which the role of the national identity of individual countries had been decisive in a transformative, progressive sense. It certainly did not manifest itself for the first time, as it had characterised the search for 'paths to socialism' in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, which differed from the Soviet model and were both repressed with military force. The national element may be the basis on which a people builds a legal order and internal solidarity; and this process is in the history of many peoples. The idea of 'nation' does not necessarily lead to xenophobic nationalism, but it can be the first step on building a solidarity-based vision of humanity. The 'League of Nations' (1920), the 'United Nations' (1945), mean just that. The idea of nation can be interpreted not only in an exclusionary sense, but in an inclusionary sense too. This is what characterises, for example, the national idea of the United States. If we read Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (19 November 1863) – just to give an example and endeavouring to ignore the immense library that exists on the subject – we see that the President's thought is like a thread between the beginning, which indicates the origins: 'our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation' and the final statement, which indicates the purpose: 'the great task remaining before us [...] that this nation, under God, shall

have a new birth of freedom' (Lincoln, 1953, 23). The mistakes and difficulties that the 'American Experiment' has gone through in history do not eliminate the vision that a nation has of itself: the unity between the original nation, inherited by those who were born into it, and the nation, which must continually experience a new birth with those who have come and will come to it.

Without history, a theory cannot be developed. It is often necessary to create and experiencing solidarity among 'natives' – originally based on blood ties – in order to come to understand solidarity in an increasingly inclusive manner. It is not a matter of generosity or 'good feelings', but a political process. Aristotle explained the progressive enlargement of the human community from the family, to the tribe, to the *polis* – and, with the latter, the birth of politics – by the need to respond to the ends of community members. If the city, in Aristotle's time, was *téleios*, that is, it was the community that enabled all the purposes of human beings of that time to be realised, what is the *téleios* community of today, if not humanity itself? To cite just one example with which we are all familiar, there are populations in demographic decline, others in surplus to the resources they possess: many of these imbalances are only resolved in a trans-continental dimension.

4.3 Civil Society and Founding People

The notion of solidarity should not only be understood intuitively. Hannah Arendt, for instance, in *On Revolution*, makes an interesting political elaboration of it, taking the republicanism of ancient Rome as a historical reference: 'For solidarity, because it partakes of reason, and hence of generality, is able to comprehend a multitude conceptually, not only the multitude of a class or a nation or a people, but eventually all mankind. But this solidarity, though it may be aroused by suffering, is not guided by it, and it comprehends the strong and the rich no less than the weak and the poor […] solidarity is a principle that can inspire and guide action, compassion is one of the passions and pity is a sentiment' (Arendt, 1990 – 1st 1963, 88–89).

The idea of solidarity, throughout history, has gone far beyond the ancient republicanism that held together, but at the same time separated, two hereditary social categories. Throughout the 1800s, a debate developed involving the relational principles used in the founding events of political societies, starting with the English revolution of the 1600s, to focus on that of the English colonies in North America and, immediately afterwards, on the French and Haitian revolutions: the latter achieved the first effective universalisation of rights between Whites and Blacks in history, on the basis of the French 'Triptych' – liberty, equality and fraternity – which introduced a dynamic between the founding principles of the political community that was as problematic as it was unexplored (Baggio, 2011). Between 1800 and 1900, several major cultural currents of solidarism stand out, which profoundly affect society, the economy and politics. They produced facts and, consequently, a

vast bibliography.[22] In most political studies on populism, however, it is not possible to find, among the 'descriptors' or 'items' of the analyses, concepts that have profoundly affected political realities and theories and that are also central to the popular and populist political experience, such as solidarity, friendship, brotherhood and trust. There is something about the latter: Rodrigo Mardones reports on it in *Fraternity in Politics. New Scholarship and Publications from Latin America* (Mardones, 2012).

We find this intrinsic connection between 'society' and 'people' in a historical period much closer to us, that, which we have already mentioned, of 1980s Europe. And here we also find Margaret Canovan: 'Of all recent cases of "people power", the strongest claim to authenticity as a grass roots movement of the People belongs to the Polish "Solidarity" (*Solidarność*) movement that emerged unexpectedly in 1980' (Canovan, 2005, 136). 'Solidarity' movement, Canovan emphasises, had the support of the entire population, and it gives an explanation that takes up the different meanings contained in the word 'people', which she had expounded over 20 years earlier, interpreted in the light of the Arendtian vision of solidarity uniting the people: 'It could do so because it represented the people three times over, not just as sovereign source of legitimacy but as underdogs and as nation – a conjunction of meanings of "people" and sources of myth that greatly reinforced one another. Starting as a workers' trade union, it drew deeply on the rich mythology of Polish nationalism, itself fused with religious devotion […] To many observers this was a genuine manifestation of the People in action' (Canovan, 2005, 136). And, further, 'It is therefore fair to say that some of the myths contain a kernel of truth about politics: where individual people do form "a people" and acts as "the people", political power can come into being – perhaps momentarily, but sometimes in a solid, lasting fashion, as the *populus Romanus* showed long ago, and the American People more recently' (Canovan, 2005, 137). Canovan immediately adds that these are exceptional events and that when the people come to exercise power directly, destructive actions are frequent, but she uses Arendt's terminology to describe them: 'mob violence' (Canovan, 2005, 137).

