

# Populism and the “unfulfilled promises” of democracy: towards the corrosion of the character of democracy?

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## Abstract:

This article examines the complex relationship between populism and democracy, focusing on how populism emerges as both a symptom and a critique of democratic institutions in advanced modernity. It explores the transformation of liberal democracies under the influence of populist movements that exploit crises of legitimacy and declining trust in traditional political actors. It argues that populism, with its chameleonic nature, reshapes the political landscape by emphasising anti-elitist and anti-pluralist discourses that challenge established democratic norms. By analysing the ‘re-semantisation’ of concepts such as ‘the people’ and ‘community’ and their implications in Western democracies, the article explores how populism navigates between being an element of democratic discourse and a factor of democratic erosion. The tension between the ideal and procedural dimensions of democracy is highlighted, suggesting that populism capitalises on the ‘unfulfilled promises’ of democracy to position itself as both an alternative and a critique of the current democratic order.

## Keywords:

Populism; Liberal democracy; Legitimation crisis

## 1. Introduction

Populism is commonly associated with the transformation of liberal democracies or viewed as an expression of a diseased representative democracy, a gauge of political discontent with mainstream parties and a symptom of a struggling democracy<sup>1</sup>. The power

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1 Y. Mény, Y. Surel, *Populismo e democrazia*, il Mulino, Bologna 2001; Id., *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2002; C. Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017; P. Ostiguy, *The Socio-Cultural, Relational Approach to Populism*, in «Partecipazione e Conflitto», XIII, 2020, pp. 29-58; C. de La Torre, *Introduction: Power to the People? Populism, Insurrections, Democratization*, in Id., (ed. by), *The Promise and Perils of Populism: Global Perspectives*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington 2023, pp. 1-28; C. de la Torre, O. Mazzoleni (eds), *Populism and Key Concepts in Social and Political Theory*, Brill, Leiden/Boston 2023.

of populism, the main contender of mainstream politics, lies in a legitimisation crisis and eroded consensus and trust in traditional liberal democratic representatives, although this is not the only perspective to consider. Like – and perhaps more than – other phenomena, populism has a remarkable chameleonic capacity that makes it adaptable to various political ideologies<sup>2</sup>. This ambiguity, however, risks jeopardising its heuristic capacity when populism is perceived as an umbrella concept encompassing all rhetorical forms of protest against the elite. Simultaneously, the concept of populism comprises only partially comparable phenomena, ranging from «agrarian populism» to the various shapes and sizes of «political populism»<sup>3</sup>, in addition to its different historical waves, such as American populism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian populism of the *narodniki* or the emergence of populism in Latin America, post-colonial countries and Western, Central and Eastern European countries. The populism chronicled in this paper corresponds to the context of advanced modernity and Western liberal democracy, specifically in the wake of the 2008 credit crunch, necessitating interpretative models innate to the social, economic and cultural dynamics of this situation.

In the context of this complex but far from unidirectional relationship between populism and representative democracy, the redefinition of places, actors and politicisation processes at the hands of new leaders and political organisations will be addressed, particularly in light of the rise of the “people” and the “community” in politics and the problems associated with their «re-semantisation» in society and Western democracies<sup>4</sup>. More than 40 years after the Trilateral Commission’s Report<sup>5</sup>, the problem of advanced democracies does not appear to be a crisis of governability due to the overwhelming number of conflicting social issues or increased apathy and voter abstention unable to support democracy. Instead, the principle of legitimisation – with regard to delegative or liquid democracy and representative democracy – is questioned. The rise of populism is accompanied, on the one hand, by the depoliticisation of large segments of political regulation and the establishment of public policies, especially in finance, that exacerbate the “crisis” of representative politics<sup>6</sup>, and on the other, by the cartelisation of mainstream political parties<sup>7</sup>. In this context, populism is an example, but not the only one, of ‘discourse’ on the democratic transformation processes in an era in which ‘absolute politics’ has been definitively

2 P. Taggart, *Populism*, Open University Press, Buckingham 2000; C., *The Populist Zeitgeist*, in «Government and Opposition», 39, 2004, pp. 541-563.

3 M. Canovan, *Populism*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York 1981.

4 A. Pizzorno (a cura di), *La democrazia di fronte allo Stato. Una discussione sulle difficoltà della politica moderna*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2010; B. Manin, *Principi del governo rappresentativo*, il Mulino, Bologna 2010; P. Rosanvallon, *Controdemocrazia. La politica nell’era della sfiducia*, Castelvecchi, Roma 2012.

