***The fifth cleavage. Genealogy of the populist ideology and parties***

**Contents**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **1.** | **Populism: a thin-centered ideology with strong cultural roots** |
|  | 1.1.  The communicational approach |
|  | 1.2.  The political-strategic approach |
|  | 1.3.  The ideational approach |
|  | 1.4. Populism: a thin-centred ideology with strong cultural roots |
|  | 1.5.  The organicistic root |
|  | 1.6.  The Rousseauian root |
|  |  |
| **2.** | **The explanations of the phenomenon: populism, democracy, and the rise of populist parties** |
|  | 2.1. Populism and democracy |
|  | 2.2. The conducive conditions of populism and populist parties |
|  | *2.2.1. The supply-side conditions* |
|  | *2.2.2 The demand-side conditions* |
|  | 2.3. In search of new cleavages |
|  |  |
| **3.** | **The fifth cleavage** |
|  | 3.1. One cleavage, many cleavages? |
|  | 3.2. The cleavage theory of Rokkan and Lipset |
|  | 3.3. The people |
|  | 3.4. The collective identity of the people |
|  | 3.5. The political organization of the collective identities |
|  | 3.6. Foundational populism |
|  | *3.6.1 The Russian Narodniks* |
|  | *3.6.2. The People’s Party* |
|  | *3.6.3. Boulangism* |
|  | 3.7. The consolidated populism |
|  | *3.7.1. Vargas* |
|  | *3.7.2. Peronism* |
|  | *3.7.3. Poujadism* |
|  | 3.8. The multifaceted populism |
|  | *3.8.1. Nationalist populism* |
|  | *3.8.2. Latin American neo-populism* |
|  | *3.8.3. European radical left populism* |
|  | *3.8.4. Populism neither leftist nor rightist* |
|  |  |
| **4.** | **The dark side of populism: from anti-liberal configuration to populist plutocracy** |
|  | 4.1. Populism and democracy: participation and anti-systemic configurations |
|  | 4.2. The populist plutocracy: a short introduction |
|  | 4.3. For a history of the thought on plutocracy |
|  | 4.4. Plutocracy, demagogic plutocracy, and populist plutocracy |
|  | 4.5. Berlusconi |
|  | 4.6. Thaksin |
|  | 4.7. Trump |
|  | 4.8. The three leaders and the populist plutocracy |

**1 - Populism: a thin-centered ideology with strong cultural roots**

Usually, any work on populism starts highlighting the substantial ambiguity, slippery, “chameleontic” nature of the concept of populism, and soon after it tries to identify, on the basis of “good reasons”, the most promising definition of populism and/or approach in studying it. Sometimes, behind these “good reasons” it is possible to find the specific scholar’s field of study, that affects the preference towards one or the other perspectives: media scholars, for instance, mostly tend to adopt a communicational approach, whereas political scientists and sociologists embrace other kind of approaches. Other times, but fortunately less and less, the adoption of a certain perspective is considered in a sharp contrast with the other ones, and any attempt to bridge the gap between them is doomed to fail.

This study does not avoid to specify our own understanding of populism too. Meanwhile, we believe that each different approach to populism means to see, to represent, and also to construct the same phenomenon from different points of view, that are not necessarily in opposition to each other; after all, the disagreement among scholars mainly pertains to the categories which should be used to describe the phenomenon, rather than to its constituents (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014). Therefore, if distinguishing the core of the concept of populism constitutes an indispensable task for every researcher involved in the topic, the alternative ways of conceptualizing populism are best viewed as complementary rather than competing to this core notion (Kriesi, 2018).

Even if nowadays the scholarly production on populism is increasingly flourishing[[1]](#footnote-1), and consequently many different notions of populism have been put forward, three main definitions or conceptual approaches can be detected: the communicational approach, the political-strategic approach, and the ideational approach (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2004). Each of these approaches is mostly embodied by the thesis of a specific author, namely Benjamin Moffitt (2016; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014) for the communicational approach, Kurt Weyland (2001, 2017) for the political-strategic approach, and Cas Mudde (2004; 2017a; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013) for the ideational approach. However, in this study we will refer to the works of other authors too.

* 1. ***The communicational approach***

The communicational approach is probably the one that has more rapidly and largely developed in recent times.

As Moffitt argues drawing on the thesis of Ulrich Beck and John Keane, both the reflexivity modernity and the age of communicative abundance have deeply transformed the shape of the political (Moffitt 2016). On the one hand, the increasing erosion of the established or mainstream politics, characterized by the weakening of the ideological cleavages, of the politics’ class character, as well as of the bonds between the citizens and the traditional parties, has led the communicational styles and repertoires to assume a greater importance as markers of the political experience. On the other, the growing mediatization of politics has made the politicians’ performances and images more and more important; the political leaders have become pseudo-celebrities, and the political events draw the audience’s attention not so much on their content, as on their stylistic features. Furthermore, the mediatization of politics implies a simplification of the political discourses, that means constantly employing an antagonistic “we” vs “them” logic and proposing solutions through captivating slogans.

The acknowledgment of the salience of these communicational and political changes represents the necessary premises for the development of the communicational approach, within which the concept of populism is actually perceived in many different ways: as a set of rhetorical patterns, as a political discourse, as a political or a political communication style, and so on.

One of the former and renowned scholar of populism, namely Margaret Canovan, for instance, defines it as «a rhetorical style which relies heavily upon appeals to the people» (Canovan, 1984: 313). In a later work, after clarifying that the structural feature of populism lies on an appeal to the people against the political and cultural establishment, she adds that this appeal is expressed through a specific political style and a specific mood. The populist style is based on the use of a simple and direct language, and on the proposal of simple and direct solutions; the populist mood is characterized by a revivalist flavor, and by the aim to achieve a great renewal or to save one’s own country (Canovan, 1999).

In a similar way, Pierre-André Taguieff considers populism as «a political style, one capable of manipulating a whole range of symbolic material and of taking root in a number of different ideological positions (…), as a set of rhetorical operations, deployed through the symbolic use of a number of social representations» (Taguieff, 1997: IV; see also Taguieff, 2002). According to him, populism can therefore assume different ideological nuances; furthermore, the gesture of the appeal to the people, on which populism is based on, implies previous clarification and agreement on what the “people” means, on what they are worth, and on what they would aspire to.

Within the communicational approach one cannot forget to mention the figures of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who, in their earlier works, conceive populism at least in part as a political discourse. Indeed, they maintain that populism is a type of discourse where the popular-democratic interpellations prevail ad are articulated in a specific form, that is a synthetic antagonistic complex in regard to the ideology of the dominant classes. In other words, the relation of antagonism between “the people” and “the powerful” can be constructed only within a certain discursive framework; the characteristics that compose the signifier “the people” become the elements of a chain of equivalences in which they share among them only the antagonistic relation itself (Laclau, 1977; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

Instead, Jan Jagers and Stefaan Walgrave (2007), following the suggestions of Canovan and Taguieff, consider populism as a political communication style, defined also as a communication frame, or as a master frame, or as conspicuous exhibition of closeness to the ordinary citizens, or even as a strategy, a standard communication technique to mobilise support.

The two scholars are among the first to notice how this style includes both form and content features. Indeed, on the one hand the populist style implies using an informal and colloquial language, and dressing in informal way; on the other, it always refers to the people, it manifests anti-elite sentiments, and it conceives the people as a monolithic group. Given that the content peculiarities are more relevant than the formal ones, Jagers and Walgrave think that the three aforementioned elements constitute what defines populism: «a political style essentially displaying proximity of the people, while at the same time taking an anti-establishment stance and stressing the (ideal) homogeneity of the people by excluding specific population segments» (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007: 319).

The authors clarify that many different political actors, that is politicians, political parties, movements leaders, interest groups representatives, and journalists, may adopt a populist communication style. The latter can assume four different forms, depending on how many and which content elements it includes: *complete populism* comprises reference and appeals to the people, anti-elitism, and exclusion of out-groups; *excluding populism* comprises only references and appeals to the people and exclusion of out-groups; *anti-elitist populism*, instead, comprises reference and appeals to the people and anti-elitism; and finally, *empty populism* comprises only reference and appeals to the people.

Although interesting and accurate, the aforementioned studies dwell only on the purely communicative and rhetorical elements of the political style. They also, and above all, neither explain clearly what a political style really is, nor enlighten why populism, though holding a significant ideational element (its content features), cannot be considered as an ideology.

A significant step forward in examining in depth this questions is taken by Moffit (2016) and Moffit and Tormey (2014).

First of all, basing on the works of Frank Ankersmith, Robert Hariman, and Dick Pels, Moffitt defines the political style as «the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life» (Moffitt, 2016: 46). According to the author, this conception has the merit to avoid the usual opposition between content – what it is said – and style – how it is said – on which many approaches to the political style rest: in the political realm, style and content are indeed often deeply interconnected between them, given that sometimes the style contributes to produce content, while other times the content contributes to produce style. Furthermore, it is able to include both rhetoric features (written and spoken language, argumentation and modes of expression) and aesthetic ones (images, fashion, self-presentation, and so on).

Subsequently, Moffitt turns to focus on the populist political style, and identifies three components of it: the appeal to “the people”; the perception of a state of crisis, breakdown, or threat; the use of bad manners.

The scholar insights into the first components are of extreme interest, mostly because they shed light on the performative dimension of the populist style. After having observed that “the people” to whom the populists refer cannot include all the citizens of a community, Moffitt emphasizes that the populists’ appeal does not have only the effect to assure them a larger consensus, but also, ad above all, that of bringing a subject called “the people” into being. The populist messages, in other words, aim at constructing a new, common social identity among the citizens, who begin to feel a sense of belonging to an imagined community, and to unify with each other. In this regard, Carsten Reinemann and others state that «communicatively constructing or priming a specific sense of social identity seems to be at the very heart of populism» (Reinemann et al., 2017:19).

The appeal to “the people” involves the ideas that “the people” are the true holders of sovereignty and that there is a persistent opposition between “the people” and “the others”. Moreover, this appeal, as already said, is located within a context of perceived crisis, that requires decisive and immediate actions, and that foster the use of simple and direct language, as well as of bad manners, that is folksy and coarse practices, tastes and ways of speaking, what Pierre Ostiguy defines as the “flaunting of the ‘low’” (Ostiguy, 2009; 2017).

Finally, Moffitt dwells on the reasons why populism cannot be considered as an ideology. He argues that even if a political style can be linked to a specific ideology, neither the first is a function of the latter, nor they are mutually dependent on each other. A typical example could be that of the communist ideology, that promoted many different political style, from the magnificent and impressive styles of Stalin to the ascetic and modest ones of Lenin or Luxembourg. He also acknowledges, as we have already seen, that populism includes some ideational elements; but he believes that these elements are too thin, too scrawny to form what we intend today for ideology, even in its possible thin-centered version (see below). In short, they become part of a political style, but not of an ideology.

The question here at issue is of undoubted interest and very controversial. Many authors, as most of those previously quoted, think that the characteristics of populism do not absolutely permit to define it as an ideology; it rather represents, as seen, a specific type of political style. Other scholars, on the contrary, claim that the populist political style, forms of communication, and so on, constitute an expression of an underlying populist ideology. Others again pinpoint that there is no direct connection between the two, which implies a possible merely strategic use of the populist forms of communication.