The organised and politically conscious entry of the people into the political scene, from which they were excluded, had a particular effect – which, at least from the outside, was very difficult to foresee – on the ruling elites, at least in the states where the regime changes of 1989–1990 took place peacefully. That is to say there was the recognition, at least in the cases of the Democratic Republic of Germany and Czechoslovakia, of the formation of an alternative power, of a sort of 'transfer of power' from the political establishment to civil society. The citizens declared that they did not recognise themselves in the politics of the regime and imposed themselves on the political representatives as the real political body.

On this, I can also add a personal testimony. On 11 December 1989, at a demonstration in Prague in which a large part of the population – not only the young

[22] I will simply point to a few works, containing an extensive bibliography: Baggio, 2013; Scholz, 2008; Brunkhorst, 2005; Chevallier et al., 1992.

political activists who had participated in the demonstrations from late September to November but entire families with young children and grandparents – had poured into Wenceslas Square and the surrounding area; Vaclav Havel was presented as a candidate to become the new President of the Republic. Everyone applauded as if it was a done deal, as if it was the natural course of things. I was astonished at such confidence and asked Jirí, one of the friends with whom I was attending the event: 'How can you be sure that the parliament will elect precisely Havel, its enemy?' He gave me 'the' answer: 'They are used to obeying, and now we give the orders' (Baggio, 1990, 11–18). It is this transition that makes civil society, 'the People', take on a founding role.

The changes that were less violent and proved to be more profound and lasting were prepared by action from below, which did not take the form of sudden flashes of public action, but was built patiently, first of all by weaving personal bonds of trust, into which new people were gradually drawn, until cohesive groups capable of exerting a significant social influence were created, as happened in East Germany (Bransch, 1990). Opposition movements presented themselves, both in the GDR and in Czechoslovakia, as 'forums of civil society'. Civil society (understood not in the sense of Hegel's 'bürgerliche gesellshaft', as a mere locus of private interests, but rather in the political sense of Cicero's *civilis societas* or that of Thomas Aquinas's *totius multitudinis*) on those occasions did not merely de-constructively act: it presented a value vision, a political project, an alternative leadership that grew out of its own bosom. In these popular movements, resentment was certainly present, but the vision, the political strategy and the strength to implement it, the solidarity that overcame social and cultural differences came from other factors, belonging to reality, strangely absent from the most fashionable definitions of populism.

An important aspect, which Canovan captures – referring directly to Arendt – is the distinction between authority and power, the distinction between the two different roles they assume in the critical moment: 'Sometimes, it seems, we are confronted with "the people" as a political reality, generating both the collective power that can threaten a regime, and the collective authority that can bestow legitimacy on a new one and keep that power in being (Arendt, 1963)' (Canovan, 2005, 137).

I think a key element in giving an adequate (and politically viable) interpretation of these converging visions of Arendt, and Canovan is to understand the link and distinction between civil society and the people. 'Civil society' means plurality of associations, of cultures, of political orientations, of legitimate interests, of lifestyles, of personal choices. The experiences examined explain that when this type of society acts in a unified manner and 'becomes the people', it is in order to perform a founding act, which may be long and complex, but its purpose is to give life to a new community.

The moment it comes into being, however, the people as a unitary reality withdraws, does not govern, does not exercise power. For government and all that it entails – making laws, making decisions, living ordinary political life – it is necessary to return to the pluralism of civil society. The founding function is transformed into a function of control so that laws and decisions correspond to the values and

principles that originated the political community and that must continue to be its reasons and 'shared ideals' or, if you like, the 'factual truths': the 'will of the people', after having created a new power, continues to scrutinise its legitimacy, also (but not only) by institutionalising this function in a body (e.g. a judiciary) separate from the executive power: that is, it continues to subsist as authority, not power. Could this be a possible conceptual framework in which to contain Madison's and the People's democracy in a dynamic equilibrium? It is important that this is not just a conjecture; it is important to have lived through historical experiences in which the people acted as one but were able to maintain their pluralism as a civil society. The key issue is the growth of the political awareness of civil society.

When it went well, it went like this. It could happen again. Let us prepare to describe it better and, if possible, help it happen.

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