5 M. Crozier, S.P. Huntington, J. Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy. Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*, New York University Press, New York 1975.

6 M. Flinders, J. Buller, *Depoliticisation: principles, tactics and tools*, «British Politics», 1 2006, pp. 293-318; P. Fawcett, M. Flinders, C. Hay, M. Wood, *Anti-Politics, Depoliticization, and Governance*, in P. Fawcett, M. Flinders, C. Hay, M. Wood (eds), *Anti-Politics, Depoliticization, and Governance*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2017, pp. 3-27.

7 R. Katz, P. Mair, *The Cartel Party Thesis: A Restatement*, «Perspectives on Politics», 7, 2009, pp. 753-766.

overthrown<sup>8</sup>. The latter is identified as a form of politics that goes beyond the dynamics of interests and is not reduced to the procedural dimension of organised forms of politics. Hence, an interpretation of populism in Western democracies will be put forward to render the rift between the people and the establishment politically active, thanks to the plebiscitary dynamic of «democratic illiberalism»<sup>9</sup>. In other words, starting with the form populism adopts in a crisis, we will observe how populism is a fundamental component of democracy and an expression of the «disintermediation of politics» that denies the very rift caused by social cleavages and the conflict amongst political actors, from the perspective of a partyless democracy in not only anti-elitist but also anti-pluralist terms<sup>10</sup>.

### 2. *The crisis of political representation: a sociological perspective*

Populism in European societies and democracies can be analysed from various perspectives. However, it is relevant from a sociological standpoint if linked to the strain between the dynamics of advanced modernisation – that alter the social foundations of democracy – and the political re-articulation of the divisions present in society. This tension was caused by the disappearance of mass party representative politics as a result of the modernisation of society, the ability to articulate and aggregate interests, to elaborate ideologies, and to give political form to groups emerging from social stratification<sup>11</sup>. In particular, in the case of party democracies, the trust and legitimacy within the system were fed by the mass party’s ability to perform practices of identification and efficient activities<sup>12</sup>. On the one hand, the parties built up and multiplied collective membership through ideology; on the other, the efficient activity was oriented towards pursuing the interests of the political and social community of reference in the conflict with the other organised subjects of the political system, whilst the balance legitimised the unequal distribution of power and the attribution of power to the leadership (party leaders, elected representatives, the leader) and the citizens (advocates, registered members, voters). The general problem concerning the relationship between a transformed society, a transformed democracy and the rise of populism is rooted in the shortcomings of the system of political representation, understood as authorisation, promotion of interests, and accountability, where the responses are not ‘scientific’ but rather a set of value-based commitments, decisions and judgments<sup>13</sup>.

8 A. Pizzorno, *Le radici della politica assoluta e altri saggi*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1993.

9 W.A. Galston, *Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy*, Yale University Press, Yale 2018; T.S. Pappas, *Populism and Liberal Democracy. A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019.

10 P. Mair, *Partyless Democracy and the “Paradox” of New Labour*, in «New Left Review», 2, 2000, pp. 21-35; J. Pakulski, A. Körösiényi, *Toward Leader Democracy*, Anthem Press, London 2012.

11 S. Tormey, *The End of Representative Politics*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2015, pp. 53-54.

12 A. Pizzorno, *Mutamenti nelle istituzioni rappresentative e sviluppo dei partiti politici*, in P. Bairoch, E.J. Hobsbawm (a cura di), *La storia dell’Europa contemporanea*, Einaudi, Torino 1996, pp. 961-1031.

13 H.F. Pitkin, *Il concetto di rappresentanza*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2017, pp. 312-313.

The legitimation crisis of traditional political actors occurs when the bond holding together the pursuit of a common goal is broken, along with the power of the political class, and the achievement of the ideals or socio-economic interests by the citizens/voters based on the community action for which they are fighting. This is a problem that constantly emerges in the examination of the stability of democracies, together with the prospect of the type of modernisation and the degree of efficiency of the government. It is no coincidence that Lipset himself<sup>14</sup> did not limit the stability of democracies to economic development alone, indicating that it also depended on the effectiveness and legitimacy of the political system. Effectiveness is understood as «effective efficiency» and as the capacity of the system, political and otherwise, to fulfil the functions of government; legitimacy is understood as a fundamental resource through which «to raise and keep alive the belief that the existing political institutions are the most suitable for that society»<sup>15</sup>. In addition to legitimacy, the real foundation of power, the source of obligation and moral justification of political power as it is founded on ethical-legal or ethical-social principles and values<sup>16</sup>, there is the issue of trust, which measures the intensity of a bond without legal constraints and contributes to a wider form of legitimation. Indeed, legitimacy differs from trust because it questions the recognition of the capacity of political power to respond to the needs of citizens, and as such, is justified in a more general sense as opposed to the rule that regulates the expectation of obedience to a command. In general, as claimed by Luhmann<sup>17</sup>, trust plays a crucial role in reducing complexity and fear, precisely because it can simplify and neutralise the risk of choices for individuals who are not equipped with the cultural tools and necessary information to make their own decisions. The key to understanding the crisis of political representation and the demise of party democracy is, in this sense, the non-reconfiguration of what Giddens referred to as a social necessity that is also profoundly political, that is, «reweaving broken solidarity» where the interdependence and autonomy of the individual are fostered and protected<sup>18</sup>.

