Introduction

Is Everyone a Populist?

No US election campaign in living memory has seen as many invocations of "populism" as the one unfolding in 2015–16. Both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders have been labelled "populists." The term is regularly used as a synonym for "antiestablishment," irrespective, it seems, of any particular political ideas; content, as opposed to attitude, simply doesn't seem to matter. The term is thus also primarily associated with particular moods and emotions: populists are "angry"; their voters are "frustrated" or suffer from "resentment." Similar claims are made about political leaders in Europe and their followers: Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders, for instance, are commonly referred to as populists. Both these politicians are clearly on the right. But, as with the Sanders phenomenon, left-wing insurgents are also labeled populists: there is Syriza in Greece, a left-wing alliance that came to power in January 2015, and Podemos in Spain, which shares with Syriza a fundamental opposition to Angela Merkel's austerity policies in response to the Eurocrisis. Both—especially Podemos—make a point of feeling inspired by what is commonly referred to as the "pink tide" in Latin America: the success of populist leaders such as Rafael Correa, Evo Morales, and, above all, Hugo Chávez. Yet what do all these political actors actually have in common? If we hold with Hannah Arendt that political judgment is the capacity

to draw proper distinctions, the widespread conflation of right and left when talking about populism should give us pause. Might the popularity of diagnosing all kinds of different phenomena as "populism" be a failure of political judgment?

This book starts with the observation that, for all the talk about populism—the Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev, one of the sharpest analysts of democratic life today, has even called our time an "Age of Populism"—it is far from obvious that we know what we are talking about.[1] We simply do not have anything like a *theory* of populism, and we seem to lack coherent criteria for deciding when political actors turn populist in some meaningful sense. After all, every politician—especially in poll-driven democracies—wants to appeal to "the people," all want to tell a story that can be understood by as many citizens as possible, all want to be sensitive to how "ordinary folks" think and, in particular, feel. Might a populist simply be a successful politician one doesn't like? Can the charge "populism" perhaps itself be populist? Or might, in the end, populism actually be "the authentic voice of democracy," as Christopher Lasch maintained?

This book seeks to help us recognize and deal with populism. It aims to do so in three ways. First, I want to give an account of what kind of political actor qualifies as populist. I argue that it is a necessary but not sufficient condition to be *critical of elites* in order to count as a populist. Otherwise, anyone criticizing the status quo in, for instance, Greece, Italy, or the United States would by definition be a populist—and, whatever else one thinks about Syriza, Beppe Grillo's insurgent Five Star Movement, or Sanders, for that matter, it's hard to deny that their attacks

on elites can often be justified. Also, virtually every presidential candidate in the United States would be a populist, if criticism of existing elites is all there is to populism: everyone, after all, runs "against Washington."

In addition to being antielitist, populists are always *antipluralist*. Populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people. Think, for instance, of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declaring at a party congress in defiance of his numerous domestic critics, "We are the people. Who are you?" Of course, he knew that his opponents were Turks, too. The claim to exclusive representation is not an empirical one; it is always distinctly *moral*. When running for office, populists portray their political competitors as part of the immoral, corrupt elite; when ruling, they refuse to recognize any opposition as legitimate. The populist logic also implies that whoever does not support populist parties might not be a proper part of the people—always defined as righteous and morally pure. Put simply, populists do not claim "We are the 99 percent." What they imply instead is "We are the 100 percent."

For populists, this equation always works out: any remainder can be dismissed as immoral and not properly a part of the people at all. That's another way of saying that populism is always *a form of identity politics* (though not all versions of identity politics are populist). What follows from this understanding of populism as an exclusionary form of identity politics is that populism tends to pose a danger to democracy. For democracy requires pluralism and the recognition that we need to find fair terms of living together as free, equal, but also irreducibly diverse citizens. The idea of the single, homogeneous, authentic people is a fantasy; as the philosopher Jürgen Habermas

once put it, "the people" can only appear in the plural. And it's a dangerous fantasy, because populists do not just thrive on conflict and encourage polarization; they also treat their political opponents as "enemies of the people" and seek to exclude them altogether.

This is not to say that all populists will send their enemies to a gulag or build walls along the country's borders, but neither is populism limited to harmless campaign rhetoric or a mere protest that burns out as soon as a populist wins power. Populists can govern as populists. This goes against the conventional wisdom, which holds that populist protest parties cancel themselves out once they win an election, since by definition one cannot protest against oneself in government. Populist governance exhibits three features: attempts to hijack the state apparatus, corruption and "mass clientelism" (trading material benefits or bureaucratic favors for political support by citizens who become the populists' "clients"), and efforts systematically to suppress civil society. Of course, many authoritarians will do similar things. The difference is that populists justify their conduct by claiming that they alone represent the people; this allows populists to avow their practices quite openly. It also explains why revelations of corruption rarely seem to hurt populist leaders (think of Erdoğan in Turkey or the far-right populist Jörg Haider in Austria). In the eyes of their followers, "they're doing it for us," the one authentic people. The second chapter of this volume shows how populists will even write constitutions (with Venezuela and Hungary serving as the most clear-cut examples). Contrary to the image of populist leaders preferring to be entirely unconstrained by relying on disorganized masses that they directly address

from the balcony of a presidential palace, populists in fact often want to create constraints, so long as they function in an entirely partisan fashion. Rather than serving as instruments to preserve pluralism, here constitutions serve to eliminate it.

The third chapter addresses some of the deeper causes of populism, in particular recent socioeconomic developments across the West. It also raises the question of how one can successfully respond to both populist politicians and their voters. I reject the paternalistic liberal attitude that effectively prescribes therapy for citizens "whose fears and anger have to be taken seriously" as well as the notion that mainstream actors should simply copy populist proposals. Neither is the other extreme of excluding populists from debate altogether a viable option, since it simply responds to the populist will to exclusion by excluding the populist. As an alternative, I suggest some specific political terms of how to confront populists.

More than a quarter of a century ago, a virtually unknown State Department official published a notorious and widely misunderstood article. The author was Francis Fukuyama and the title was, of course, "The End of History." It has long been a lazy way to establish one's intellectual sophistication to say with a sneer that obviously history did not end with the conclusion of the Cold War. But of course, Fukuyama had not predicted the end of all conflict. He had simply wagered that there were no more rivals to liberal democracy at the level of ideas. He conceded that here and there, other ideologies might enjoy support, but he nonetheless maintained that none of them would be capable of competing with liberal democracy's (and market capitalism's) global attractiveness.