Claes H. de Vreese and others, for instance, after having define populism as a communication phenomenon, state that «populist ideas must be communicated discursively to achieve the communicator’s goals and the intended effects on the audience (…) populism can be understood as a discursive manifestation of a thin-centered ideology (…) as an ideology that is articulated discursively by political actors and media actors» (de Vreese et al., 2018: 425).

Reinemann and others conceive populism both as a form of political communication and as a set of ideas, as a thin-centered ideology; they also add that «political actors, the media, and citizens have ideologies, motives, goals, and attitudes that provide the starting point and lay the groundwork for the communicative acts in which populist elements can be empirically detected» (Reinemann et al., 2017: 13-14).

And Werner Wirth and others propose to combine the three distinct approaches to populism – communicational, political-strategic, and ideational – in order to empirically analyse populism in the political communication realm; but they stress at once: «To account for the manifold manifestations of the concept we will – following other authors – tentatively define populism as ‘a distinct set of political ideas’ (…). Thereby, we are aiming at a definition of populism as a ‘thin’ ideology» (Wirth et al., 2016: 7).

From the perspective outlined by these scholar, populism would represent, first of all, an ideology which includes the beliefs previously highlighted by Jagers and Walgrave: the appeal to “the people”, the anti-elite claims, and the out-groups exclusion. Clearly, any ideology does not represent a manifest entity that can be directly observed and detected. It instead reveals itself through communication acts and discourses, as well as through the implementation of specific policies. This implies to focus on the communicative tools and patterns used to share the populist ideas, on the populist messages, that become as relevant as the same populist ideas, and that have to be intended as independent phenomena in themselves.

The populist communication comprises, as mentioned before, a content/strategical dimension and a form/stylistic one. The first refers to the public communication of the central components of the populist ideology through a characteristic set of crucial messages and frames. The idea of the existence of a monolithic people, for instance, has to be translated in the populist communication into the statements that explicitly refer to the monolithic people, that define these people, and that emphasizes their virtues and wisdom. The second pertains to the ways in which the content is presented. As Wirth and others point out (2016), the populists claims to be close to the people or to take care of them are often combined with colloquial and emotional language, simplification, and dressing informally; the belief in an opposition between “the people” and the elite may join together a black and withe or absolutist rhetoric; to remark upon the severity of the conditions generated by the decision of a malevolent elite, the populist actors may resort to dramatization and scandalization; and finally, the demands to restore the popular sovereignty may be connected with references to the wisdom of the common man, the virtue of the common sense, and the actual simplicity of decisions (on this topics see also Bracciale and Martella, 2017, and de Vreese, 2018).

As Wirth and others highlight (2016), these communication styles, that is the form/stylistic dimension of the populist communication, are not always linked to the populist ideology, because they usually perform other functions within a discourse: to reinforce the content of a message, making it more interesting and appealing; to underline the urgency of a declaration or the seriousness of a situation; etc. This means that the non-populist actors can apply these communication styles too, in order to enhance the messages’ persuasiveness and attractiveness. Therefore, the populist styles cannot be included among the components that define the concept of populism, and they do not indicate the presence of any populist ideology.

Actually, also the content dimension of the populist communication can be exploited for strategical and tactical purposes, so fostering a possible detachment between the populist ideology and the populist strategies and forms of communication. Reinemann, for instance, highlights that the *empty populism* is something typical of the established, non-populist actors, whose reference to the people is nothing but a strategy to mobilize voters (Reinemann, 2017); but that does not deny the possible tactical employ of the content of the other types of populism. It can be therefore concluded that some «rhetorical figures and means of presentation common among populists may be employed by a politician to mimic, to a certain degree, the external appearance of populism without sharing its inner meaning», and that populist communication is applicable «not only to thoroughbred populist actors but also to those who employ it only in a superficial, hollowed-out manner» (Wirth et al., 2016: 39-40).

* 1. ***The political-strategic approach***

The political-strategic approach is particularly widespread in the studies of Latin American populism. It usually differs with respect to the aspect of the political strategy on which the aforementioned studies focus on: the policy choices, the forms of mobilization, or the political organization (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2004).

The salience of the first aspect is stressed by Raúl L. Madrid (2008) and Daron Acemoglu and others (2011). Indeed, Madrid argues that populism combines economic policies aimed at the economic redistribution and the natural resources’ nationalization with repertoires of mass mobilization based on antiestablishment and anti-system appeals. In a similar vein, Acemoglu and others maintain that populism consists in the implementation of redistribution policies that are backed by a large part of the population. Even if these policies represent signals through which the populist leaders seek to gain the median voters, they ultimately do not benefit the latter.

According to many authors, this perspective is not able to explain the different forms that populism can assume over time, especially with reference to the different policies – protectionist vs. neo-liberal – it can promote. It is then more convenient to embrace other perspectives, such as the one that focuses on the forms of mobilization.

In this regard, Kenneth M. Roberts, argues that populism «refers to the top-down political mobilization of mass constituencies by personalistic leaders who challenge established elites (either political or economic) on behalf of an ill-defined pueblo, or “the people”» (Roberts, 2010: 4; see also Levitsky and Roberts, 2011). And Robert S. Jansen (2011) conceptualizes populism as a mode of political practice – as populist mobilization. The latter consists in «any sustained, large-scale political project that mobilizes ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people» (Jansen, 2011: 82).

As previously highlighted, Weyland is the author that, more than others, embodies the political-strategic approach – with particular reference to the political organization aspect. In one of his earlier work on populism (Weyland, 2001), he argues that one of the unavoidable preliminary task in studying populism is to define the domain of the concept. Here the alternative choices available for any scholar are between an economic and a political definition. According to him, the first kind of definition is not satisfactory, because on the one hand it permits to classify under the same label leaders with opposite characteristics – for instance Juan Perón, Alan Garcia, José Sarney, and Salvador Allende – and, on the other, it does not clarify if the populist expansionary economic policies, considered by the most of the technician as irresponsible and damaging, are the result of aware choices or of external constraints. Instead, the political definition, which locates populism in the sphere of domination, does not show similar shortcomings. In this vein, Weyland thinks that the best approach of studying populism is the strategical one, that allows to analyses the phenomenon under investigation taking into consideration not so much what the populists say as what they do, mostly with regard to how to achieve and to hold on power (Weyland, 2001 and 2017).

A political strategy consists in the methods and instruments used in order to get and to exercise power, and to make decisions provided with authority. It can assume different forms, depending on the type of political actor who seeks and exercises power, and on the type of the power capability the actor mobilizes to ensure himself the grass roots support. Three different types of political actors – individual leaders, informal groups, and formal organization – and two different types of power capabilities – number and special weight – can be distinguished.

With respect to the political actors, Weyland argues that «the clear predominance of a powerful leader is a cornerstone of populism» (Weyland, 2017:56). Populism, in his view, rests on a personalistic leader who seeks to enhance his power and his autonomy to the detriment of the political parties and the other political intermediaries and actors, and who fights against an established elite, standing above it. Populism, he adds, is «fully personalistic», is based on the whims of the leader – who has the sole aim of maximizing the votes – and is therefore «pragmatic and opportunistic» (Weyland, 2017: 50).

As for the power capabilities, the scholar stresses that populism rests on the strength of number, and that it makes a constant effort to mobilize “the people”, conceived as the majority of population. Therefore, populism does not admit that specific social sectors may count more than others; and consequently, it contrasts the elitist measures that tend to achieve this goal, and that threaten, in this way, the principle of political equality.

The presence of both a personalistic leader and a people that is substantially amorphous and extremely differentiated within itself, ensures that the relationship between the leaders and his follower assume a quasi-direct, personal character, as well as also anti-intermediation stances. As Weyland notes, this relationship represents the «core of populism», the «central axis of the concept» (Weyland, 2017: 50 and 59).

From all these considerations derive the definition of populism as «a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstituzionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers» (Weyland, 2017: 50). The leader, who very often is a charismatic one, manages to get this support by representing “the people” who feel excluded from the political and social life and by promising to protect them from adversities. He appeals to “the people” in order to involve them in his project of subverting a malevolent elite, of contrasting the corrupted and inefficient institutions, of triggering a radical change.

The aforementioned definition, as the same Weyland admits, is not particularly inclusive – and that is considered by the author as a merit – especially if it is applied to the European political context, characterized by the predominance of political parties with established organizational frameworks and well defined manifestos. Indeed, many European radical rightist parties often classified by the literature as populist, in the scholar perspective are not considered as such, given that they are both heavily institutionalised, and run by leader who has ideology and not opportunism as beacon.

If in the study published in 2001 Weyland argued that the concept of populism had to be applied in a clear-cut way, and that it was then possible to clearly distinguish the cases that were part of its extension from those which were not encompassed in it, in the next works he becomes aware of the limitations of this procedure, which is not able to depict a reality that is too much blurred, manifold, and changing, to be subsumed in such strict categories (Weyland, 2017). For this reason, referring to the fuzzy-set approach developed by Charles C. Ragin, he considers worthwhile to adopt a gradational concept of populism, that allows to consider as populists also those leaders who combine a strategy based on opportunism and on direct contact with the masses, with ideological references and/or fairly well-organized, program-oriented parties that however do not constrain the personal leadership. Leaders, parties, and strategies can be so distinguished in: fully populists – it is the case, for instance, of Fujimori, Chavez, Collor, and Correa in Latin America, and of Berlusconi and Fortuyn in Europe –; predominantly populists – Menem and, to a much lesser extent, Morales in Latin America, Papandreou, Iglesias, Haider, and Marine Le Pen in Europe –; and non-populists – Lula da Silva, Bachelet, and Vázquez in Latin America, Jean-Marie Le Pen in Europe.

* 1. ***The ideational approach***

The ideational approach is probably the most widespread in the field. It conceives populism as a set of ideas that represents politics as a Manichean struggle between the will of the people and a conspiring elite. These ideas, that manifest themselves through the leaders’ rhetoric and appeals, result in specific behaviors and policies, and furthermore impel people to mobilize and to uphold populist parties and movements. Differently from a number of earlier work on populism that do not denies the relevance of populist ideas, this approach devotes large attention to the content and the causal properties of these ideas, and consider them as the key feature of populist forces (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019; see also Hawkins, 2009 and Mudde, 2017a).

In defining this set of ideas, a number of scholars do not consider it appropriate to resort to the term ideology, and prefer to use other terms. Marco Tarchi, for instance, considers populism as «a mentality, a *forma mentis*, connected to a vision of social order based upon a belief in the innate virtue and primacy of “the people” as the legitimating source of all political and governmental action» (Tarchi, 2008: 85; see also Tarchi, 2016)[[2]](#footnote-2). Other scholars, instead, do not hesitate to explicitly define populism as an ideology. This is the case of Mudde (2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013), one of the most prominent and internationally renowned expert in the field, but also of Hans-Georg Betz and Carol Johnson (2004), Ben Stanley (2008), Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnel (2008), and others again.

Drawing on the works of Michael Freeden (1996; 1998), some of the just mentioned scholars agree in considering populism a specific type of ideology, that is a thin-centred ideology.