The tension between the dynamics of advanced modernisation altering the social foundations of democracy and the construction of new ties of solidarity reveals a key problem: the identity crisis of political actors and their capacity to represent new social actors and to operate as a vehicle of legitimacy within the system in which they function. In European democracies, populism is accompanied by an increased sentiment of resentment towards the political elite, a vital part of the silent counter-revolution that determines the polarisation of the winners and losers of new social processes on a global scale<sup>19</sup>. This is evident in the politicisation of phenomena such

14 S.M. Lipset, *L'uomo e la politica. Le basi sociali della politica*, Edizioni di Comunità, Milano 1963.

15 Ivi, pp. 77-78.

16 P.P. Portinaro, *Legittimità*, in *Enciclopedia delle Scienze sociali*, V, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana Treccani, Roma 1996, pp. 235-245.

17 N. Luhmann, *La fiducia*, il Mulino, Bologna 2002, p. 37.

18 A. Giddens, *Oltre la destra e la sinistra*, il Mulino, Bologna 1997, pp. 201-21.

19 S. Bornschier, *Cleavage Politics and the Populist Right. The New Cultural Conflict in Western Europe*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 2010; H.-P. Kriesi, E. Grande, M. Dolezal, M. Helbling, D. Höglinger, S. Hutter, B. Wüest, (eds.) *Political Conflict in Western Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012; A. Reckwitz, *The Society of Singularities*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2020.

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as immigration, the European integration process, a lack of safety and security and the emergence of new right-wing parties not ideologically associated with traditional fascism<sup>20</sup>. If populism emerges during economic, financial and social crises, then its relationship with these crises is ambivalent at best. It does not exhaust the opportunities of the general phenomenon, given that, in addition to the economy, «the union of an ideological structure and a political situation» is decisive<sup>21</sup>. Firstly, populism indicates the existence of an illness originating from a lack of political integration even in the absence of an economic crisis, thereby highlighting the malfunctioning, or rather, the contraction of the quality of democracy in terms of the responsiveness of the system<sup>22</sup>. Secondly, a crisis is itself a tool used as a permanent representation by populist leaders and political movements to de-legitimise the mainstream political class<sup>23</sup>. Therefore, in broader terms, populism arises not only during economic crises but also as a result of political breakdowns, which may accompany or even precede economic crises, in a context where the structures of political intermediation are transformed and where precedents and traditional hegemonic political discourses are overcome<sup>24</sup>. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that the credit crunch of 2008 marked a further acceleration in the deconstruction of political integration and, concurrently, the growth of politicised disenchantment and aversion towards the mainstream political class, revealing different forms of populist manifestation, including not only the populist right but also the emergence of a new form of populism, the new populist left, particularly in the countries of Southern Europe<sup>25</sup>.

The tale of populism unfolds in the continuous relationship between the different forms of modernisation and political representation. Populism can emerge in any phase of the relationship between modernisation and democracy, in aspects that differ in their economic structure and political culture, as a result of three possible types of crisis of representation<sup>26</sup>. In the first case, exemplified by South American populism, the national leader is called upon to incorporate into the democratic political system the heterogeneous masses, without the social and political references to parties and unions<sup>27</sup>. In the second example, there can be a lack of legitimacy deriving from the weak institutionalisation of the representative system (still under construction), as seen in the new democracies of Eastern Europe. Finally, the third

20 C. Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007.

21 Y. Mény, Y. Surel, *Populismo e democrazia*, cit., pp. 151-2.

22 L. Morlino, F. Raniolo, *The Impact of the Economic Crisis on South European Democracies*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2017.

23 B. Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2016.

24 E. Laclau, *La ragione populista*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2008.

25 H.P. Kriesi, T.S. Pappas, *Populism in Europe During Crisis: An Introduction*, in H-P. Kriesi, T. S. Pappas (eds.), *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession*, Ecpr Press, Colchester 2015, pp. 1-19.