Was he so obviously wrong? Radical Islamism is no serious ideological threat to liberalism. (Those who conjure up the specter of "Islamofascism" tell us more about their longing for clear-cut battle lines comparable to those that prevailed during the Cold War than they do about the political realities of the present.) What is now sometimes called "the China model" of state-controlled capitalism obviously inspires some as a new model of meritocracy, and perhaps none more so than those who consider themselves as having the greatest merit.[2] (Think Silicon Valley entrepreneurs.) It also inspires through its track record of lifting millions out of poverty—especially, but not only, in developing countries. Yet "democracy" remains the chief political prize, with authoritarian governments paying lobbyists and public relations experts enormous sums of money to ensure that they, too, are recognized by international organizations and Western elites as genuine democracies.

Yet all is not well for democracy. The danger to democracies today is not some comprehensive ideology that systematically denies democratic ideals. The danger is populism—a degraded form of democracy that promises to make good on democracy's highest ideals ("Let the people rule!"). The danger comes, in other words, from within the democratic world—the political actors posing the danger speak the language of democratic values. That the end result is a form of politics that is blatantly antidemocratic should trouble us all—and demonstrate the need for nuanced political judgment to help us determine precisely where democracy ends and populist peril begins.

Chapter 1

What Populists Say

"A spectre is haunting the world: populism."[1] Thus wrote Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner in the introduction to an edited volume on populism published in 1969. The book was based on papers delivered at a very large conference held at the London School of Economics in 1967, with the aim "to define populism." The many participants, it turned out, could not agree on such a definition. Yet reading the proceedings of the gathering can still be instructive. One cannot help thinking that then, just as today, all kinds of political anxieties get articulated in talk about "populism"—with the word *populism* being used for many political phenomena that appear at first sight to be mutually exclusive. Given that today we also don't seem to be able to agree on a definition, one might be tempted to ask, Is there a there there?

Back in the late 1960s, "populism" appeared in debates about decolonization, speculations concerning the future of "peasantism," and, perhaps most surprising from our vantage point at the beginning of the twenty-first century, discussions about the origins and likely developments of Communism in general and Maoism in particular. Today, especially in Europe, all kinds of anxieties—and, much less

often, hopes—also crystallize around the word *populism*. Put schematically, on the one hand, liberals seem to be worried about what they see as increasingly illiberal masses falling prey to populism, nationalism, and even outright xenophobia; theorists of democracy, on the other hand, are concerned about the rise of what they see as "liberal technocracy"—which is to say, "responsible governance" by an elite of experts that is consciously not responsive to the wishes of ordinary citizens.[2] Populism might then be what the Dutch social scientist Cas Mudde has called an "illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism." Populism is seen as a threat but also as a potential corrective for a politics that has somehow become too distant from "the people."[3] There might be something to the striking image Benjamin Arditi has proposed to capture the relationship between populism and democracy. Populism, according to Arditi, resembles a drunken guest at a dinner party: he's not respecting table manners, he is rude, he might even start "flirting with the wives of other guests." But he might also be blurting out the truth about a liberal democracy that has become forgetful about its founding ideal of popular sovereignty.[4]

In the United States, the word *populism* remains mostly associated with the idea of a genuine *egalitarian* left-wing politics in potential conflict with the stances of a Democratic Party that, in the eyes of populist critics, has become too centrist or, echoing the discussion in Europe, has been captured by and for technocrats (or, even worse, "plutocrats"). After all, it is in particular the defenders of "Main Street" against "Wall Street" who are lauded (or loathed) as populists. This is the case even when they are established politicians, such as New York

City mayor Bill de Blasio and Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren. In the United States, it is common to hear people speak of "liberal populism," whereas that expression in Europe would be a blatant contradiction, given the different understandings of *both* liberalism and populism on the two sides of the Atlantic.[5] As is well known, "liberal" means something like "Social Democratic" in North America, and "populism" suggests an uncompromising version of it; in Europe, by contrast, populism can never be combined with liberalism, if one means by the latter something like a respect for pluralism and an understanding of democracy as necessarily involving checks and balances (and, in general, constraints on the popular will).

As if these different political usages of the same word were not already confusing enough, matters have been further complicated by the rise of new movements in the wake of the financial crisis, in particular the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street. Both have variously been described as populist, to the extent that even a coalition between right-wing and left-wing forces critical of mainstream politics has been suggested, with "populism" as the potential common denominator. This curious sense of symmetry has only been reinforced by the ways in which the 2016 presidential contest has widely been described in the media: Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders are supposedly both populists, with one on the right and the other one on the left. Both, we are frequently told, have at least in common that they are "antiestablishment insurgents" propelled by the "anger," "frustration," or "resentment" of citizens.

Populism is obviously a politically contested concept.[6] Professional politicians themselves know the stakes of the battle over its meaning. In Europe, for instance,

ostensible "establishment figures" are eager to tag their opponents as populists. But some of those labeled as populists have gone on the counterattack. They have proudly claimed the label for themselves with the argument that, if populism means working for the people, then they are indeed populists. How are we to judge such claims, and how should we draw distinctions between real populists and those who are merely branded as populists (and perhaps others who are never called populists, never call themselves populists, and yet still might be populists)? Are we not facing complete conceptual chaos, as almost anything—left, right, democratic, antidemocratic, liberal, illiberal—can be called populist, and populism can be viewed as both friend and foe of democracy?

How to proceed, then? In this chapter, I take three steps. First, I try to show why several common approaches to understanding populism in fact lead down dead ends: a social-psychological perspective focused on voters' feelings; a sociological analysis fixated on certain classes; and an assessment of the quality of policy proposals can all be somewhat helpful in understanding populism, but they do not properly delineate what populism is and how it might differ from other phenomena. (Nor is it helpful to listen to the self-descriptions of political actors, as if one automatically becomes a populist simply by using the term.) In place of these approaches, I will follow a different path to understanding populism.[7]

Populism, I argue, is not anything like a codified doctrine, but it is a set of distinct claims and has what one might call an inner logic. When that logic is examined, one discovers that populism is not a useful corrective for a democracy that somehow has come to be too

"elite-driven," as many observers hold. The image according to which liberal democracy involves a balance where we can choose to have a little bit more liberalism or a little bit more democracy is fundamentally misleading. To be sure, democracies can legitimately differ on questions such as the possibility and frequency of referenda or the power of judges to invalidate laws overwhelmingly passed in a legislature. But the notion that we move closer to democracy by pitting a "silent majority," which supposedly is being ignored by elites, against elected politician is not just an illusion; it is a politically pernicious thought. In that sense, I believe that a proper grasp of populism also helps deepen our understanding of democracy. Populism is something like a permanent shadow of modern representative democracy, and a constant peril. Becoming aware of its character can help us see the distinctive features—and, to some degree, also the shortcomings—of the democracies we actually live in.[8]

Understanding Populism: Dead Ends

The notion of populism as somehow "progressive" or "grassroots" is largely an American (North, Central, and South) phenomenon. In Europe, one finds a different historically conditioned preconception of populism. There populism is connected, primarily by liberal commentators, with irresponsible policies or various forms of political pandering ("demagoguery" and "populism" are often used interchangeably). As Ralf Dahrendorf once put it, populism is simple; democracy is complex.[9] More particularly, there is a long-standing association of "populism"

with the accumulation of public debt—an association that has also dominated recent discussions of parties like Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, which are classified by many European commentators as instances of "left-wing populism."