Adopting a morphological approach, Freeden argues that the ideologies consist in configurations, or cluster of *decontested* – that means made not controversial – meanings of political concepts[[3]](#footnote-3), which form distinct and coherent ideational, interpretive frameworks. The older, established ideologies – conservatism, liberalism, and socialism – are comprehensive and “full” ones, because they «have been overarching, inclusive networks of ideas that have offered solutions, deliberately or by default, to all the important political issues confronting a society» (Freeden, 2003: 78). It has however to be acknowledged that not all the ideologies, such as, for instance, feminism, green political thought, and nationalism, are comprehensive. For Freeden, the most appropriate term to define them is that of “thin ideologies”. A thin ideology, he highlights, «is one that, like mainstream ideologies, has an identifiable morphology but, unlike mainstream ideologies, a restricted one. It severs itself from wider ideational contexts by deliberately removing or replacing many concepts we would expect an ideology to include. It does not embrace the full range of questions that the macro-ideologies do, and is limited in its ambitions and scope» (Freeden, 2003: 98). A thin ideology emanates from single-issue or at most double-issue viewpoints; moreover, it is unable to stand alone, and therefore it generally needs to cohabit with other full ideologies. Finally, it do not have neither any master or outstanding thinker – such as Mill, Marx, or Freud – to refer to, nor any sacred text to be inspired by.

According to Mudde and Stanley, populism exhibits all the characteristics a thin-centred ideology requires. It is indeed based on a small number of core concepts, shows a narrow morphology and decreased internal integration; it is not being able to provide either a framework for “decoding” and “interpreting” the social world nor answers to the political requests that stem from civil society; it shows an irrepressible tendency to borrow concepts and ideas from other (thick or full) ideologies or even to be mixed with them (see Mudde, 2004 and Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Stanley, 2008).

In this vein, populism can so be defined as «an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus the ‘corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people» (Mudde, 2004: 543).

As this definition shows, the “minimal” content of the populist ideology would be formed by four components: the existence of two homogeneous groups, namely “the people” and “the elite”; an antagonistic relationship between these groups; the idea of popular sovereignty; and, finally, a Manichean outlook, that promotes a positive valorization of the people and a denigration of the élite.

This latter component highlights that the people-elite opposition on which populism rests on is essentially a moral type one. “The people” is “pure”, “authentic”, which means that they do the right things, that is they do what is right for all the people; it refers to an idealized conception of the community, to the “heartland” (Taggart, 2000)[[4]](#footnote-4). “The elite”, on the contrary, is “corrupted” and not “authentic”; it puts its own both particularistic interests and false moral principles before the general interest and the common good; although coming from the same group of the people, the elite betrayed them.

Recently, Freeden has expressed his doubts about the possibility of applying the concept of thin ideology to the study of populism (Freeden, 2017). Indeed, after having pointed out that populisms exist only in plural, although they have in common some fundamental elements, the scholar specifies two main reasons why populisms cannot be considered, in his opinion, as thin ideologies. The first reason lies on the fact that the thin-centred ideologies derive from longstanding political reflections, are well articulated inside them, and are driven to future change; populisms, instead, focus on a few, selected topics, and make a commitment to an initiating moment of a society. The second reason pertains to the thin ideologies capability to become full, when they succeed in integrating some elements of the other ideologies, a capability that populisms cannot have, given their truncated nature. Populisms can rather only display a blurred overlap with the other ideologies. As Freeden acknowledges (2017: 3), populism «is simply ideologically too scrawny even to be thin! (…). A thin-centred ideology implies that there is potentially more than the centre, but the populist core is all there is; it is not a potential centre for something broader or more inclusive. It is emaciatedly thin rather thin-centred».

The author concludes that populism can be however conceived as a new, unfamiliar genre of ideology. Its vagueness and indeterminacy qualify it as «a phantom ideology, a spectre that can be draped over pressing and intricate socio-political issues in order to blur and to conceal (…) an amalgam of historical longstanding modifiers of ideology: amorphous, sporadic, truncated, discursively bellicose, inflexibly contemptuous of ideological rivals» (Freeden, 2017: 10).

* 1. ***Populism: a thin-centred ideology with strong cultural roots***

As previously highlighted, the three approaches to populism do not really compete with each other, and have rather to be conceived as different way of looking into the same phenomenon; as such, each of them has both merits and shortcomings[[5]](#footnote-5).

This does not imply the impossibility either of distinguishing the core of the concept of populism or of giving a different relevance to the aforementioned approaches.

As regards the communicational approach, it has firstly to be stressed that both populism as an ideology and populism as a political strategy manifest themselves through specific discursive and communication patterns. We have also previously seen that many of the authors who adopt a communicational approach argue that the populist communication includes both a content and a form dimension, that is both ideological and rhetoric elements. All this means that there is a close relationship between populism as a communication style and populism as an ideology. Defining and analyzing populism taking into account only its communicational aspects, as some scholars do, leads however to a conceptual overstretching (Kriesi, 2018). It has for instance been observed on this score that the appeal to the people does not represent nowadays something typical of the populist leaders, but a strategy used by all kind of politicians to get support (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Kriesi, 2018).

Hanspeter Kriesi remembers us that according some authors, such as Paris Aslandis (2016), we should give up to conceive populism as an ideology and start to interpret it as a “discursive frame”, because populism can be empirically detected only within political discourses. Aslandis adds that we are not able to understand the real motives behind the usage of populist patterns of communication, that is to comprehend if a populist political actor believes in what he/she says or if he/she is just acting strategically: no one can indeed look inside the head of a politician, as, more in general, of any individual.

In our opinion, what the author argues is not really correct. We could try to identify the real nature of the political actor’s aims looking not only at his speeches and messages, but also and moreover at his concrete proposals. Furthermore, as the same Kriesi states, what Aslandis observes does not really question the concept of populism as ideology. Indeed: «Whether political actors who use populist ideas in their discourse believe in this ideas or not is a secondary issue. Crucial is that they effectively use the populist ideas to interpret the world in an attempt to mobilise ‘the people’» (Kriesi, 2018: 13).

Kriesi suggests therefore to take into account the demand side of populism. Only in this way it is possible to realize that many people believe in what the populists say beyond the fact that the latter are guided by purely ideological reasons or by merely opportunistic ones.

With respect to the political-strategic approach, Kriesi notes that the relationship between the personalistic leader and his followers is mainly based on processes of identification. This kind of relationship corresponds, in his view, to the components of the populist ideology, that do not leave large room for well-defined programs and tend to merge with different substantive demands. Furthermore, it is also possible to catch sight of another correspondence between the political-strategic and the ideational approach: the first supports a monolithic conception of the leader and, if there is one, of his political organization; the latter uphold a monolithic conception of the people.

It has however be clear that the personalistic leadership does not represent a prerequisite for the emergence of the populist ideology, given that many personalistic leaders often adopt non-populist set of beliefs. As admitted by many authors, both the personalistic leader and the unmediated and unorganized relationship between the leader and his followers do not constitute a central feature of populism, even though they may facilitate the expansion of populist ideas (Mudde, 2004; Kriesi, 2018). After all, many populist experiences both past – the American *People’s Party* – and present – some of the Scandinavian *Progress Parties* – do not exhibit any personalistic, strong and charismatic leadership; other ones, such as the French *Front National*, the Italian *League*, and the Austrian *Freedom Party*, are characterized by strong and well-articulated party organizations – it is indeed not by chance that Weyland has decided to adopt a gradational concept of populism.

The ideological definition, instead, albeit minimalist and thin – which may lead it to have too broad of an extension and to the possible inclusion of “false positive”, that is to consider non-populist political actors as being populist – has the “ability to travel”: it can indeed be applied to different geographical and temporal contexts (Mudde, 2017a).

Some authors who adopt the communicational or the political strategic approach (see, for instance, Weyland, 2017) think that the main merits of their approaches consist on taking into consideration how the political actors behave and act, and on reflecting on an important issue: the identities which emerges from the relationship between the leader and his followers. In this way these scholars seem to overlook many of the building blocks of the concept of ideology. The ideology, indeed, shows not only a cognitive function, but also a social-pragmatic one, that means it provides the individuals the instruments through which they can react to what happens, and, more in general, a guide for action too; it aims at shaping the social order and at orienting the political action. It has also to be added that the concept of ideology is closely linked to that of identity, on both a macro and a micro level. Any ideology, indeed, contributes to the flourishing of a collective identity among the members of a group providing them a common interpretation of the social world and making them feel part of the same project (macro level); but it also contributes to shape the identity of the individual (micro level).

Turning to the nature of the concept of populism, we believe, following Kriesi, that the criticisms expressed by Freeden about the possibility to apply the notion of thin-centred ideology to the populist phenomenon are not such as to convince us to abandon the concept of populism as a set of ideas. In this regard, Kriesi suggests to define populism as a rudimentary ideology. Its core beliefs are indeed emaciatedly thin and rudimentary; they do not have the capability to become the centre for something other, but they can however combine with other, full ideologies.

Beyond the term that we prefer to adopt – thin-centred ideology, phantom ideology, or rudimentary ideology – we think, as some of the aforementioned scholars, that the core of the concept of populism is constituted by a set of beliefs, and that the other notions of the phenomenon, namely the communicational and the political-strategical ones, have to be intended as complementary to this core. On this issue, Kriesi points out: «Together with the ideological core, the other elements may be viewed as jointly sufficient to define populism. Independently of this core, however, these same elements define the concept only at the risk of conceptual overstretching» (Kriesi, 2018: 6).

In analysing the phenomenon of populism it is then not advisable to focus only on its communicational and strategic aspects, which implies the opportunity to adopt an ideological definition of populism, such as that given by Mudde.

In this regard, it has to be emphasized that in dwelling a great deal on the thinness of the ideological definition, the scholarly debate have almost all overlooked to stress the great salience and influence two beliefs of populist ideology have acquired over time: the concept of people as a homogeneous entity that share a collective identity, as a single “body”, and the idea of the general will (single, of the people) as the final source of the political authority. It has also to keep in mind that these ideas, in turn, refer to and are closely connected to two influential great currents of thought, namely organicism and the Rousseau thought. Ultimately, the thin-centred ideology of populism lies on strong cultural roots. It is then necessary to turn our attention, albeit briefly, on these cultural traditions and on the way in which they have been poured in to populism.

***1.5. The organicistic root***

Loris Zanatta, one of the most prominent scholar who deals with the relationship between populism and organicism, highlights that “the people” of the populists «is undifferentiated, homogeneous, without disagreement or dissents. It is a community, in which the whole does not consists in the simple sum of the parts, and in which the individual merges with the whole; it is a holistic community» (Zanatta, 2013: 19-20). For the author, it is indeed no coincidence that often the populist narrative represents the people as an organism whose parts contribute, each according to its own function, to preserve its stability and its overall well-being. And again: «the notion of populism develops into the conception of organic community. A community whose life would reflect a natural order, instead of depending on an explicit, voluntary and rational contract among its members» (Zanatta, 2013: 21).

These remarks allow to notice that the meaning and the contents the populist narrative assign to the concept of “people” are not something new, but rather they echo much older narratives or imaginaries that, albeit in a latent way, continue to be perceived as familiar, and are always ready to be revivified whenever a favorable circumstance occurs. Among these narratives, it has to be mentioned, given its salience, the organicist or communitarian cultural tradition; it indeed represents the first strong cultural root on which populism rests on. As it is known, this tradition has a long history; it is here therefore only possible to briefly cite some of its basic traits.

A first embryonic form of the organicist tradition can be identified in the “corporatist” depiction of the Greek *polis* and the Roman *respublica[[6]](#footnote-6)*; it however reaches its peak during the Middle Age, when, as Ernst H. Kantorowicz acknowledges (1957), an organicist image of the Church and the State, both defined successively as *corpus mysticum*, began to rapidly spread.