26 K.M. Roberts, *Populism, Political Mobilization, and Crises of Political Representation*, in C. de la Torre (ed. by), *The Promise and Perils of Populism: Global Perspectives*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington 2015, pp. 140-158; pp. 147-149.

27 G. Germani, *Política y sociedad en una época de transición, de la sociedad tradicional a la sociedad de masas*, Editorial Paidós, Buenos Aires 1962; Id., *Autoritarismo, fascismo e classi sociali*, il Mulino, Bologna 1975.

type of crisis of representation corresponds to what is happening overall in European advanced democracies, particularly in the process by which parties, on the one hand, reinforce their attribution of power as organisations in public office and, on the other, lose their connection to defined social groups.

Populism in itself is not incompatible with modernity, but it expresses the lack of cleavage politics, understood as a system of re-articulation of social conflict into political conflict. Moreover, in building political ties, it becomes necessary to identify and participate in a vision of the world capable of planning the future, that is to say, a value-based dimension able to create a frame of meaning that goes beyond mere individual utilitarianism, at the foundation of democratic participation that is not activated solely because of a sense of civic belonging. What constitutes particularly fertile terrain for the rise of populism is a decline in trust<sup>28</sup>, rooted in the structure of the trust placed in institutions, or perhaps, before we can even begin to contemplate a lack of faith in the institutions, in a society in which interpersonal bonds and relationships are characterised by a growing sense of distrust.

### 3. *Populism: constructing the People and challenging the Elites*

If populism aims to implement a strategy of politicisation of the lack of confidence towards the political establishment, the ‘political nature’ of this phenomenon has always been a controversial subject of analysis. Populism has been defined in various ways: as an ideology, a mentality, a discourse, a movement, a syndrome, a social identity and a strategy<sup>29</sup>. In addition to the different perspectives for analysis and the debate on its traceability to a thin-centred ideology<sup>30</sup>, it is nonetheless possible to recognise, in the appeals to the people and in the opposition to the political elite, the recurring aspects of the different forms of populism. The Manichaean dualism in which the contraposition between a «pure people» and a «corrupt elite» is articulated refers to the categories of ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’, in which the enemy takes root in the betrayal of the people by the political elite through an abuse of power and corruption. The most relevant and ambiguous dimension is the reference to the people/community, whose primacy in terms of sovereignty exceeds the horizontal right and left, thereby countering axis with a cleavage between ‘above and below’ in reference to power, and ‘inside and out’ in reference to the identification of the other people (including the elites but also immigrants, intellectuals, the media, etc.).

28 C. Fieschi, P. Heywood, *Trust, Cynicism and Populist Anti-politics*, «Journal of Political Ideologies», 9, 2004, pp. 289-309.

29 N. Gidron, B. Bonikowski, *Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda*, «Weatherhead Working Paper Series», 13, 2013; P. Aslanidis, *Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective*, «Political Studies», 64, 2016, pp. 88-104; C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo, P. Ostiguy, *Populism: An Overview of the Concept and State of Art*, in *Oxford Handbook of Populism*, cit., pp. 1-24.

30 K.A. Hawkins, C. Rovira Kaltwasser, *Introduction: The Ideational Approach*, in K.A. Hawkins, et al. (eds.), *The Ideational Approach to Populism. Concept, Theory, and Analysis*, Routledge, London 2019, pp. 1-24.

The ideological – or semi-ideological – nature of populism is mutually attributable to the hostility felt towards representative politics, to the rejection – selective or total – of parties, to the call to the people not as a source of legitimacy of a delegated political action but as a unique, indivisible political actor, to anti-elitism, to the Manichaean juxtaposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’ to the call for a heartland, an imagined community that takes on that moral and mythical reference to the land of the heart, to the trust in personalised leadership and not party oligarchies and forms of direct democracy<sup>31</sup>. Other than its possible variations, one of the most controversial aspects in the study of populism is the identification of not only how much antagonism there is but whether it exists and what the particular form of this phenomenon is in the political construction of a sovereign people and opposition to the representative distortions of liberal democracy<sup>32</sup>.