Populism is also frequently identified with a particular class, especially the petty bourgeoisie and, until peasants and farmers disappeared from the European and the American political imaginations (ca. 1979, I'd say), those engaged in cultivating the land. This can seem like a sociologically robust theory (classes are constructs, of course, but they can be empirically specified in fairly precise ways). This approach usually comes with an additional set of criteria drawn from social psychology: those espousing populist claims publicly and, in particular, those casting ballots for populist parties, are said to be driven by "fears" (of modernization, globalization, etc.) or feelings of "anger," "frustration," and "resentment."

Finally, there is a tendency among historians and social scientists—in both Europe and the United States—to say that populism is best specified by examining what parties and movements that at some point in the past have called themselves "populists" have in common. One can then read the relevant features of the "-ism" in question off the self-descriptions of the relevant historical actors.

In my view, none of these perspectives or seemingly straightforward empirical criteria is helpful for conceptualizing populism. Given how widespread these perspectives are—and how often seemingly empirical and neutral diagnoses such as "lower-middle class" and "resentment" are deployed without much thinking—I want to spell out my objections in some detail.

First of all, when examining the quality of policies, it's hard to deny that some policies justified with reference to "the people" really can turn out to have been irresponsible: those deciding on such policies did not think hard enough; they failed to gather all the relevant evidence; or, most plausibly, their knowledge of the likely long-term consequences should have made them refrain from policies with only short-term electoral benefits for themselves. One does not have to be a neoliberal technocrat to judge some policies as plainly irrational. Think of Hugo Chávez's hapless successor as president of Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro, who sought to fight inflation by sending soldiers into electronics stores and having them put stickers with lower prices on products. (Maduro's preferred theory of inflation came down to "parasites of the bourgeoisie" as the main cause.) Or think of the French Front National, which in the 1970s and 1980s put up posters saying "Two Million Unemployed Is Two Million Immigrants Too Many!" The equation was so simple that everyone could solve it and seemingly figure out with *bon sens* what the correct policy solution had to be.

Still, we cannot generate a criterion for what constitutes populism this way. For in most areas of public life, there simply is no absolutely clear, uncontested line between responsibility and irresponsibility. Often enough, charges of irresponsibility are themselves highly partisan (and the irresponsible policies most frequently denounced almost always benefit the worst-off).[10] In any case, making a political debate a matter of "responsible" versus "irresponsible" poses the question, Responsible according to which values or larger commitments?[11] Free trade agreements—to take an obvious

example—can be responsible in light of a commitment to maximizing overall GDP and yet have distributional consequences that one might find unacceptable in light of other values. The debate then has to be about the value commitments of a society as a whole, or perhaps about the different income distributions that follows from different economic theories. Setting up a distinction between populism and responsible policies only obscures the real issues at stake. It can also be an all-too-convenient way to discredit criticism of certain policies.

Focusing on particular socioeconomic groups as the main supporters of populism is no less misleading. It is also empirically dubious, as a number of studies have shown.[12] Less obviously, such an argument often results from a largely discredited set of assumptions from modernization theory. It is true that in many cases, voters who support what might initially be called populist parties share a certain income and educational profile: especially in Europe, those who vote for what are commonly referred to as right-wing populist parties make less and are less educated. (They are also overwhelmingly male—a finding that holds for the United States as well, but not for Latin America.)[13] Yet this picture is by no means always true. As the German social scientist Karin Priester has shown, economically successful citizens often adopt an essentially Social Darwinist attitude and justify their support for right-wing parties by asking, in effect, "I have made it—why can't they?" (Think of the Tea Party placard demanding "Redistribute My Work Ethic!")[14] Not least, in some countries such as France and Austria, populist parties have become so large that they effectively resemble what used to be called

"catch-all parties": they attract a large number of workers, but their voters also come from many other walks of life.

A number of surveys have shown that one's personal socioeconomic situation and support for right-wing populist parties often do not correlate at all, because the latter is based on a much more general assessment of the situation of one's country.[15] It would be misleading to reduce perceptions of national decline or danger ("Elites are robbing us of our own country!") to personal fears or "status anxiety." Many supporters of populist parties actually pride themselves on doing their own thinking (even their own research) about the political situation and deny that their stances are just about them or are driven merely by emotions.[16]

One should be very careful indeed about using such loaded terms as "frustration," "anger," and especially "resentment" to explain populism. There are at least two reasons for this. First, while commentators invoking a term like *resentment* might not be rehearsing Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morality* in the back of their minds, it is hard to see how one could entirely avoid certain connotations of *ressentiment*. Those suffering from resentment are by definition weak, even if in Nietzsche's analysis those consumed by resentment can become creative, with the cleverest among the weak vanquishing the strong by reordering the rank of human values. The resentful are nonetheless defined by their inferiority and their *reactive* character.[17] They feel bad about the strong and bottle up that feeling; their self-understanding is thus fundamentally dependent on the strong, as they ultimately long for proper recognition by the superior. In that sense, the resentful are always incapable of anything like autonomous

conduct. They have to keep lying to themselves about their own actual condition, even if they can never quite believe their own lies. As Max Scheler put it, resentment leads humans slowly to poison their own souls.[18]

Now, maybe one really believes that this is actually true of all people who wear baseball caps emblazoned with the slogan "Make America Great Again." Or that those who vote for populist parties always have authoritarian personalities or perhaps what social psychologists call "low agreeable personalities."[19] But one should at least face up to the political consequences of such psychologizing diagnoses—namely, that they end up confirming those people's view of "liberal elites" as being not just deeply condescending but also constitutively unable to live up to their own democratic ideals by failing to take ordinary people at their word, preferring instead to prescribe political therapy as a cure for fearful and resentful citizens. The simple fact is that "anger" and "frustration" might not always be very articulate—but they are also not "just emotions" in the sense of being completely divorced from thought. There are *reasons* for anger and frustration, which most people can actually spell out in some form or other.[20] This is not to say, of course, that all these reasons are plausible and should just be accepted at face value; the feeling of having been wronged or sentiments that "the country has been taken away from us" are certainly not self-validating. But simply to shift the discussion to social psychology (and treat the angry and frustrated as potential patients for a political sanatorium) is to neglect a basic democratic duty to engage in reasoning. Here seemingly enlightened liberals appear to be repeating the very exclusionary gestures of some of their illustrious nineteenth-century predecessors who were wary

of extending the franchise because the masses were "too emotional" to exercise the vote responsibly.