In the ecclesiastical sphere, the term *corpus mysticum* had at first an exclusive liturgical and sacramental meaning, because it was used to indicate the consecrated host. In a short time, however, the term assumed a different meaning, with deep sociological entailments: it in fact no longer referred to the Eucharist, but to the Church, that means the Christian society as composed of all the faithful. And subsequently it will undergo a further transformation, that will lead it to include and enhance secular corporate-juridical contents (Kantorowicz, 1957).

The German historian highlights also that next to the process of secularization which involves the concept in the ecclesiastical realm, emerges, in the lay sphere, a parallel process of exaltation and semi-religious glorification of the state. The French and English jurists – among which we have to mention Jean Gerson and, above all, John Fortescue – in particular, are those who spoke about a mystical body of the reign or of the people, who emphasized the relevance of the constitutional institutions which restricted the regal absolutism, who however claimed the insuppressible necessity that the power government had to be held by the man who was at the head of this body, namely the king.

A representation based on the ancient metaphor of the body began to spread in the central and northern Italian city-states during the XII century. The city-state was in fact perceived as a living body that needed the cooperation of its components and the harmony among them; the latter, in turn, could not survive outside the body to which they belonged. In this regard, the Florentine preacher Remigio de’ Girolami stated in his *Tractatus de bono communi* that the individual *si non est civis non est homo* (is a man only if he is a citizen).

From a geographical point of view, however, the organicist perspective spreads especially in the strongly Catholic countries: Spain, Portugal, part of Italy, the Iberian America; in short, almost all the entire Latin world. This world, which conceived the natural social order as a reproduction of the divine order, steadily hindered the diffusion of both the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment. Moreover, despite being gone through by deep divisions of political character (plurality of authorities), social character (aristocracies vs. plebs, plurality of ethnic groups), and territorial character (the North vs. the South, city vs countryside), it was unified, as Zanatta points out (2013; 2017) by the common catholic faith. The political unity and the religious homogeneity, the community of citizens and the religious community, and the worldly and the spiritual sphere, respectively overlapped each other. The Iberian empires, for instance, characterized themselves as empires of Christianity, because catholicity represented their unifying element and inspiring principle, and its protection and expansion constituted their universal political mission. Build on these bases, they portrayed themselves as a huge and harmonious organism which perfectly reflected the divine order; and the sovereign was seen as the guarantor of their political and spiritual unification. Such a representation, as it is well known, promoted the appearance of a hierarchically organized corporate society, in which the individual still had no place.

Zanatta also highlights that Latin America began, with the colonial conquest, to share the traits and the destiny of the Hispanic civilization, to be ruled by a government based on a pact and on the acknowledgment of the imperial unity, to be organized, like every European society of that time, in a corporate way. After having acquire the independence, Latin America however retained «the religious social imaginary that deeply had shaped it for a long time. In this imaginary the society had to be organized as an organic community, in turn depicted as a reproduction of the revealed divine order, and no distinction between the political and the religious unity, the citizen and the believers, the worldly and the spiritual sphere was made» (Zanatta, 2017: 23).

Ultimately, it is enough clear that the political, ideological, and religious unanimism, and, more in general, the organicist and corporate tradition represents one of the cultural roots of populism, especially that emerged in the Latin world. This is exactly why Zanatta comes to define populism as «the modern expression of an ancient heritage […] of a cosmology, an implicit world view with an extraordinary evocative strength, with ancient roots, and that finds its most consistent expression in the age of mass society and democracy» (Zanatta, 2013: 9).

***1.6. The Rousseauian root***

In claiming that politics should be an expression of the people’s general will, the populist ideology has a second clear cultural root: the Rousseau’s thought. In treating the question of democracy, populists in fact almost always refer, though many times unwittingly, to the radical conception of Jean-Jacques Rousseau – subsequently put forward again, in different guises, by Maximilien de Robespierre and Karl Marx – that they revivify in promoting the largest citizen participation to the decisional processes trough the introduction and the implementation of several institutional devices, such as the referendum, the recall election, the popular citizen’s legislative initiative, and so on. It is therefore necessary to dwell briefly on the distinctive traits of the Rousseau’s conception of democracy.

As it is well known, Rousseau thought that the essence of democracy is in the matching between the people and the sovereign, that is that the sovereignty belongs to the people. The latter, according to Rousseau, is formed by all the members of the social body who, taking on common duties and contributing to the drafting of the laws, acquire the status of citizens.

Differently from the Enlightenment philosophers, who had strongly despised the people, considered coward, rude, and that can be easily manipulated, Rousseau, considering himself a man of the people, appreciated its virtues and good qualities, and deemed it as a victim of the deep social inequalities of the time[[7]](#footnote-7) – the pursuit of justice and equality represented indeed for the Genevan philosopher the main moral objectives of every society. Furthermore, in the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* he distinguished, in a similar way to what the populists of every time and place will later do, two different “human types”: the simple men, who honestly live from their work, righteous in their behaviors and tastes, and the courtiers, who lack the moral strength, and are prone to idleness and deceit.

Rousseau was well aware of the difficulties in the fulfillment of his conception of democracy, except that in the very small states. Nevertheless, his utopian and radical perspective enabled him to shed light on and criticize the forms of society based on a strong imbalance of power and authority.

It is however here necessary to focus on the concept of general will, because it plays a central role within both the Rousseauian thought and, later, the thin ideology of populism. Rousseau argued that the practice of popular sovereignty could be undermined by the harmful inclination of any individual to place his particularistic and selfish interests above the general interest; for this reason, he deemed it necessary that the aforementioned practice would be based on a moral precondition: in contributing to make laws, each individual could give a subjective assessment in respect to the contents, but the same assessment had to be addressed to the common interest in respect to the objectives. In this interpretative framework, the general will is intended as the whole of the individual wills – each of which aims at achieving the common good –; only it is able to produce the “fair” laws. The general will is always righteous, aims to achieve the common good, even if sometimes the latter cannot easily identified. It deeply differs from the “will of all”, which results from the mere sum of the votes and protect the private interests. Furthermore, the general will cannot emerge in a context characterized by the presence of opposite factions or partial associations struggling to assert their particularistic wills (see Salvadori, 2015).

Looking through the constituent elements of the social pact which, for Rousseau, should have brought together the free and equals individuals, it can be observed that the Rousseauian tradition merges with the organicist one. In fact, in the *Social Contract* Rousseau states: «*Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and we as a body receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole*.

Immediately, this act of association produces, in place of the individual persons of every contracting party, a moral and collective body, which is composed of as many members as there are votes in the assembly, and which, by the same act, is endowed with its unity, its common self, its life, and its will» (Rousseau, 1762: 55-56).

Rousseau pointed out that the sovereignty consists in the execution of the general will, and that it cannot alienated; it cannot also be represented, since the collective and sovereign body of the people can be represented only by itself – in fact, only the power, and not the will, can be transferred –; finally, it is indivisible, because of its inalienability. Thus, democracy, the power of the people, corresponds to the «process from which it derives, the direct participation of the whole political body, the law» (Salvadori, 2015: 137; see also Pateman, 1970)[[8]](#footnote-8).

The claim of the popular sovereignty, the reference to the general will, the hostility towards the forms and mechanism of representation, the portrayal of a homogeneous people, the opposition between the pure people and the corrupt elite: these are all issues on which the Rousseau’s reflection dwells on, and which we find again, adapted to new times and different contexts, in the different types of populisms.

In particular, it has to be mentioned that the liberal democracy, as highlighted by many scholars – we will examine in depth the question in the following section – is the result of an instable and changeable combination of a liberal/constitutional pillar, based on the principle of the restraint of power and on the checks and balances mechanisms, and a democratic/participatory pillar, which enhances the popular will and vote (Eisenstadt, 1999; Mény and Surel, 2000; Mouffe, 2000; of contrary opinion Abts and Rummens, 2007). As we will see later, we think that another pillar, namely the elitist, have to be added to the previous ones. The strains among these pillars have characterized the history of the liberal democracy since its origins, and the different importance given to them over time depends on the worldview which has prevailed from time to time in the different contexts. As Yves Mény and Yves Surel highlight (2000), this flexibility of democracy actually represents its greatest virtue, allowing it to easily adapt to the economic, social, and ideological changes. But when the instable balance among the pillars is jeopardized, that is when the gap between democracy as it is imagined – the power of the people – and democracy as it works – the power of the elites chosen by the people – becomes too wide, the Rousseauian tradition, and, more in particular, the Rousseau’s conception of democracy, come to be revivified once again, especially by those populist political movements which have in that tradition their nourishment.

Populism could then promote, especially in its outset, what has been called a redemptive version of democracy; by fostering the most appropriate initiatives that enhance the political participation and that reduce the separateness between the people and the elite, it indeed can constitute a sort of antidote that helps democracy to revitalize itself (Canovan, 1981). But later, as we shall see in the last section of the book, given its constituent elements and its Rousseauian root, populism may come to assume an anti-liberal and sometimes even anti-systemic configuration.

The core of the concept of populism does have, as previously highlighted, an ideological nature, and the other ways of conceptualizing it are complementary to this core notion. Certainly, the populist ideology, as we tried to show referring to the works of Mudde, is characterized by a very thin structure, not comparable to those which support the stronger ideologies of conservatism, nationalism, or socialism. This thinness, however, it is worth reiterate it once again, rests on strong cultural foundations. In conceiving the people as a homogeneous unity and in promoting the idea of the general will, the populist ideology reveals in fact its clear origins in two traditions of thought that sometimes tend to intertwine: organicism, with its portrayal of society as an organic community, and the Rousseauian thought, which identifies the essence of democracy in the matching between the people and the sovereign.

**2 - The explanations of the phenomenon: populism, democracy, and the rise of populist parties**

The attention of the scholars has often focused on the causes from which both the populist parties and, more generally, the phenomenon of populism are derived or of which they would take advantage. Obviously, the differences in the explanations largely depends on the different conceptual approach of populism which has been adopted. In this regard, it has to be highlighted that «scholars trying to explain populism’s causes have given surprisingly little attention to the role of populist ideas […] [empirical] studies say little about the circumstances under which populist ideas in their own right would be appealing to voters or where these ideas come from» (Hawkins, Read, and Pauwels, 2017: 268).

Due to the fact that this study conceives populism as a set of ideas, in this section we firstly deal with the context or the conditions conducive to the activation of the populist thin-centred ideology and to the rise of populist parties. The latter, however, require also specific explanations, such as those which dwell on the characteristics of the electoral systems. In this section, therefore, we will also take into account these specific explanations too.

Whit regard to the first point, a specific attention will be devoted to analyse the relationship between populism and democracy. As previously argued, the concept of populism is based on two specific drivers: the opposition between the (pure) people and the (corrupt) elite and the demand that politics constitutes the expression of the people’s general will. This means that the thin-centred ideology of populism and populist parties emerge only when the following conditions are met: the people acquire a pivotal role in the political arena and there is a widespread perception that the elite rules with no reference to the people, such that a division between the people and the elite must therefore occur. Both of these conditions are strictly bound, as we have previously attempted to show, to the idea of the people’s sovereignty and to the consequent development of democracy.