The attempt to shape the «disintermediation of politics» as opposed to the intermediate bodies of politics, that is, first and foremost the parties, appeals to an idea of community that echoes a sort of «romantic primitivism», with an echo of egalitarian moralism typical of certain religious sects, with hints at life in the suburbs in the culture of the Western world<sup>33</sup>. The role of the community is imperative in considering populism not only as a simple expression of the resentment of the people or of ‘popular’ politics. For populism to contribute to the understanding of political phenomena in advanced democracies, it is necessary to separate the destinies of simple contestation and the political elite, a strategy that can be associated with a wide range of political parties and movements which, however, do not perceive the «construction of the people» in the sense of an indivisible and ‘pure’ community<sup>34</sup>.

The followers of populists see organicism as an artificial construction that refers to the concept of «imagined community» where that image is the result of a fictionalised unitary whole that, in truth, conceals disconnected individualities. This social construction is at the basis of tangible practices of identification that ‘sacralise’ the people, providing a border that protects those who are ‘similar’ from those who are ‘different’, thereby undermining the very structure of democratic representation of a people comprising individuals counterposed based on legitimate interests and projecting the political dimension on an indivisible representation of the common good. The result is an organicism comparable to an artificial *Gemeinschaft*, politically constructed through the selective manipulation of the collective memory, leading to «a kind of coherent and integrated society, sometimes called the *Volk*, which has its roots in the past, imaginary or real, which is bound by a sense of fraternity and a desire for a certain kind of social equality and perhaps even freedom»<sup>35</sup>.

31 M. Rooduijn, *The Nucleus of Populism: In Search of the Lowest Common Denominator*, «Government and Opposition», 49, 2014, pp. 573-599: 578.

32 P. Panizza, *Introduction: Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, in F. Panizza (ed. by), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, Verso, London 2005, pp. 1-31: 3-4.

33 D. MacRae, *Populism as an Ideology*, in G. Ionescu, E. Gellner (ed. by), *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, Macmillan, New York 1969, pp. 153-165: 162.

34 J.-W. Müller, *What Is Populism?*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2016.

35 I. Berlin, *London School of Economics Conference on Populism*, May 20-21, 1967: Verbatim Report, HN 17 C74, pp. 7-8.

Not every appeal to the people from a plebiscitarian perspective is attributable to the populist dimension, just as not every form of opposition to the political establishment – even in terms of anti-partyism – can be identified as the reason for a new populist family. Appeals to the people vary according to the social, economic and political contexts in which they are made. They can be ethnic-nationalist, civic, collectivist or particularistic<sup>36</sup>. The different types of populism refer to conceptions of the people, which, from time to time, view the people as sovereign, as belonging to different classes, as a nation or as ‘underdogs’ or ‘everyman’. In this sense, the construction of a people/nation, founded on the idea of *ethnos*, refers to the politicisation launched by the populist parties of the new right, while the redefinition of the boundaries and contents of the people/class, from a post-Marxist perspective, characterises the populist parties of the new left<sup>37</sup>. Lastly, the mythicisation of the people (*dêmos*) leads to a sort of ‘civic populism’, a radicalisation of those counter-democratic powers substantiated by the power of surveillance, the power of interdiction and the ability to express an opinion on the work of the institutions by sovereign citizens represented as a collective whole with political subjectivity<sup>38</sup>.

The representation of populists is based on the ‘social reconfiguration’ of weak identities and fragmented social groups, whose fiction is represented by the ‘personification of a collectivity’ and the ‘re-creation of one people’<sup>39</sup>. The objective is the construction of a holistic vision of society, an “organic people” built politically through an identity that, to establish a perimeter of recognisability, requires a confrontation with an external enemy<sup>40</sup>. In this sense, a clash with the political establishment, the economic and financial establishment, the European institutions, immigrants and the intellectual elite arises according to a Manichaeic logic that places the morality of the people in conflict with the immorality of its antagonists. This politicisation has at its core the populist leader who acts as a new entrepreneur in the politics of distrust. Indeed, aside from the different possible

36 J. De Raadt, D. Hollanders, A. Krouwel, *Varieties of Populism: An Analysis of the Programmatic Character of Six European Parties*, Working Papers Political Science, No. 2004/04, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam 2004.

37 For E. Laclau (*La ragione populista*, cit., p. 169), populism becomes a form of politics that does not originate from a pre-established system of classes but corresponds to a political style that creates identities based on an «equivalential chain of unsatisfied demands», thanks to the ability of the leader to exercise a new hegemony and create a homogeneous people no longer identified with the concept of class. Laclau adopts a post-Marxist approach, meaning populism can be both subversive, with regard to the existing order, and able to reconstruct a new order, through a new «cultural hegemony» when the previous one is both in a state of political and institutional crisis.