Now, even if one were to conclude that nothing should prevent elites from criticizing the value commitments of ordinary citizens, it is still rather peculiar to conflate the content of a set of political beliefs with the socioeconomic positions and the psychological states of its supporters. This is like saying that the best way to understand Social Democracy is to redescribe its voters as workers envious of rich people. The profile of supporters of populism obviously matters in how we think about the phenomenon. But it is not just patronizing to explain the entire phenomenon as an inarticulate political expression on the part of the supposed "losers in the process of modernization." It is also not really an explanation.

Then why do so many of us keep resorting to it? Because consciously or unconsciously, we continue to draw on a set of assumptions derived from modernization theory that had its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s. This is true even of many political theorists and social scientists who, if asked, would say they consider modernization theory to be thoroughly discredited. It was liberal intellectuals like Daniel Bell, Edward Shils, and Seymour Martin Lipset (all heirs of Max Weber) who in the course of the 1950s began to describe what they considered to be "populism" as a helpless articulation of anxieties and anger by those longing for a simpler, "premodern" life.[21] Lipset, for instance, claimed that populism was attractive for "the disgruntled and the psychologically homeless, . . . the personal failures, the socially isolated, the economically insecure, the uneducated, unsophisticated, and authoritarian personalities."[22] The immediate targets of these social theorists were McCarthyism and the John Birch

Society—but their diagnosis often extended to the original American populist revolt of the late nineteenth century. Victor C. Ferkiss, for instance, saw the followers of the Farmer's Alliance and the People's Party as nothing less than the precursors of a distinct American variety of fascism.[23] This thesis was not to remain uncontested—but the background assumptions are still present among many social and political commentators today.[24]

Finally, there is the thought that populism must have something to do with those who first called themselves populists. Think of the Russian *narodniki* in the late nineteenth century and their ideology of *Narodnichestvo*, which is usually translated as "populism." The *narodniki* were intellectuals who idealized the Russian peasants and saw the village commune as a political model for the country as a whole. They also advocated "going to the people" for political advice and guidance. (Like many urban intellectuals, they found that "the people" neither welcomed them in the ways they had hoped nor recognized the political prescriptions deduced from their supposedly "pure ways of life" by intellectuals.)

For many observers, there simply has to be a reason something called "populism" emerged simultaneously in Russia and the United States toward the end of the nineteenth century. The fact that both movements had something to do with farmers and peasants gave rise to the notion—prevalent at least until the 1970s—that populism had a close connection to agrarianism or that it was necessarily a revolt of reactionary, economically backward groups in rapidly modernizing societies.

While that association is largely lost today, the origins of "populism" in the United States in particular still

suggests to many observers that populism must at least on some level be "popular" in the sense of favoring the least advantaged or bringing the excluded into politics—a sense that is reinforced by a glance at Latin America, where the advocates of populism have always stressed its inclusionary and emancipatory character in what remains the most economically unequal continent on the globe.

To be sure, one cannot simply by fiat ban such associations: historical languages are what they are and, as Nietzsche taught us, only that which has no history can be defined. But political and social theory also cannot simply root itself in one particular historical experience—with, for example, every form of populism presumed to fit the template of the American People's Party.[25] We have to allow for the possibility that a plausible understanding of populism will in fact end up excluding historical movements and actors who explicitly called themselves populists. With very few exceptions, historians (or political theorists, to the extent that they care about such historical phenomena) would not argue that a proper understanding of socialism needs to make room for National Socialism just because the Nazis called themselves socialists. But then, to decide which historical experience really fits a particular "-ism," we must of course have a theory of that particular "-ism." So what is populism?

The Logic of Populism

Populism, I suggest, is a particular *moralistic imagination of politics*, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified—but, I shall

argue, ultimately fictional—people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior.[26] It is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to be critical of elites in order to qualify as a populist. Otherwise, anyone criticizing the powerful and the status quo in any country would by definition be a populist. In addition to being antielitist, populists are always antipluralist: populists claim that they, *and only they*, represent the people.[27] Other political competitors are just part of the immoral, corrupt elite, or so populists say, while not having power themselves; when in government, they will not recognize anything like a legitimate opposition. The populist core claim also implies that whoever does not really support populist parties might not be part of the proper people to begin with. In the words of the French philosopher Claude Lefort, the supposedly real people first has to be "extracted" from the sum total of actual citizens.[28] This ideal people is then presumed to be morally pure and unerring in its will.

Populism arises with the introduction of representative democracy; it is its shadow. Populists hanker after what the political theorist Nancy Rosenblum has called "holism": the notion that the polity should no longer be split and the idea that it's possible for the people to be one and—all of them—to have one true representative.[29] The core claim of populism is thus a moralized form of antipluralism. Political actors not committed to this claim are simply not populists.[30] Populism requires a *pars pro toto* argument and a claim to exclusive representation, with both understood in a moral, as opposed to empirical, sense.[31] There can be no populism, in other words, without someone speaking in the name of the people as a whole.

Think of George Wallace's infamous statement upon his inauguration as governor of Alabama: "In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny . . . and I say . . . segregation now . . . segregation tomorrow . . . segregation forever."[32] Segregation did not last forever, but what Wallace said about it tarnished his reputation forever; it was clearly racism. Yet the rhetoric that revealed Wallace to be a populist centered on his claim exclusively to speak "in the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth." What exactly gave the governor of Alabama the right to speak in the name of all Americans—minus, evidently, the proponents of "tyranny," which meant, of course, the Kennedy administration and everyone else who was working to end segregation? And what allowed him, furthermore, to claim that the "real America" was what he called "the Great Anglo-Saxon Southland"?[33] Clearly, everything good and authentic in the United States was Southern, or so it seemed when Wallace exclaimed, "And you native sons and daughters of old New England's rock-ribbed patriotism . . . and you sturdy natives of the great mid-West . . . and you descendants of the far West flaming spirit of pioneer freedom . . . we invite you to come and be with us . . . for you are of the Southern mind . . . and the Southern spirit . . . and the Southern philosophy . . . you are Southerners too and brothers with us in our fight." Toward the end of the address, Wallace claimed that virtually all Founding Fathers had been Southerners.[34]