In this respect, Nadia Urbinati has for instance stated that «the debate over the meaning of populism turns out to be a debate over the interpretation of democracy» (Urbinati, 1998: 116; see also Urbinati, 2019), and Manuel Anselmi has claimed that populism «today is, to all intents and purposes, a highly probable option of democracy […] populism must be considered as a complex phenomenon deeply connected with democracy […]. Populism is a modality of social expression of popular sovereignty» (Anselmi, 2018: 1-2). Kirk A. Hawkins, Madeleine Read, and Teun Pauwels, have argued, more specifically: «Instead of being a purely material response to interests, populism is a normative response to perceived crisis of democratic legitimacy […] populism is a response to long-term problems of weak democratic governance, especially corruption […] populist parties and movements are associated with decline in liberal democracy […] populist ideas are sensibly activated when policy failures can be traced to systematic malfeasance by traditional politicians» (Hawkins, Read, and Pauwels, 2017: 268 ff.)

With regard to the second point, we will give a summary of the explaining conditions of the populist parties’ electoral performance. In doing this, we will mainly refer to two very significant studies, that we will try to combine with each other. The first is what Mudde devotes to the populist radical right (PRR) parties (2007)[[9]](#footnote-9), and the latter is the research of Stijn van Kessel on populist parties in Europe (2015). Following the suggestions of the two scholars, we will take into consideration the explanations placed at different level of analysis – macro, meso, and micro – and focused on both the demand-side and the supply-side of populist parties politics.

Finally, we will examine some recent studies which have attempted to analyse the surge of populism started in the late eighties and early nineties by using the concept of cleavage. Among these, one cannot avoid mentioning, given their importance, the studies carried out by Kriesi and others (Kriesi et al., 2008; see also Kriesi and Pappas 2015), Simon Bornschier (2010), Albena Azmanova (2011), and Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris (2016; 2019). In this section we will paid a great attention to these studies, because they somehow represent the starting point of the central thesis of the book, that there is a unique cleavage from which all the populist parties originate (see the third section of this book).

***2.1. Populism and democracy***

Generally, two main distinct conceptions and practices of democracy can be distinguished: liberal or constitutional and participatory (Katz, 1997; Eisenstadt, 1998 and 1999).

In the first conception, democracy consists in a method through which individuals acquire the power of decision by means of a competitive struggle for the popular vote. In the well-known Joseph A. Shumpeter’s words, «Democracy is a political *method*, that is to say, a certain type of institutional arrangement for arriving at political – legislative and administrative – decisions and hence incapable of being an end in itself, irrespective of what decisions it will produce under given historical conditions» (Schumpeter, 1962: 242).

To be defined as democratic, a form of government has therefore to be based on: continuous and free competition for power; the possibility to get rid of the bad rulers; and, above all, the adherence of competition to the constitutional arrangements and rules. In fact, the latter «constitute a – and possible *the* – core element of democratic regimes, and they are the prerequisite for their functioning and continuity insofar as they assure that the changing of rulers is not just a one-time event» (Eisenstadt, 1998: 218). This would seem implies that democracy does not have any substantive aim, or that it cannot promote any specific value. But actually, the aforementioned assurance can be guaranteed only by the acknowledgment of the liberal values pertaining the individual rights – freedom of speech, of association, of religion, and so on –, which hence represent the sources of legitimation of the constitutional democracy. The value, as Richard S. Katz points out, is liberty. «Democracy is supported because people believe that it will ensure liberty better than any other political method (…) liberal democracy refers to attempts to find a democratic implementation of liberalism» (Katz, 1997: 46).

This kind of regime connotes an individualistic representation of society: the individuals act by looking primarily to their self-interests and paying little attention to the common good. Its emphasis on rights, including the property ones, and on the benefits of competition between the political leaders, shows the close relation of liberal democracy to the development of capitalism.

The government activity is deemed necessary in order to protect individuals from one another and accordingly to safeguard the social order. However, also the government, like every individual, may seek to maximize its interests to the detriment of the others, namely the people as a whole, and may tyrannize over them by restraining their rights. In the perspective of the liberal democracy only the institutional device of free and periodic elections, which makes the rulers responsible and responsive to the constituency, can avoid that such a possibility comes true. This implies, as Katz highlights once again, that the people’s power is not directive, that is not aimed at achieving potential benefits, but defensive, that is striving to avoid potential evils.

The liberal or constitutional conception of democracy denotes two different versions: elitist and pluralist.

The first one, which essentially derives from the Schumpeter’s thought, portrays the ordinary people as politically incompetent, misinformed, acting under the impulse of irrational forces, substantially illiberal. As Schumpeter states (1962: 262), «the typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes a primitive again. His thinking becomes associative and affective». And again: «the electoral mass is incapable of action other than a stampede» (Schumpeter, 1962: 283).

On the one hand, it would be better therefore that the people do not directly rule themselves; their participation in democratic life would be exercised only during elections, and the latter should not be too frequent, in order to avoid that the elite decisions depend too much on the changeable voters’ opinions. The people, if anything, can assess the proposal and decisions made elsewhere, as well as their outcomes. On the other hand, politics should continue to be an elite affair. To govern effectively, the elite need indeed wide discretion and an adequate term on office (Katz, 1997).

The pluralist version, whose main exponents are represented by James Madison and Robert Dahl, considers as democratic that form of government that is characterized by a plurality of centres of power, none of which prevails over the others; a strong separation of powers and the development of a set of checks and balances are deemed necessary conditions for enhancing the quality of democracy.

Unlike the elitist conception, the pluralist one conceives the society as formed not only by individuals but also by groups with different interests, considered as necessary for the existence and the legitimation of a polyarchical form of government. It is enough clear how, according to this perspective, the society must be guarded against the oppression not only of its rulers but also of a majority which could become tyrannical. Popular elections, which can be controlled by a majority faction, are not sufficient to prevent such dangers, and other devices have therefore to be introduced. Among them, one has to mention the constitutional restriction to the national government, the separation of powers between the different organs of government, the independence of the judiciary, the diffusion of political resources among the different groups, the assignment of some policy areas to local governments or to semipublic or private agencies (Katz, 1997).

In contrast with the liberal or constitutional conception of democracy, the participatory one is based on the active, strong, and continuous participation of the citizens in decision-making processes; the institutions of the referendum, the recall election, the citizens’ initiative, and majority rule are firmly fostered; politics should consist in the immediate expression of the general will of the people (Abts and Rummens, 2007) [[10]](#footnote-10).

Participation differs regarding to its frequency and its intensity. An active participation requires therefore that it takes place not only during the periodic national elections, as the supporters of the elitist democracy would like; moreover, it should be concrete and not partial, that is all citizens, without distinctions, should participate in the decision making processes. Finally, it should involve all the levels of government, as well as many sectors of society, such as the workplace (see, on this, Pateman, 1970)[[11]](#footnote-11).

According to the main exponents of this conception – Rousseau, John Stuart Mill, and George D. H. Cole among the first – participatory democracy is undoubtedly superior to liberal democracy for four reasons: it allows to discover what the people really want; it ensures that all the relevant interests will be able to access to the decision process; it enhances the legitimacy and the acceptance of decisions and policies; and, last but not least, it helps the human being to fully develop his potentialities and capacities, thus contributing to create a more human society. With respect to this last point, it has to be noted that the participatory conception of democracy strive for the development of the citizen as an autonomous human being, and believes that this development could be achieved also in an atomized society, that is characterized by low levels of sympathy and cooperation between individuals. In the perspective of the participatory democracy, however: «It is the process rather than the decision that leads to the desired outcome, and hence there can be no substitute for direct involvement by the people» (Katz, 1997: 68).

Ultimately, a strain among different ideas and practices of democracy has affected Western countries since the democratic revolutions and has subsequently spread to those countries where democratic ideals have seeped in. The populist division between the people and the elite is strictly linked to this strain, to the extent that the former cannot developed without the latter. Indeed, the emergence of the sovereign people, of the demos, implies a request for a broad political participation and for the implementation of participatory forms of government. And when democracy would seem to have lost these participatory traits and, on the contrary, to have assumed exclusively elitist or pluralist traits, the individuals come to identify with the people, that is when a collective identity of the people emerge in opposition to an enemy elite (see section three of this book).

The aforementioned three main different forms of democracy are therefore in friction one with each other; that is, any imbalance towards one and its radicalization induces the appearance of opposite forces that tend to rebalance the situation. Populism, in other words, arises when the gap between the people and the governing leaders has become too wide, when the political establishment merely complies with formal rules and procedures, and when the general will of the people is not taken into account as much as it deserves to be (Canovan, 1981; Mény and Surel, 2000; Taguieff, 2002).

The relationship between populism and democracy, however, is sometimes, as we will see in the fourth section, very problematic. Populism, indeed, can induce the rise of authoritarian forms of government which have nothing in common with democracy.

***2.2. The conducive conditions of populism and populist parties***

The numerous and different explaining conditions of populism and populist parties can be organized, following the suggestions of Mudde (2007) and van Kessek (2015), within a two-dimensional space formed by the level of analysis – macro, meso, and micro – and by the populist parties politics – demand-side or supply-side.

The demand-side represents the breeding ground for populist forces; it is indeed a necessary but not sufficient condition for their success. Most of the theories which focus on the demand-side use macro-analysis, that is they refer to wide historical, social, and economic processes which occur at national, supra-national, and global level.

The supply-side can be subdivided in external and internal. The former includes those factors that are not inherent to the populist parties; it corresponds with the political opportunity structures (POS), which represent the «consistent, but not necessarily formal or permanent, dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure» (Tarrow, 1994: 85; see also Mudde, 2007). The latter comprise those factors that concern the characteristics of the populist parties. Almost all the theories which focus on the supply-side, both external and internal, are placed on the meso-level of analysis, that is the local organizations in which the individuals are involved.

Very often, the researches on this topic do not reach convergent results; and very often they are lacking empirical evidence. Furthermore, the effects that the identified factors can produce, largely depend on the phase the populist parties are going through, that is their electoral breakthrough or their persistence. In short, it can be stated that any monocausal explanation of the phenomenon is doomed to failure, and that many of the factors highlighted by the authors can therefore contribute to the performance of the populist parties.

Let’s start from the external supply-side conditions, which include the media, the institutional context (electoral system), and the political context (responsiveness of the established parties).

*2.2.1. The supply-side conditions*

With regard to the first aspect, it is not necessary to spend a lot of words on the growing relevance of the media in contemporary societies and politics. Nowadays, we find ourselves in what Jay G. Blumler and D. Kavanagh called as early as 1999 the age of media abundance, that is an age characterized by a sharp increase in the number of television channels and radio stations, a wide diffusion of communication devices (television, smartphone, personal computer, etc.) among the population, the advent of Internet and the digital media (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; see also Wirth et al., 2016). The political communication has undergone a profound change, so assuming five new characteristic traits: intensified professionalization of political advocacy; increased competitive pressures; centrifugal diversification; audience reception of politics; anti-elitist popularization and populism.

The first trend stems from the increasing awareness among political parties and leaders «that attending to communication through the media is not just an add-on to political decisions but is an integral part of the interrelated processes of campaigning, cultivation of public opinion, policy-making, and government itself» (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999: 214). Policy advisors with specific skills on media and on persuasive communication represent therefore the indispensable figure for any leader who wishes to attain the popular support in a situation of permanent electoral campaign. For this purpose, the ability to run the news agenda firsthand, that is to focus the attention of the media, and consequently of the audience, on its own issues and on its own representation of the events, constitutes an essential task for the leaders and their advisors.

The second trend points to the numerous challenges the news and political programs and journalism has to face: the multiplication of television channels, which puts the aforementioned programs in competition with each other; the rapid growth of specialist journalism in other fields, such as business, sport, and so on; the advent of commercial media, which has led journalism to dwell on news the most attractive for the public and the most palatable for the big advertising investors; the availability of information in Internet web sites and the proliferation of infotainment programs.