38 P. Rosanvallon, *Le siècle du populisme: Histoire, théorie, critique*, Seuil, Paris 2020. A characteristic common to all these forms of politicisation of the people is that they differ from the function performed in political regimes since the ‘constituted people’ expressed through the procedural dialectic of delegative democracies is countered by a ‘constituent people’ that connotes forms of ‘democratic extremism’.

39 N. Urbinati, *Me the People. How Populism Transforms Democracy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA), 2019; P. Diehl, *Twisting representation*, in de la Torre C. (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism*, Routledge, London 2019, pp. 129-143.

40 C. de la Torre, *Introduction: Power to the People? Populism, Insurrections, Democratization*, in Id. (ed. by), *The Promise and Perils of Populism: Global Perspectives*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, pp. 1-28: 5.



declinations of the people, a common feature of the various forms of populism is the direct relationship between a leader and the people, where the leader does not represent a social group of reference but “creates the people of populism,” personifies its unity and gives substance to something without reality of its own, developed in the social body<sup>41</sup>. To become a political-electoral option, populism requires politicisation with sufficient anti-political sentiment; instead, action is needed to make the invisible visible, with a recognisable identity perimeter (that in itself is not present).

### 4. *The populist democratic paradox*

What emerges from the construction of the people and the politicisation of distrust by populism is closely linked to the problem of compatibility between the latter and democracy. The challenge posed by populism to representation and the traditional political system has been interpreted in terms of non-reconciliation between the democratic regime and the populist phenomenon<sup>42</sup> and, alternatively, as an objection within democracy itself, with connections, compatibility and potentially positive aspects ‘for’ and ‘in’ representative democracies<sup>43</sup>. As noted about the lack of the identity component of the parties, in the case of democracy, it is necessary to distinguish two components that contribute to defining the concept and its functions. On the one hand, democracy responds to the procedural logic of guaranteeing a political-electoral process and the functioning of the institutions (democracy as it is); on the other, it involves a part that prescribes an ideal form of politics and society to be achieved (democracy as a project)<sup>44</sup>. The “paradox of democracy” lies in the internal dynamics underpinning the co-existence of the principle of popular sovereignty, and therefore the power of the people-*dèmos*, and the protection of minority rights and the typically liberal procedural system of protecting citizens from the power of the majority. The tension between liberal constitutionalism and the reaffirmation of the will of the majority is at the basis of «faith politics» with a transmutation of the democratic principles of the majority<sup>45</sup>. This process constitutes the specific representative twist and the reformulation of the democratic project by populist leaders and parties at the moment when liberal democracy is stripped of its ideal component and identity to affirm its liberal proceduralism<sup>46</sup>.

41 B. Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, cit., p. 64.

42 K. Abts, S. Rummens, *Populism versus Democracy*, «Political Studies», 55, 2007, pp. 405-424.

43 C. Mudde, C.R. Kaltwasser, *Populism: corrective and threat to democracy*, in C. Mudde, C.R. Kaltwasser (eds.), *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012, pp. 205-222.

44 G. Sartori, *Elementi di teoria politica*, il Mulino, Bologna 1995.

45 N. Urbinati, *Me the People*, cit.

46 B. Ackerman, *Revolutionary Constitutions: Charismatic Leadership and the Rule of Law*, Belknap Press: Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2019; B. Bugarič, *Populist Constitutionalism – Between Democracy and Authoritarianism*, in M. Krygier, A. Czarnota, W. Sadurski (eds), *Anti-Constitutional Populism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2022, pp. 27-66.

The crisis of representation is favoured by the “emptying” of the generative component of identity and projects of “redemptive politics” of democracy itself<sup>47</sup>, assuming a form that mainly connotes it as an “institutional tool” to reach political decisions, thereby limiting free and competitive voting patterns. An imbalance in the components affects trust and consensus in parties characterised by the process of moving their centre of gravity from society to institutions, through the cartelised and self-referential closure of their political class and their becoming semi-state agencies. This is the framework in which populism is inserted as a project that reactivates a substantial component of democracy, whose legitimacy claim is based on the democratic ideology of popular sovereignty and the rule of the majority. Popular sovereignty becomes the political subjectivity of the organic community representing the people, and the opposition component focuses on all the structures of political mediation that constitute a limitation. The dissatisfaction felt towards the political establishment surfaces when democracy is unbalanced in its «constitutional pillar» and there are no actors articulating meaning and identity capable of restoring to democracy the component of the «political project of transformation of society». In other words, populism stems from a void of identity that in mass democracy was present, thanks to the legitimating function of party ideologies. Even the latter was a *fictio* in terms of representation, but the ideological element featured in the democratic-electoral conflict favoured integration in the political system. The conditions related to the emergence of populism also refer to modernisation, where the social foundations of democracy change with respect to the geography of the social constituencies of mass society and the crises of political mediation setups, with particular reference to the processes of personalisation of politics and the growing role of the media in political life. Populist movements, parties and leadership are fuelled by the lack of expression and efficiency of mass democracy and participation in ‘short democracy’ characterised by disintermediation, extreme simplification and radicalisation of the dichotomy between the people and the elite. This is a trend that, with different yet complementary outcomes, unites populism with the increased relevance of citizen groups and the introduction of participatory and deliberative practices. Indeed, democracy loses its character of a regulated space within which to exercise the pluralism of political judgment, effectively delegitimising its competitive characteristics with the depoliticisation of conflict arenas, on the one hand in the name of the indivisibility of the people’s interests, on the other in the name of the legitimating claim of the practices of deliberative democracy<sup>48</sup>.