This is the core claim of populism: only some of the people are really the people. Think of Nigel Farage celebrating the Brexit vote by claiming that it had been a

"victory for real people" (thus making the 48 percent of the British electorate who had opposed taking the UK out of the European Union somehow less than real—or, put more directly, questioning their status as proper members of the political community). Or consider a remark by Donald Trump that went virtually unnoticed, given the frequency with which the New York billionaire has made outrageous and deeply offensive statements. At a campaign rally in May, Trump announced that "the only important thing is the unification of the people—because the other people don't mean anything."[35]

Since Greek and Roman times, "the people" has been used in at least three senses: first, the people as the whole (which is to say, all members of the polity, or what used to be called "the body politic"); second, the "common people" (the part of the res publica made up of commoners, or in modern terms: the excluded, the downtrodden, and the forgotten); and, third, the nation as a whole, understood in a distinctly cultural sense.[36]

It is plainly inadequate to say that all appeals to "the people" qualify as populism. An idealization of the people (think of Bakunin saying "the people is the only source of moral truth . . . and I have in mind the scoundrel, the dregs, uncontaminated by bourgeois civilization") would not necessarily be populism, though the Russian *narodniki* in the late nineteenth century understood populism in precisely this way. Less obviously, advocacy for "the common people" or the excluded—even if it involves an explicit criticism of elites—is also insufficient evidence of populism. For a political actor or movement to be populist, it must claim that a *part* of the people *is* the people—and that only the populist authentically identifies and

represents this real or true people. Put in terms derived from ancient Rome, fighting for the interests of the *plebs*, "the common people," is *not* populism, but saying that only the *plebs* (as opposed to the patrician class, never mind the slaves) is the *populus Romanus*—and that only a particular kind of *populares* properly represents the authentic people—*is* populism. In the same vein, in Machiavelli's Florence, fighting for the *popolo* against the *grandi* would not automatically be populism, but saying that the *grandi* do not belong in Florence, no matter what they say or do, *would* be populism.

Populists themselves often conceive of political morality in terms of work and corruption. This has led some observers to associate populism with a distinct ideology of "producerism."[37] Populists pit the pure, innocent, always hardworking people against a corrupt elite who do not really work (other than to further their self-interest) and, in right-wing populism, also against the very bottom of society (those who also do not really work and live like parasites off the work of others). In American history, think of the way followers of Andrew Jackson opposed both "aristocrats" at the top and Native Americans and slaves below them.[38] Right-wing populists also typically claim to discern a symbiotic relationship between an elite that does not truly belong and marginal groups that are also distinct from the people. In the twentieth-century United States, these groups were usually liberal elites on the one hand and racial minorities on the other. The controversy over Barack Obama's birth certificate made this logic almost ridiculously obvious and literal: at one and the same time, the president managed to embody in the eyes of right-wingers both the "bicoastal elite"

and the African American Other, neither of which really belongs to the United States proper. This helps explain the extraordinary obsession of the "birthers" with proving that Obama was not just symbolically an *illegitimate* office holder but plainly an *illegal* one—an "un-American" figure who had usurped the nation's highest office under false pretenses. (This obsession went far beyond the tendency of right-wingers during the 1990s to term Bill Clinton "your president"—though the basic impulse to cast the chief executive as fundamentally illegitimate was similar.)[39] One might also think of post-Communist elites and ethnic groups such as the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe, or "Communists" and illegal immigrants (according to Silvio Berlusconi) in Italy. In the former case, the liberal post-Communist elites do not properly belong, as they collude with outside powers such as the European Union and espouse beliefs alien to the true homeland, while the Roma—Europe's most discriminated minority—has no proper place in the nation to begin with. The far-right populist Jobbik party in Hungary, for instance, always analogizes "politician crime" and "gypsy crime."[40]

The moralistic conception of politics advanced by populists clearly depends on some criterion for distinguishing the moral and the immoral, the pure and the corrupt, the people who matter, in Trump's parlance, and those "who don't mean anything." But the distinction does not have to be work and its opposite. If "work" turns out to be indeterminate, ethnic markers can readily come to the rescue. (Of course, racist thought often equates race and laziness without having to make that equation explicit: nobody ever imagines welfare queens to be white.) Still, it's a mistake to think that populism will always turn out

to be a form of nationalism or ethnic chauvinism. There are a variety of ways for a populist to distinguish moral and immoral. What will always need to be present is *some* distinction between the morally pure people and their opponents. This assumption of the noble people also then distinguishes populists from other political actors who are antipluralists. For instance, Leninists and highly intolerant religious actors do not think of the people as morally pure and unerring in its will. Not everyone who rejects pluralism is a populist.

Just What Exactly Do Populists Claim to Represent?

Contrary to conventional wisdom, populists do not have to be against the idea of representation as such; rather, they can positively endorse a particular version of it. Populists are fine with representation, as long as the right representatives represent the right people to make the right judgment and consequently do the right thing.

Apart from determining who really belongs to the people, populists therefore need to say something about the content of what the authentic people actually want. What they usually suggest is that there is a singular common good, that the people can discern and will it, and that a politician or a party (or, less plausibly, a movement) can unambiguously implement it as policy.[41] In this sense, as Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser have pointed out in their important work on empirical cases of populism, populist always sounds at least somewhat "Rousseauean," even if there are also important differences between populism and Rousseau's democratic thought, to

which I'll turn in a moment.[42] Moreover, the emphasis on a singular common good that is clearly comprehensible to common sense and capable of being articulated as a singularly correct policy that can be collectively willed at least partly explains why populism is so often associated with the idea of an oversimplification of policy challenges.[43] Hungary's right-wing populist leader Viktor Orbán, for instance, did not participate in debates before the 2010 and 2014 elections (both of which he went on to win). He explained his refusal to debate as follows:

> No policy-specific debates are needed now, the alternatives in front of us are obvious [. . .] I am sure you have seen what happens when a tree falls over a road and many people gather around it. Here you always have two kinds of people. Those who have great ideas how to remove the tree, and share with others their wonderful theories, and give advice. Others simply realize that the best is to start pulling the tree from the road. . . . [W]e need to understand that for rebuilding the economy it is not theories that are needed but rather thirty robust lads who start working to implement what we all know needs to be done.[44]

Here Orbán equates the correct policy with what common sense can easily discern. What needs to be done is obvious; no debate about values or weighing of empirical evidence is required.