The third trend of centrifugal diversification imply the possibility of creating target audience, and so of diversifying both the form and the content of political communication depending on the different target that have been identified.

In an age of media abundance, the audience reception of politics – and here we come to the fourth trend – has characterized by five traits: *inadvertency*, because the political communication can came from anywhere and at any time; *dilution* of politics with other elements; *fragmentation* of political communication; *redundancy* of information, depending on the constant repetition of the same news, in different guises and in different media outlets; *flexibility* of the individuals in approaching to the news and to the different broadcasting.

Moving on the last trend, Wirth and others note how «the growing convergence between the operating logic of popularized media and populist parties is another key component that needs to be accounted for in a “historical” understanding of the relevant opportunity structures» (Wirth at al., 2016: 23; see also Mazzoleni, 2008 and 2014). Indeed, on the one hand, the media seek to pursue their corporate ends (i.e., achieving new viewers and readers), using styles and discourses suitable for the ordinary people, focusing on issues that involve people emotionally – immigration, economic crisis and so on – adopting a spectacular and sensationalistic framing, preferring a personalized story-telling. All this, as Mudde observes (2004: 554), «provides a “perfect stage” for populist figures that find “not just a receptive audience but also a highly receptive medium”». On the other hand, populist leaders manage to achieve approval, visibility, and celebrity just by engaging and talking about the same issues, using simple, but also provocative and boisterous language, emphasizing the private aspects of their life.

In order to analyse the relationship between populism and the media more in detail, it is worthwhile to distinguish between populism *through* the media, that is the media as a platform for populist actors, and populism *by* the media, that is the media as populist actors (Esser et al, 2017).

As for the first point, the media are useful for populist parties and leaders firstly because they give the latter the visibility they need to make themselves known and to achieve success. Furthermore, in covering issues generally perceived as threatening, such as immigration, crime, and cultural identity, they somehow give importance to those populist forces which seem to own these issues.

However, what is more important to note is that mass communication offer to populist actors the opportunity to bypass the traditional places of political negotiation, the intermediate institutions – so often portrayed as obstacles to the expression of the true will of the people or even as producers of stagnation, waste, and corruption – and to establish a direct relationship with citizen. This process of political disintermediation has been further accelerate in the last decades by the advent and spread of social media and Web 2.0. In fact, the latter have significantly increased the information available to audience, have weakened the role of gate-keepers in filtering and framing the news, have enhanced the interconnectivity between the audience and the politicians (Wirth et al., 2016).

With regard to the second point, some media outlets may assume a pro-active role in promoting the demands of the people, and in putting the mainstream parties and elite in a bad light. In this way, they become a sort of representative of the “man in the street”.

In this respect, Gianpietro Mazzoleni (2008; 2014), have for instance hypothesized that popular news media, such as tabloid, are more inclined to defend the people’s interests, whereas quality news media tend to defend the political elite. Recent empirical researches have however not find evidences in support of the author’s thesis.

Let’s focus now of the institutional and political contexts.

The first pertains the characteristics of the electoral systems. Generally, the plurality system – both the first-past-the post system and the two-tier majority system – seems to adversely affect the populist parties chances of success; ballots and electoral thresholds should do the same. Large electoral districts and proportional systems, on the contrary, should seem to advantage the populist forces. These constraints produce their effects in a mechanic way, after the election; but they also affect the vote behavior before the election, suggesting to the voter not to waste his vote.

The political context, instead, include the parties’ structured interaction within the electoral arena, whose impact has been defined the “electoral opportunity structure” (Van der Brug *et al.*, 2005; Mudde, 2007).

The agency of the established political parties, in other words, can widen or reduce the opportunities for the populist parties to enter in the political system. Such opportunities increase when:

* The mainstream parties are not able to deal with the issue that the people consider salient;
* They are not able to take ownership of the issues on which the populist appeal revolves around;
* There is an ideological convergence between the mainstream parties;
* A great coalition has been formed.

All the aforementioned conditions affect the rise of populist parties only partially. When the latter gain a broad consensus, no institutional or political constrain is capable to curb its rise.

Finally, let’s analyse the internal supply-side conditions, which refer to the need for populist parties of being credible. Ideology, leadership, and organization represent the factors on which this credibility depends on (Carter, 2005).

With regard to the first point, it has to be observed that the more extremist the ideological positions of the populist party are, the weaker their attractiveness is. A visible and persuasive leadership, able to take the ownership of the salient issue, represent another condition which favour the party, especially in the electoral breakthrough stage. Also a strong organizational structure is necessary, particularly in the persistence stage, in order to preserve the internal cohesion and discipline, to compete in the elections for a long time, and to play a role within the decision-making process.

Dwelling on the ownership of the salient issue, van Kessel identifies four important themes on which populist parties usually focus on: culture and ethnicity, economic hardship, European integration, and corruption. He moreover observes that «these four themes are not relevant to (the performance of) *all* populist parties. I nevertheless expect that the breeding ground for populist parties is especially fertile where related issues are salient and where established parties are considered unresponsive or incapable of dealing with them» (van Kessel, 2015: 23-24).

*2.2.2. The demand-side conditions*

Many studies on the populist parties’ performances have recently focused on the populist attitudes at the mass level. These micro-level studies propose a thesis quite simply: populist forces emerge and gain success where the populist attitudes are, for many and different reasons, widespread. They are very interesting and promising, especially for having fill a gap in populism analysis, that is the difficult of assessment and measurement.

Hawkins and Scott Riding are among the first authors who dealt with the topic. They indeed delivered a paper entitled “Populist attitudes and their correlates among citizens: survey evidence from the Americas” at an ECPR Workshop held in Muenster in March 22-25, 2010. The paper formed the basis for the publication of an article written in collaboration with Mudde, in which the authors developed three original scales of populist, pluralist, and elitist attitudes (Hawkins, Ridings and Mudde, 2012). The items included in the scales has been revised several times, and the latter has been applied in the study related to different geographical area and elections (see Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove, 2014; Akkerman, Zaslove and Spruyt, 2017; Van Hauwaert and van Kessel, 2017; Cremonesi *et al*., 2019). One of the most recent study considers the following six items as indicators of populist attitudes:

* The politicians in [Congress/parliament] need to follow the will of the people;
* The people, not the politicians, should make our most important policy decisions;
* The political differences between the people and the elite are larger than the differences among the people;
* I’d rather be represented by an ordinary citizen than an experienced politician;
* Politicians talk too much and take too little action;
* What people call “compromise” in politics is really just selling out on one’s principles (Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Andreadis, 2018).

Usually, the literature on populism claims the thesis that who shares anti-immigration stances tend to vote for populist radical right (PRR) parties, whereas who support socioeconomic redistribution tend to vote for populist radical left (PRL) parties. The aforementioned studies, instead, focus on the populist attitudes *per se*, and on how they affect the voting behavior. The results are quite clear: individuals with strong populist attitudes are more likely to vote for the populist parties. This seems quite obvious. It is less obvious to wonder and to research why this happens. In this respect, Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Ioannis Andreadis hypothesis and find initial evidences that these attitudes are complementary to the traditional issue positions and ideologies, and they are activated in a context characterized by political unresponsiveness of the elite, and by widespread corruption.

As it has previously highlighted, most of the studies that focus on the demand-side variables adopt, unlike those just seen, macro analysis.

Some of these researches argue that the rise of populist parties has to be connected to the phenomenon of modernization. If we refer to the Latin American countries, we can see how, during the 1930s and 1940s, many of them, thanks to the politics of the populist leaders, underwent processes of urbanization and tried to contrast the state of agricultural and economic backwardness, by launching systematic industrialization programs based on the replacement of imports with local products, on planning and state ventures, or on both. So, many scholars, including Gino Germani (1971 and 1978), have claimed that populism represents a phase in the transition to modernity.

As it is well known, Germani did not limit his analysis to the Latin American world. His main general purpose was indeed to show that the processes of modernization and economic development, which formed the basis of modern and pluralist democracy, produced many contradictions capable of hinder the rise of democracy or even to destroy it.

The main feature of the modern society was seen in the secularization process. In the western world, the latter had assumed a radical form, thus questioning the sacredness of the values system, of the rules, and of the institutions. As a consequence, a strain between the growing secularization and the need to preserve a minimal common core of meanings and rules emerges almost immediately. It represents the cause of the possible outbreak of social conflicts and catastrophic crisis, which, in turn, favour the advent of authoritarian regimes, such as Fascism in Italy and Peronism in Argentina. The two regimes, however, differed from each other in the way social mobilization was accomplished. In Fascism, the middle class fostered a top-down mobilization in order to control the subaltern classes. In Peronism, instead, a populist social block that included both the middle and the subaltern classes promoted a multiclass movement, more democratic and progressive than the hierarchical one arose during Fascism (Anselmi, 2018).

In more recent time, many researches have referred to the phenomenon of modernization in order to explain the rise of the PRR parties in Western Europe. Drawing on the thesis put forward by Seymour Martin Lipset (1960), Thomas Childers (1983), and Jürgen W. Falter (1986), Hans-Georg Betz has for instance argued that the emergence and success of the PRR parties derive from the profound change of the socio-economic structure of the Western European countries, that is the rise of the economic globalization processes, and, above all, of a postindustrial form of capitalism characterize by high flexibility both on the side of production and on the side of consumption. This change has had a strong impact in the work force, dividing it in two wide groups: that at the centre of the economic system, formed by workers with high skills and attractive jobs, and that at the periphery, formed by workers with poor skills, precarious conditions and not attractive jobs – the so-called victims of modernization, moved by feeling of anxiety, resentment and anger. It is precisely on the discontent of this second group that the niche PRR parties find the opportunities of their success (Betz, 1994).

In relating populism to modernization, these explanations often show some weakness. From a theoretical point of view, for instance, the relationship between the macro phenomenon of modernization and the micro phenomenon of the vote is not always well clarified. From an empirical point of view, instead, the results of the studies are not always supported by evidences, and the hypothesis are often tested through proxy variables (Mudde, 2007).

Other researches that adopt a macro-level of analysis include the recurrent crisis among the conditions of the populist parties’ electoral performances. The relevance of this issue, after all, has been acknowledge in the studies on populism from the outset. As Paul Taggart has highlighted, «populism draws great support at times of crisis […]. The emergence of a crisis shakes populists out of their reluctance and into politics, and into an active defence of the heartland […] populism comes about when a larger process of transition gives rise to a sense of crisis» (Taggart, 2000: 1 ff.; see also Weyland, 1999).

Kriesi is among the scholars who have recently dealt with this topic. He and others have indeed analysed the impact of the 2008 Great Recession on European populism, focusing on the differences between five regions – Nordic (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland), Western (Austria, Belgium, The Netherlands, France, and Switzerland), Southern (Greece, and Italy), Central and Eastern (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland), Anglo Celtic (UK, and Ireland) – and taking in account the economic crisis, the political crisis, and the interactions between the two (Kriesi and Pappas, 2015).

The authors show that during the Great Recession populism increased at European level, even if “rather modestly”. Its growth was particularly relevant in the Southern and Central-Eastern regions. Both economic crisis and political crisis had a positive impact on populism, with some exceptions: France, Denmark, and Finland, as for the former; Belgium, Austria, and Switzerland, as for the latter. Finally, the thesis according which populism would increase when an economic crisis coupled with a political one finds robust empirical evidences.