If the relationship between populism and democracy is relevant in the ever-widening gap between party programmes and policies, in addition to their inability to represent the new cleavages in society, then the contradictions and tension present in democracy cannot come in second. Democracy brings with it a series of «unfulfilled promises» anchored on the tension between democracy as an ideal and democracy as a procedural realisation<sup>49</sup>. The unfulfilled promises of democracy include, as Bobbio points out, the persistent interests of conflicting plural

47 M. Canovan, *The People*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2005.

48 N. Urbinati, *Unpolitical Democracy*, «Political Theory», 38, 2010, pp. 65-92.

49 N. Bobbio, *Il futuro della democrazia*, Einaudi, Torino 1984; J.-W. Müller, *What Is Populism?*, cit.

social groups instead of a «monistic» people; the greater impact of the representation of interests instead of political representation; the vilification of the elite in a representative democracy; the persistence of social and political regulation in which democracy has failed to intervene and the role of invisible powers and the phenomenon of clientelism degeneration<sup>50</sup>.

Every historical reality and every social system implies a greater or lesser degree of broken promises. Thus, from what has been discussed so far, it is evident that democracy is not solely an institutional regime nor can it be merely identified as an electoral democracy. Regarding the question of whether populism is compatible with democracy, it is interesting to observe how the former constitutes a «politics of unpolitics»<sup>51</sup>. This specific paradox of populism involves balancing the depoliticisation of political institutions with the hyperpoliticisation of the people, emphasising their moral virtues in everyday life, far removed from the political elite. The successful rise of such a paradox, associated with the reshaping (or corrosion) of the democratic project, is made possible by the inherent tensions and contradictions within representative democracy. Populism activates the internal conflict within democracy, denying the traditional political establishment’s form of representation and transforming a ‘crisis of faith’ into a transversal and pre-ordered ‘political fracture’ compared to other societal divides. In this sense, populism acts as the «drunken guest at a dinner party», an uncomfortable presence “of” and “in” democracy. Accordingly, it underscores the need to rethink the connections between citizens and politics, the content of representation and the entire process of legitimising those in power<sup>52</sup>. In line with Arditì’s reasoning, populism “inhabits” the internal periphery of democracy. It disputes the traditional political classes (both government and opposition) but does not operate as an anti-system power like those parties whose ideologies predict a system other than democracy, whether representative or direct. Populism’s appeals to the people are not merely a direct, plebiscitary call to replace a government of parties with a party leader. They represent a moralistic vision of politics where the people are seen not as *a part representing the whole* but as an organic whole, making the majority an expression of the common good<sup>53</sup>. This is not merely a rhetorical or instrumental form of friend/enemy Manichaeism. The people of populism, the real and pure people, claim an exclusive moral representation in democracy. Consequently, populism is not only anti-elitist, similar to other political protests against the ruling elite but also anti-pluralist<sup>54</sup>, as it repudiates parties and the traditional political class as actors in a conflict that undermines the unity of the people. It is no coincidence that populism has been linked to political theology – understood as the mythicisation of the people according to secular concepts found in theology – used to sacralise the identity

50 N. Bobbio, *Il futuro della democrazia*, cit. pp. 7-8.

51 P. Taggart, *Populism*, cit.; Id., *Populism and ‘unpolitics’*, in G. Fitzì, J. Mackert, B.S. Turner (eds.), *Populism and the crisis of democracy*, Vol. 1, Routledge, London 2018, pp. 79-87.

52 B. Arditì, *Populism as an Internal Periphery of Democratic Politics*, in F. Panizza (ed. by), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, Verso, London 2005, pp. 72-98: 90-91.