Except that it is required. We have already seen how, for populists, there cannot be such a thing as legitimate competition when populists run for office—hence slogans such as "*Abbasso tutti!*" ("Down with them all!"),

"*¡Que se vayan todos!*" ("Everyone out!"), *Qu'ils s'en aillent tous!* ("Let them all go!"), or Beppe Grillo's "V-Days" ("V" stood for *vaffanculo* [fuck off]). When they are in power, there is likewise no such thing as a legitimate opposition. But then, if they are the only legitimate representatives of the people, how can it be that populists aren't in power already? And how could anyone be against them once they have attained power? Here a crucial aspect of populists' understanding of political representation comes into play: while it can sound as if they espouse a notion of a democratic representation of the popular *will*, they actually rely on a *symbolic* representation of the "real people" (as in the notion of "real Americans," a beloved term of George Wallace). For them, "the people themselves" is a fictional entity outside existing democratic procedures, a homogeneous and morally unified body whose alleged will can be played off against actual election results in democracies. It is not an accident that Richard Nixon's famous (or infamous) notion of a "silent majority" has had such an illustrious career among populists: if the majority were not silent, it would already have a government that truly represented it.[45] If the populist politician fails at the polls, it is not because he or she does not represent the people, but because the majority has not yet dared to speak. As long they are in opposition, populists will always invoke an uninstitutionalized people "out there"—in existential opposition to officeholders who have been authorized by an actual election, or even just opinion polls, which fail to reflect what populists see as the true popular will.

Such a notion of "the people" beyond all political forms and formation was influentially theorized by the right-wing legal theorist Carl Schmitt during the interwar period. His

work, together with that of Fascist philosopher Giovanni Gentile, served as a conceptual bridge from democracy to nondemocracy when they claimed that fascism could more faithfully realize and instantiate democratic ideals than democracy itself.[46] Conversely, an opponent of Schmitt such as the Austrian jurist (and democratic theorist) Hans Kelsen insisted that the will of parliament was not the popular will; and that something like an unambiguous popular will was in fact impossible to discern. All we could verify were election outcomes, and everything else, according to Kelsen (in particular an organic unity of "the people" from which some interest above parties could be inferred), amounted to a "metapolitical illusion."[47]

The term *illusion* is justified here. For the whole people can never be grasped and represented—not least because it never remains the same, not even for a minute: citizens die, new citizens are born. Yet it is always tempting to claim that one can actually know the people as such.[48] Robespierre made it easy for himself when he said that he simply was the people (in a sense that follows the logic of the kings whom the French Revolution had deposed). It is telling that the French revolutionaries never found a satisfactory way symbolically to represent the principle of popular sovereignty: the whole people could not appear as such, and particular symbols, such as the Phrygian cap, a crowned youth, or Hercules, clearly failed to convince. Jacques-Louis David wanted to erect a giant statue of "the people" on the Pont Neuf; the foundations were to be made of shattered royal monuments, and the bronze of the statue was supposed to have been furnished by the melted canons of the "enemies of the people." (The plans were approved, but only a model was constructed.) The supposedly most important actor of

the revolution—the sovereign people—became the "Yahweh of the French," which is to say, utterly unrepresentable. (Only the word could be shown: at revolutionary festivals, flags bearing citations from Rousseau's *Social Contract* were to be carried around.)[49]

As it happens, we are also in a position now to clarify the major difference between populist representation of the people and Rousseau's general will. The formation of the latter requires actual participation by citizens; the populist, on the other hand, can divine the proper will of the people on the basis of what it means, for instance, to be a "real American." More *Volksgeist*, if you like, than *volonté générale*—a conception of democracy in which "substance," "spirit," or, put more straightforwardly, "true identity" decides, and not the larger number. What might initially have looked like a claim by populists to represent the will turns out to be a claim to represent something like a symbolic substance.

Yet, one might object, don't populists often demand more referenda? Yes. But one needs to be clear about what the meaning of a referendum for populists really is. They do not want people to participate continuously in politics. A referendum isn't meant to start an open-ended process of deliberation among actual citizens to generate a range of well-considered popular judgments; rather, the referendum serves to ratify what the populist leader has already discerned to be the genuine popular interest as a matter of identity, not as a matter of aggregating empirically verifiable interests. Populism without participation is an entirely coherent proposition. In fact, populists are not even inherently antielitist, if one takes the latter to mean that power should always be as widely dispersed as

possible. As mentioned above, populists have no problem with representation as long as they are the representatives; similarly, they are fine with elites as long as they are the elites leading the people. Hence it is naïve to think that one has scored a decisive point against a figure like Trump if one points out that he is in fact part of the existing elite (albeit not the political elite in a narrow sense); the same is true of businessmen-turned-politicians in Europe, such as the Swiss populist Christoph Blocher. They know that they are part of the elite, and so do their supporters; what matters is their promise that as a proper elite, they will not betray the people's trust and will in fact faithfully execute the people's unambiguously articulated political agenda.

It is thus no accident that populists in power (about whom I have to say more in the next chapter) often adopt a kind of "caretaker" attitude toward an essentially passive people. Think of Berlusconi's reign in Italy: the ideal was for a Berlusconi supporter comfortably to sit at home, watch TV (preferably the channels owned by Berlusconi), and leave matters of state to the *Cavaliere*, who would successfully govern the country like a very large business corporation (which was sometimes called *azienda Italia*). There was no need to enter the piazza and participate. Or think of the second Orbán government in Hungary, from 2010 onward, which crafted a supposedly authentic national constitution (after some sham process of "national consultation" by questionnaire) but felt no need to put that constitution to a popular vote.

We are also in a better position now to understand why populists often conclude "contracts" with "the people" (the deeply populist Swiss People's Party has done so, as did Berlusconi and Haider; in the United States, some might

remember Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America").[50] Populists assume that "the people" can speak with one voice and issue something like an imperative mandate that tells politicians exactly what they have to do in government (as opposed to a free mandate, according to which representatives have to use their own judgment). Thus there is no real need for debate, let alone the messy back-and-forth of deliberating in Congress or other national assemblies. The populists have always already been the faithful spokespersons of the real people and worked out the terms of the contract. Yet the fact is that the imperative mandate has not really come from the people at all; its supposedly detailed instructions are based on an interpretation by populist politicians. Political scientists have long argued that a completely coherent, single "popular will" is a fantasy[51] and that no one can credibly claim, as Juan Perón used to do, that "the political leader is the one who does what the people want."[52] What is less obvious is that pretending that there is such a will also weakens democratic accountability. Populists can always turn back to the people and say, "We implemented exactly want you wanted, you authorized us; if anything goes wrong, it's not our fault." By contrast, a free mandate, as opposed to an imperative one, puts the burden on representatives to justify how they used their political judgment, when election time—that is to say, time for accountability—comes around. Populists like to suggest that a free mandate is somehow undemocratic; the opposite is true, and it is not an accident that democratic constitutions that specify an understanding of representatives' role opt for a free, and not an imperative, mandate.