The studies which deal with the relationships between populism and crisis provide an important contribution to the comprehensions of the conditions that favour the emergence and success of populism. However, sometimes, as argued by Mudde (2007) – but this is not the case of the research carried out by Kriesi and Pappas – they show many definitional and operationalizational weakness.

***2.3. In search of new cleavages***

As it is known, in the last decades the support for populist parties has sharply increased throughout Europe, as well as in other parts of the world, and many populist leaders, such as Donald Trump, have achieved power. The search for the causes that have produced a new wave of populism cannot therefore be limited to an analysis of single-case study, that is of specific populist parties, leaders, or electorates. As Norris and Inglehart underpin (2019: 13): «The phenomenon is much broader than any individual and thus requires a more general theory». This implies to place particular emphasis on the macro-level analysis.

In recent times, many researches within the demand-side approach have acquired a great resonance, because of their both theoretical relevance and empirical robustness. These studies connect the surge of populism to the emergence in the political space of a new cleavage, or to the change of meaning and of salience of the old ones. In doing this, they attempt to combine the macro-level of analysis with the micro one, that is to connect extensive processes, such as modernization, globalization, crisis, post-industrialization, to the individual behavior. As mentioned above, Kriesi and others (2008; see also Kriesi and Pappas 2015), Bornschier (2010), Azmanova (2011), and Inglehart and Norris (2016; 2019) are the key players of this attempt.

The common starting point of these studies is Kriesi’s acknowledgement that the four classic cleavages can be reduced to two. Indeed, the first two cleavages that are linked to the national revolution – the centre/periphery and state/church cleavages – are essentially cultural divides that are dominated by religious issues; the latter two cleavages – the rural/urban and owner/worker cleavages – represent socio-economic class divisions (Kriesi, 1994; see, on this, section 3 of this book). Furthermore, all the aforementioned authors agree that the meaning of these two dimensions – especially the cultural dimension – has been transformed over the years, particularly during two critical events or junctures: the cultural revolution of the 1960s, and the processes of globalization and denationalization that occurred in the 1990s.

Indeed, during the late 1960s, new conflicts – as those for instance between managers and socio-cultural professionals – and new social movements emerged. The latter, in addition to fostering the birth of new parties – the New Left and the Green Party – on the one hand strengthened the traditional class cleavage, and on the other altered the meaning of the cultural dimension, thus weakening traditional moral and religious issues and emphasizing issues such as environmentalism, peace and gender equality.

Bornschier (2010), in this regard, speaks about a rapid spread of universalistic values, such as the principle of individual autonomy or the free choice of one’s lifestyle, and emphasizes that these values constitute the left-libertarian pole of a new cultural dimension of the conflict, that has replaced the previous values divisions of the traditional religious cleavage.

Azmanova (2011), in turn, highlights how, in the second half of the 20th century, both the ideological and the political mobilization spaces underwent two relevant changes. The first, caused by the rise of the New Left, consisted in the heightened interests towards certain issues, such as identity politics and ecology. As a result, the cultural vector of the ideological map (formed by the opposition between libertarianism and traditionalism) acquired greater relevance, and the left-right axis came to overlap to it, clustering the ideological positions in “left-libertarian” and “right-authoritarian”. The second concerned the weakening, if not even the collapse, of the left-right divide – caused by the socio-structural transformation of post-industrial societies – and the emergence of a set of transformative dynamics which included the increasing relevance of post-materialism both, in general, in one’s own life, and, in particular, in the political preferences and the electoral choices.

And Inglehart and Norris (2016, 2019), finally, proposing again the thesis supported by the same Inglehart more than forty years ago (Inglehart, 1977), highlight how a “silent revolution” has transformed the western cultures. In particular, the achievement of new high levels of existential security fostered the development and the spread of the post-materialist values, such as cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, as well as an increasing support towards the libertarian left parties, the greens and other progressive movements, and towards their “core issues”: environmental protection, human rights, gender equality, tolerance of diversity, protection of minorities.

In the nineties, the appearance of the immigration flows, the European integration project, and, moreover, the globalization processes transformed the meaning of the cultural dimension once again, emphasizing issues such as European integration and immigration; instead, the traditional class cleavage has evolved into a broader state-market cleavage, and has undergone, in the course of time, a loss of salience. As Azmanova points out, «by altering the structure of the political economy of post-industrial democracies, globalization is not simply disrupting, but even transforming the logic of ideological conflict and political competition in Europe, ultimately replacing the standard left-right dichotomy with a new macro-constellation» (Azmanova, 2011: 384).

According to Kriesi and others, the process of globalization has triggered a new structural conflict, opposing the “winners” and “losers” of globalization; the first include the entrepreneurs and the qualified employees in sectors open to international competition, as well as the cosmopolitan citizens, whereas the others encompass the entrepreneurs and the qualified employees in traditionally protected sectors, all the unqualified employees, and the citizens who strongly identify themselves with their national community.

Kriesi and other have referred to this antagonism as a conflict between integration and demarcation. This conflict too remains embedded in a two-dimensional political space, but the processes of globalization transformed the meaning of the cultural dimension once again, emphasizing issues such as European integration and immigration. In the economic dimension, therefore, a neoliberal, free trade position contrasts with a defensive, protectionist one; in the cultural dimension, a universalist and multiculturalist position is opposed to a position in favour of protecting national identity, culture and values (Kriesi et al., 2008).

Accordingly, both old and new political parties have been compelled to reposition themselves within this transformed political space. In particular, the lack of responsiveness of the established parties to the complaints of the globalization losers gives the populist right parties a chance to mobilize them. Indeed, the new challengers from the populist right tend to take the “losers’” side and to combine a position of economic integration (that is, in support of market integration and economic liberalization) with a position of cultural demarcation, which is seriously concerned by the threats to national identity caused by the European integration process and, more generally, by the opening of borders – it is no coincidence, the author points out, that the new populist right parties are primarily characterized by xenophobic, if not racist, stances or restrictive positions with respect to immigration (Kriesi et al., 2008).

Bornschier (2010), for his part, notes that during the nineties, the appearance of the globalization processes provided new chances of success to a neo-conservative counter-movement that emerged, in the previous decade, in opposition to the universalistic values and the libertarian left and that emphasized the relevance of tradition, of the established community, and of the social bond; a new cultural conflict based on the opposition between libertarian-universalistic values and traditional-communitarian ones has therefore arisen.

A remarkable part of the constituency, according to Bornschier, is placed on the traditional-communitarian pole; showing common worries regarding immigration flows, the loss of identity, and the erosion of the community, this constituency represents the potential that the populist right parties can mobilize. Indeed, these parties tend to adopt a “cultural-differentialist” discourse that rejects the idea of a multicultural society and the universalist values and stresses the people’s right to preserve the national culture’s distinctive traditions as well as framing the issues of identity and community in terms of “us” and “they”.

Azmanova (2011), in turn, argues that the globalization processes has led to a restructuring of the ideological and the political competition spaces. On the one hand, indeed, both the economic and the cultural vectors of the ideological map have undergone a shift of meaning: from a free-regulated market to an open-closed economy opposition the former; from a libertarianism-traditionalism to a cosmopolitanism-sovereigntism the latter. On the other, a new political cleavage, based on the dichotomy risks-opportunities that individuals perceive to have from the social impact of globalization, has arisen.

Just like Kriesi, Azmanova too thinks that a new-fault line of social conflict between the winners and the losers of globalization has emerged. She however pinpoints, in a slightly different way from the same Kriesi, that this line is above all linked to the features of economy – old or new sectors in which enterprises and employments are located –; that the exposure to risk and opportunity is institutionally mediated by the individual type of education – including or not technological skills – and by the securitization policies; and that what matters are the perceptions of the anticipated social impact of globalization. The latter can indeed trigger feelings of fear concerning the loss of job, the lowering of earnings, the growing immigration flows, and so on.

The “opportunity-risk” axis thus becomes, according to Azmanova, the new cleavage that structures both the demand and the supply side of political mobilization, cutting across the traditional left-right axis. In this context, the rise of the populist parties represents a response to the increasing demands of economic, social, and cultural protection; they, such as their constituency too, locate themselves on the risk pole, and combine a position in favour of closed economy (on the economic vector) with one in favour of soverigntism (on the cultural vector). As Azmanova acknowledges (2011: 403): «While in the old paradigm these formations would appear as political pathologies which would be placed outside the main axis of political competition, in the current context they express mainstream positions, well inscribed in the political logic charted by the novel “opportunity-risk” axis of political contestation».

Other studies, carried out by Inglehart and Norris (2016; 2019), come to similar conclusions. The first of them is a working paper, and it has therefore to be considered as a preparatory work of the second one, that consist in a well-organized, in-depth, and very interesting book. As such, it shows some inaccuracies, that will be eliminated in the following study. The most evident is that the authors define the concept of populism in a restricted way, giving to it some of the features that Mudde uses in his analysis on the populist radical right parties (2007). Populism, therefore, is considered as a vague political ideology characterized not only by an anti-establishment discourse, but also by authoritarianism and nativism; furthermore, it defends the nationalistic interests, supports protectionist policies and, in foreign affairs, isolationism; it’s fundamentally xenophobic, and finally it protects the traditional sex roles in opposition to the more fluid gender identities and roles.

Despite this, the authors cannot avoid to include in their analysis many populist parties which have gained growing consensus in recent times, but which do not fall within the definition of populism previously provided: the Italian *Five Star Movements*, the Greek *Syriza*, the Spanish *Podemos*.

Beyond this, the authors try to explain the populist parties’ performance putting forward the thesis of the cultural backlash.

As it has previously remembered, the scholars highlight how during the late XX century, a “silent revolution” has transformed the western cultures, promoting the development of the post-materialist values, of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism.

This change has triggered a counter-revolution among those who do not share this kind of values and remain instead anchored to the traditional familiar rules: the oldest generations, white men, and the lesser educated. These people represent the potentials that populist parties can mobilize.

A new cultural cleavage that opposes populist values to the liberal-cosmopolitan values has currently acquired greater salience, this prevailing on the other relevant structuring dimensions and shaping the current political space. The latter is then structured along two different cleavage, which are orthogonal to each other: the classical economic cleavage, less relevant, that opposes the economic left – in favor of State management, economic redistribution, welfare state and collectivism – to the economic right – in favor of free market, deregulation, low taxation, and individualism –; and a new cultural cleavage, much more relevant, which divides the populists from the liberal cosmopolitans.

In the book published in 2019, instead, the scholars pay greater attention in distinguish populism from authoritarianism. As they carefully stress: «The conjunction of populism and authoritarianism is common, since populism undermines the legitimacy of institutional checks on executive powers, opening the door for authoritarian rulers. But this is a contingent relationship not a necessary condition» (Norris and Inglehart, 2019: 217).

“Authoritarianism” is intended as a set of cultural values which prioritize «collective security for the group at the expense of liberal autonomy for the individual» (*ivi*: 7). They indeed revolve around three core components: *security* of the group against threatens to order and stability; *conformity* to group traditions and rules; *loyalty* to the group and to its leaders. The community to which authoritarianism refers is portrayed as a tribe, that is a social identity group based on the opposition between us/our people and them/the others. As such, authoritarianism is not opposed to populism, but to libertarianism, that is a set of values which promote personal freedom, pluralism, and individualism. Populism, instead, is opposed to pluralism; in fact, the former locate the legitimate authority of governance in the people, whereas the latter in the elected officials and in the established institutions.