53 J.-W. Müller, *What Is Populism?*, cit., p. 98.

54 C. Mudde, *The Populist Zeitgeist*, «Government and Opposition», 39, 2004, pp. 541-563: 543.

between people and sovereignty, with a totalising claim, even if not necessarily always attributable to an authoritarian project<sup>55</sup>. The relationship between populism and democracy is not an expression of an anti-system principle of opposition in the name of a totalitarian or dictatorial institutional project. The populist version of democracy acquires the connotation of ‘democratic illiberalism’, where the illiberal component challenges the traditional political establishment in the name of a single relevant cleavage: that between the elite and the people, the radicalisation of political conflict and the reaffirmation that the rule of the majority is more important than the rights of minorities.

### 5. *Concluding remarks: towards a populist corrosion of the character of democracy?*

Taking the concept of populism ‘seriously’ and not making it a catch-all category, thus avoiding redundancy with other social and political science concepts, means recognising that the political forms associated with populism represent a peculiar strategy of politicisation by ‘populist’ entrepreneurs. This is true regardless of whether the ‘populist’ label is a self-representation or an externally imposed form of stigma. If populism is primarily identified by its appeals to the people and discontent with the elite, we have observed that identifying the ‘people’ of populism is essential for three reasons. First, it refers to the disappearance of the ‘people’ created by the mass parties of the 20th century, ending the logic-based systems capable of ensuring integration and representation based on trust in both horizontal relations (among group members) and vertical relations (with the delegated political class). Second, it relates to the populists’ social construction of a people understood as an organic, imaginary community, shaped by the type of leader and party implementing the strategy and political style of politicisation and mobilisation<sup>56</sup>. Third, it concerns the relationship with democracy, where popular sovereignty is expressed as an affirmation of the rights of a majority that aspires to be identified as the ‘common good’ to the detriment of the liberal protection of minority rights, from the perspective of populist constitutionalism. The construction of a people according to a holistic vision distinguishes populism from other forms of contestation of the political establishment. Compared to protest parties, anti-party parties, anti-political establishment parties and anti-austerity parties, populism uses distrust and disintermediation to affirm a democracy in which conflict is avoided from a standpoint of anti-elitism and anti-pluralism. At the same time, populism cannot be compared to other prospects of weakening representative democracy, whether participatory, deliberative or an expression of the personalisation of politics and leadership in a leader democracy. Particularly, populism rises and develops as a means of dissolving the boundary between the personal and the political, pushing to «re-embody the body politics» for

55 J. Cohen, A. Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1992; A. Arato, *Political Theology and Populism*, in C. de la Torre (ed. by), *The Promise and Perils of Populism: Global Perspectives*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington 2015, pp. 31-58.

56 K. Weyland, *Democracy's Resilience to Populism's Threat*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2024.

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the sovereign people and relying on their unification through the leader<sup>57</sup>. Therefore, it is not a democracy that shifts from the relevance of collective actors to a direct relationship between voters and leaders with personalised parties but a particular form of plebiscitary democracy where directism supports a democracy potentially without parties and conflict – an illiberal democracy in which the pillar of popular sovereignty is separated from that of liberal constitutionalism, consisting of democratic, anti-democratic and counter-democratic tendencies<sup>58</sup>. The potentially dangerous aspects of democracy can be attributed to the denial of societal complexity, the imposition of majority rule in full, the stigmatisation of ‘others’ the leader’s concession to go ‘beyond the Constitution’ as a symbol and integral part of the people (and therefore not merely representative), the failure to articulate different interests and identities in society, and the depoliticisation of democracy through the hyper-politicisation of the people. However, in Western political systems, populism rises and develops within existing democratic institutions. It participates in elections (democratic proceduralism), takes the form of a party like other party models (movement parties, personal parties), contributes to public debate with issues previously excluded from the political agenda and highlights the absence of a new form of cleavage politics. In other words, populism raises and disturbs existing problems in representative democracies; indeed, it acts as a «reminder for the elite»<sup>59</sup>, reminding them of the lack of political integration in the democratic system. If in physics the principle states that “every void is filled,” then in politics the void between the lack of mass democracy, with its actors, places of power, identity and structures of mediation and the failure to reconfigure cleavage politics, is filled by populism, a phenomenon that needs to make a “crisis” permanent if it is to thrive.

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57 B. Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, cit., p. 64.

58 Id., *The Global Rise of Populism*, cit.; T.S. Pappas, *Populism and Liberal Democracy*, cit.

59 Y. Mény, Y. Surel, *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, cit., p. 15.