Principled, moralized antipluralism and the reliance on a noninstitutionalized notion of "the people" also helps

explain why populists so frequently oppose the "morally correct" outcome of a vote to the actual empirical result of an election, when the latter was not in their favor. Think of Victor Orbán claiming, after losing the 2002 Hungarian elections, that "the nation cannot be in opposition"; or of Andrés Manuel López Obrador arguing, after his failed bid for the Mexican presidency in 2006, that "the victory of the right is morally impossible" (and declaring himself "the legitimate president of Mexico");[53] or of Tea Party Patriots claiming that the president who won a majority of the vote is "governing against the majority."[54] Then there is the example of Geert Wilders, who has called the Dutch *Tweede Kamer* a "fake parliament" with "fake politicians." And then, finally, there is Donald Trump reacting to every loss in the primaries with the charge that his opponents were committing fraud, as well as his preemptive claim that the entire system—including the Republican National Convention itself—is "rigged." In short, the problem is never the populist's imperfect capacity to represent the people's will; rather, it's always the institutions that somehow produce the wrong outcomes. So even if they look properly democratic, there must be something going on behind the scenes that allows corrupt elites to continue to betray the people. Conspiracy theories are thus not a curious addition to populist rhetoric; they are rooted in and emerge from the very logic of populism itself.

Populist Leadership

At first sight, many populist leaders seem to confirm the expectation that they are "just like us," that they are "men

(or even women) of the people." But then some leaders clearly don't fit that description. Donald Trump surely is not "just like us" in all kinds of ways; in fact, it might seem that the real populist leader is exactly the opposite of "us"—which is to say, ordinary. He or she must be charismatic, for one thing, which means endowed with extraordinary gifts. So which is it? Was Hugo Chávez just an average person? Or was he somehow special because he was "a little of all of you," as he liked to put it?

At first sight, it might appear that the basic logic of representation through the mechanism of election also applies to populists: one chooses a populist politician because of his or her *superior* capacity to discern the common good, as judged by the people.[55] This is no different from the general understanding of elections according to which the vote helps us get "the best" into office (a notion that has led some observers to argue that elections always contain an aristocratic element; if we really believed that all citizens were equal, we would employ lotteries to fill offices, just as was the case in ancient Athens).[56] The person elected might seem more likely to discern the common good because he or she shares important features with us, but this is not necessary. In any case, nobody can be "identical" with us, strictly speaking. Even "Joe the Plumber" is in a sense special because he is more ordinary than anyone.[57]

A clue to how populist leadership actually operates might be the election slogans of the Austrian far-right populist politician Heinz-Christian Strache (successor to Jörg Haider as chairman of Austrian Freedom Party): "*ER will, was WIR wollen*" ("HE wants what WE want"), which is not quite the same as "He is like you." Or another

one: "*Er sagt, was Wien denkt*" ("He says, what Vienna thinks"), not "He says (or is), what Vienna is." Or, to evoke a fictional politician from a completely different part of the world, "My study is the heart of the people," which is Willie Stark's slogan in *All the King's Men* (the greatest novel on populism ever written, based loosely on Huey Long's career in Louisiana).

The leader correctly discerns what we correctly think, and sometimes he might just think the correct thing a little bit before we do. This, I would venture, is the meaning of Donald Trump's frequent imperatives issued on Twitter to "THINK!" or "GET SMART!" All this does not depend on charisma; neither does it rely on being an outsider in politics. Of course, it's more credible to run against existing elites if one isn't obviously one of them. Yet there are certainly cases where populists are clearly identifiable as nothing but career politicians: Geert Wilders and Viktor Orbán, for instance, have spent their entire adult lives within parliaments. It does not seem to have hurt their standing as populists.

But in what ways exactly do they claim to represent and also "lead" us? If the analysis presented earlier is accurate, "symbolically correct" representation matters here, too. It's not that the leader has to be particularly charismatic personally. But he or she has to provide a sense of a direct connection with the "substance" of the people and, even better, with every single individual. This is why Chávez's campaigns featured slogans such as "*¡Chávez es Pueblo!*" ("Chávez is the people!") and "*¡Chávez somos millones, tú también eres Chávez!*" ("Chávez we are millions, you are also Chávez!"). And after his death, people came together around the new imperative "*Seamos como Chávez*" ("Let's be like Chávez").

The leader does not have to "embody" the people, as statements such as "Indira is India, and India is Indira" might suggest. But a sense of direct connection and identification needs to be there. Populists always want to cut out the middleman, so to speak, and to rely as little as possible on complex party organizations as intermediaries between citizens and politicians. The same is true of wanting to be done with journalists: the media is routinely accused by populists of "mediating," which, as the very word indicates, is what they are actually supposed to do, but which is seen by populists as somehow distorting political reality. Nadia Urbinati has coined the useful, if at first sight paradoxical, concept of "direct representation" for this phenomenon.[58] A perfect example is Beppe Grillo and his Five Star Movement in Italy, which literally grew out of Grillo's blog. The ordinary Italian can check out what is really going on through direct access to Grillo's website, provide some input online, and then also come to identify with Grillo as the only authentic representative of the Italian people. As Grillo himself explained, "Folks, it works like this: You let me know, and I play the amplifier."[59] When the *grillini*—as Grillo's followers are called—finally entered parliament, Gianroberto Casaleggio, Grillo's strategist and Internet impresario, explained that "Italian public opinion" itself had at last arrived in parliament.[60]

Arguably, Donald Trump's Twitter account has had a similar lure in the 2016 presidential campaign: "real Americans" can be done with the media and have direct access (or, rather, the illusion of direct contact with) a man who is not just a celebrity; the self-declared "Hemingway of 140 characters" uniquely tells it like it is. Everything that liberals from Montesquieu and Tocqueville onward once

lauded as moderating influences—what they called intermediate institutions—disappears here in favor of Urbinati's "direct representation." In the same way, everything that might contradict what we are already thinking is silenced in the echo chamber of the Internet. The web (and a leader like Trump) always have an answer—and, amazingly, it always happens to be the one we were expecting.

Principled antipluralism and the commitment to "direct representation" explain another feature of populist politics that is often commented on in isolation. I refer to the fact that populist parties are almost always internally monolithic, with the rank-and-file clearly subordinated to a single leader (or, less often, a group of leaders). Now, "internal democracy" of political parties—which some constitutions actually take to be a litmus test for democracy and hence the legitimacy (and, ultimately, legality) of parties—can be a bit of a pious hope. Many parties still are what Max Weber said they were: machines for selecting and electing leaders or, at best, arenas for personality-driven micropolitics as opposed to a forum for reasoned debate. While this is a general tendency of parties, populist parties are particularly prone to internal authoritarianism. If there is only one common good and only one way to represent it faithfully (as opposed to a self-consciously partisan but also self-consciously fallible interpretation of what the common good might be), then disagreement within the party that claims to be the sole legitimate representative of the common good obviously cannot be permissible.[61] And if there is only one "symbolically correct" representation of the real people—the understanding on which populists always fall back, as we have seen—then there's also not much point in debating that.

Geert Wilders's *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) is an extreme example. This is not just metaphorically a one-man-party; Wilders controls everything and everyone. Initially, Wilders and his chief intellectual Martin Bosma did not even want to establish a political party but a foundation. This proved legally impossible, but the PVV today operates as a party with exactly two members: Wilders himself and a foundation, *Stichting Groep Wilders*, with (one might have guessed it) once again Wilders as the only member.[62] The members of the PVV in parliament are merely delegates (and are extensively coached by Wilders every Saturday on how to present themselves and how to do their legislative work).[63] Something similar is true of Grillo. He is not just the "amplifier," as he pretends. He exercises central control over "his" parliamentary deputies and expels from the movement those who dare to disagree with him.[64]

Now, in practice, populists have compromised here and there, entered coalitions, and moderated their absolute claim to a unique representation of the people. But it would be wrong to conclude from this that they are, after all, just like all the other parties. There is a reason they want to be a "front" (as in Front National), a "movement," or indeed a foundation.[65] A party is just a part (of the people), whereas populists put forward the claim to stand for the whole, without remainder.

In practice, it is also clear that the content of the "correct symbolic representation" of the people can change over time even within the same party. Think of the Front National (FN). Under founder Jean-Marie Le Pen, the party was initially a rallying point for right-wing extremists, monarchists, and especially those who could not

accept France's loss of Algeria in the 1960s. More recently, Le Pen's daughter Marine has dropped the historical revisionism of her father (who infamously called the gas chambers a "historical detail"), and tried to present her party as the last defender of French republican values against the twin threats of Islam and Eurozone economic dictatorship by Germany. Every second Sunday in May, the FN holds a rally at the statue of Jeanne d'Arc in the first district of Paris, symbolically rededicating itself to French independence and what it construes as authentic French popular sovereignty. Times have changed, and so have the ways in which "the real people" can be evoked through specifying the main enemies of *la République*.

Such transformations can be effected more easily if the central symbolic statement of the populists is virtually empty. What does "Make America Great Again" actually mean, other than that the people have been betrayed by elites and that anybody who opposes Trump must also somehow be against "American Greatness"? What did George Wallace's "Stand Up for America" (the national version of his successful slogan "Stand Up for Alabama") signify, other than that the United States was being victimized and that anyone critical of Wallace automatically failed to defend America?

One More Time: Isn't Everyone a Populist, Then?

As we have seen, populism is a distinctly moral way to imagine the political world and necessarily involves a claim to exclusive moral representation. Of course, it's not just populists who talk about morality; all political discourse is

shot through with moral claims, just as virtually all political actors make what Michael Saward has called "the representative claim."[66] At the same time, few political actors go around saying, "We are just a faction; we just represent special interests." Even fewer would admit that their opponents might be just as right as they are; the logic of political competition and differentiation makes that impossible. What distinguishes democratic politicians from populists is that the former make representative claims in the form of something like hypotheses that can be empirically disproven on the basis of the actual results of regular procedures and institutions like elections.[67] Or, as Paulina Ochoa Espejo has argued, democrats make claims about the people that are self-limiting and are conceived of as fallible.[68] In some sense, they'd have to subscribe to Beckett's famous words in *Worstward Ho*: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

Populists, by contrast, will persist with their representative claim no matter what; because their claim is of a moral and symbolic—not an empirical—nature, it cannot be disproven. When in opposition, populists are bound to cast doubt on the institutions that produce the "morally wrong" outcomes. Hence they can accurately be described as "enemies of institutions"—although not of institutions in general. They are merely the enemies of mechanisms of representation that fail to vindicate their claim to exclusive moral representation.

Nonpopulist politicians do not propose in rousing speeches to speak merely for a faction (though some do; at least in Europe, party names often indicate that the parties in question only really mean to represent a particular clientele, such as smallholders or Christians). Nor do

run-of-the-mill democratic politicians necessarily subscribe to a high-minded ethics according to which, beyond all our partisan differences, we are engaged in a common project of perfecting the political community's foundational political values.[69] But most *would* concede that representation is temporary and fallible, that contrary opinions are legitimate, that society cannot be represented without remainder, and that it is impossible for one party or politicians permanently to represent an authentic people apart from democratic procedures and forms. Which means that they implicitly accept a basic claim that was clearly articulated by Habermas: "the people" appear only in the plural.[70]

To summarize, populism is not a matter of a specific psychological cast, a particular class, or simplistic policies. Neither is it just a question of style. Yes, George Wallace made a point of wearing cheap suits and telling Americans that he "put ketchup on everything." Yes, some populists test the limits of how rude one can be in a debate (or about the host of a debate). But it doesn't follow, as some social scientists hold, that we can simply and safely identify populists by their "bad manners."[71] Populism is not just any mobilization strategy that appeals to "the people";[72] it employs a very specific kind of language. Populists do not just criticize elites; they also claim that they and only they represent the true people. Whether someone speaks that language or not isn't a matter of subjective impressions. Scholars such as Keith Hawkins have systematically identified elements of populist language and even quantified its occurrence in different countries.[73] One can therefore also meaningfully speak of degrees of populism. The main point is that this populist rhetoric can be pinned down. The next question is what happens when populists put their ideas into practice.

Chapter 2

What Populists Do, or Populism in Power

One might be tempted to conclude by now that populists live in a kind of political fantasy world: they imagine an opposition between corrupt elites and a morally pure, homogeneous people that can do no wrong; they play a symbolic representation of that people off against sordid political realities where populists do not yet rule. Aren't such fantasies bound to fail?

Conventional wisdom has it that populist parties are primarily protest parties and that protest cannot govern, since one cannot protest against oneself (and, once political actors have become an elite in power, it will simply prove impossible for them to perpetuate an antielitist stance).[1] Finally, there's the notion that populists, when they reach office, will somehow lose their nimbus; charisma will be used up and "disenchanted" in everyday parliamentary routines. Returning to an earlier (in my view, flawed) definition of populism, one might think that the simplistic prescriptions of populists will also quickly be exposed as unworkable. Antipolitics cannot generate real policies.

The notion that populists in power are bound to fail one way or another is comforting. It's also an illusion. For