The current European political space is therefore structured, according to Norris and Inglehart, along three cleavage: the old left-right one, that no longer has the same salience it had in the past, the populist-pluralist one, and, finally, the authoritarian-libertarian one, that since the 1980s have acquired growing importance. The political parties can so be classified in four categories: authoritarian-populist, libertarian-populist, libertarian-pluralist, and authoritarian-pluralist.

Now, the scholars, recalling what already stated in the previous study, argue that the silent revolution in cultural values has stimulated a conservative backlash and an authoritarian reflex. Specific groups of population that share conservative values, such as the interwar cohorts, those less educated, the white men, the fervent religious, and so on, have felt deeply threatened by the cultural changes produced by the silent revolution. Their social and moral values, their beliefs, and also their prominent position within society were at stake. They «felt they had become strangers in their own land» (Norris and Inglehart, 2019: 35).

Accordingly, these social conservatives adopt an authoritarian reflex, that is a strategy of defensive reaction, a «rejection of the diverse lifestyles, political views, and morals of “out-groups” that are perceived as violating conventional norms and traditional customs, including those of homophobia, misogyny, and xenophobia» (Norris and Inglehart, 2019: 18). The authoritarian reflex, in turn, brings about a counter-revolutionary conservative backlash, whose rise is favoured also by the spread of globalization and by specific periods effect, such as the 2008 financial crisis or the migration flows, that worsened the economic situation, deepened the economic inequalities, and increased the material insecurity.

The conservative backlash, ultimately, has pushed many voters to express their preferences for authoritarian-populist parties. The conservative groups that share authoritarian values, in fact, constitute the potential supporters for this kind of parties, that have taken root and have gained an increasing consensus throughout Europe. As the scholars point out, «socially liberal or conservative attitudes, and authoritarian values, in the electorate, predict support for European parties that are more authoritarian and more populist. Moreover, voting support for parties with more authoritarian position is concentrated among the older birth cohorts and less educated population, as well as among men, the more religious, and ethnic majority populations» (Norris and Inglehart, 2019: 20).

**3 - The fifth cleavage**

The phenomenon of populism has, as is known, a long history. It is not surprising, therefore, that the case that some scholars have attempted to distinguish different phases within this history on the basis of geographical area or time period and/or on ideological features (Hermet, 2001; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Woods, 2014).

A historical analysis of the real forms of populism that have followed one another over time, that is of the political parties and movements that are traditionally considered populist, shows how these forces alternate periods of prosperity with period of an almost total absence. On the basis of this analysis and trying to sharpen the previous classifications, it is possible to identify three different waves of populism; essentially, those that have recently been listed by Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (2017).

The first wave, which occurred in the period from the middle to the end of the 19th century, was foundational populism (Hermet, 2001; 2013). Although there is no doubt that the word “populism” arose in Russia around 1870, doubt can be cast, as will be discussed below, on whether the populism of the Russian Narodnik movement is comparable to the populism of the subsequent movements. This first wave, however, surely includes the agrarian populism of the American People’s Party and, accepting the suggestions of Guy Hermet, the nationalist French Boulangism.

The second wave extends approximately from 1930 to 1960 and represents consolidated or classic populism. Spreading in many Latin American states through the political action of leaders such as Juan Domingo Péron and Getúlio Dornelles Vargas, this kind of populism no longer represented something negative or marginal but transformed itself into the State’s power and ideology (*ivi*; see also Taggart, 2000); however, some Latin American populist leaders, such as Hipólito Yrigoyen and Jorge Alessandri Rodríguez, had begun to make themselves heard already in the twenties. A different kind of populism emerged during this period in France: Poujadism.

The third wave started in the eighties and continues today, and can be labelled the wave of multifaceted populism. Indeed, at least four different types of populism have come to the fore during this period: nationalist populism, embodied by parties such as the French and the Belgian National Fronts and the Austrian Freedom Party; the Latin American populism of Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales, which was preceded by the neoliberal populism of leaders such as Fernando Collor de Mello, Alberto Fujimori and Carlos Saúl Menem; the progressive populism of some radical left parties, such as the Spanish Podemos and the Greek Syriza; and the populism expressed by political parties which locate themselves outside the left-right dimension, such as the Italian Five Star Movement.

***3.1. One cleavage, many cleavages?***

The studies mentioned in the previous section, which have analysed the possible connections between the surge of populism and the cleavages, have focused only on the third wave, which occurred only over a specific period of time and only in the specific geographical area of Western Europe. Even if this kind of approach is undoubtedly correct, it leaves open a number of questions. What about the previous populist phenomena? And what about those of different geographical areas?

One possible answer may be that neo-populism differs from previous forms of populism and therefore requires specific explanations. In this sense and referring once again to the cleavage approach, it may be speculated, in a rather incomprehensible way, that only the third wave originates from a cleavage. This kind of answer is also inconsistent with the suggestions of Rokkan and Lipset, who presumed that each party families as a whole – and not just some of its parties – originated from a specific cleavage.

A possible alternative and a more convincing hypothesis is to suppose that the three waves of populism derive from three different cleavages (fig. 1)

Figure 1: Three different cleavages for three different waves of populism

Pp=Populist party

Also this second type of explanation, which focuses on the specific causes of populism within each individual state or within different time spans, seems to be not very satisfying. It risks considering every simple social conflict as a cleavage; indeed, as will be better seen later, to be considered as such, a cleavage must embody the toughest and most lasting of social conflicts. Accordingly, this explanation risks multiplying the number of cleavages, especially if one aims to take into account not only the populist parties, that is, to analyse the entire political party spectrum. Is it indeed possible that even non-populist parties are in turn generated by other cleavages? Moreover, this kind of answer consider the three waves of populism clearly separated from each other. This would entail a too relevant cognitive renunciation: to identify some origins and characteristics that the three waves might have in common.

In opposition to these answer, another thesis could be expressed: that there is a unique cleavage from which all the populist parties originate. This cleavage is not constantly active; that is, it is able to produce its effects only under certain circumstances, when certain critical junctures occur. The manifestations of this cleavage differ in time and space; hence, populist parties with opposite features can emerge from it (fig. 2).

Figure 2: The populist parties and the three waves of populism



Pp=Populist party; McJ=Macro critical juncture

This different type of explanation does not exclude the intervention of specific national causes or a snowball effect, because a populist party in a given country can induce the birth of similar parties in other countries. It moreover assumes that also other factors, such as those analysed in the previous section, can contribute to induce the ascent of the populist ideology and parties (Barbieri, 2018).

Unfortunately, many obstacles prevent us to check the effectiveness of this thesis using empirical data, as has been done in the studies of Kriesi, Bornschier, and Inglehart and Norris: the lack of data that refers to the second and, especially, the first wave of populism; the difficulty in comparing data (in case they were available) related to different geographical areas and historical periods; the great resources, especially of time, that such a comparison would require. Therefore, we will try to demonstrate the aforementioned thesis carrying out an analysis based on two different levels: a theoretical one and an historical-social one.

Indeed, in the first instance we will revisit the cleavages’ theory developed by Rokkan and Lipset between 1967 and 1975, without claiming to provide an original interpretation of their work, and we will focus on the features of the structural division (people vs. elite) that would foster the birth of populist parties. Then we will highlight the reasons why this division can be considered as a cleavage. We will also try to stress the relationship between such cleavage and the four traditional cleavages that have been structured the political competition space for long time, and we will try to show how democracy – in its different declinations – would represent the stakes of the populist cleavage.

Afterwards, the analysis will take into consideration the three waves of populisms that, according to some of the best-known scholars, have followed one another over time: the one that occurred in the second part of the Nineteenth Century, the one that spread between 1930 and 1960, and the last one, which began in the Eighties and continues today. This second step of the analysis aims to achieve several goals: to show how the “populist cleavage” comes back unchanged over time, and how it reactivates itself when specific critical macro and micro-junctures emerge; how the meaning given to the concept of “people” tends to change; and finally, which and what kind of populist parties and movements emerge.

***3.2. The cleavage theory of Rokkan and Lipset***

According to Rokkan and Lipset (1967; 1985; Rokkan 1970), cleavages represent the main oppositions within national communities that stem from the multiplicity of conflicts rooted in the social structure. In other words, only some conflicts, that are the strongest, those that endure over time despite having lost their original salience, and those capable of polarizing politics constitute cleavages.

These permanent, often latent, oppositions between different homogeneous social groups usually break out when certain critical junctures – that is, times of radical change – arise. A juncture, indeed, represents the transition point between new and older forms of both society and political community. In the opinion of the two scholars, three critical junctures has marked the history of each nation: the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in 16th-17th centuries; the National/Democratic Revolution of 1789 and after; the Industrial Revolution in 19th century. The authors declare of being tempted to add also a fourth juncture: the Russian Revolution in 1917 and after.

Finally, cleavages cause the birth of specific political parties and specific party systems as well as a long-term alignment between the opposed social groups and those parties. This means that the social conflicts that these cleavages express must be politicized, which occurs when the opposed social groups gain a collective identity and when these identities are politically organized.

Following Bartolini and Mair (1990), it has been therefore stated that to constitute a cleavage, a political divide must include three elements:

* a socio-structural element: a class, religious belief, ethnic group, etc.;
* an element of collective identity of this social group;
* an organizational manifestation in the form of collective action or an enduring organization of the involved social groups.

Going into the specifics, it has firstly to be remembered that Rokkan and Lipset intended to draw a model in the comparative study of nation-building that could explain the variations in the development and structuring of competitive mass politics among eleven smaller and five larger polities of Western Europe by the 1920s. They however did not deny neither that similar models could be applied in studying the political systems of other part of the world, nor that world-wide models of political development could be accomplished in the future.

As it is known, the two scholars based this model on the Talcott Parsons’ AGIL paradigm, and focused, in particular, on the I (Integration) subsystem, considered as the place where, in people’s democracies, both parties and constellations of parties have been developed – for this reason the authors stress that the I quadrant (formed by the union of the *a*, *g*, *i*, and *l* poles) could be called the “competitive politics” diamond. Rokkan and Lipset argued that the crucial cleavages and their possible political outcomes could be identified within a space formed by two diagonal lines of a double dichotomy: the territorial dimension or axes, which stretches from the *l* pole – where we find the purely local oppositions to the national aspirant or dominant élites’ usurpations – to the *g* pole – characterized by the conflicts on the organization, goals and decisions of the political system as a whole; and the functional dimension or axis, which goes from the *a* pole – that pertains to the conflicts on the allocation of resources, goods, and profits in the economy – to the *i* pole – embodied by a strong sense of belonging and strong ideological oppositions. The conflicts at the *a* end of the axis can be solved through rational bargaining, whereas the conflicts at the *i* end are difficult to solve, because they are about conceptions of moral right and interpretation of human destiny, and because they imply an intense “we-they” or “friend-foe” opposition.

On the basis of this framework, Rokkan and Lipset identified the nowadays well known four different critical lines of cleavage. Two of them – the conflict between the central culture of the nation building and the growing resistance of the subjugated populations; the conflict between the nation-state and the church – are caused by the national revolution; the others – the conflict between the rural interests and the emerging class of the industrial entrepreneurs; the conflict between the owners and the employers, on the one hand, and the tenants, the hired men and the blue-collar workers, on the other – are begot by the industrial revolution.

The two scholars clarified that a concrete conflict is hardly exclusively territorial or exclusive functional, and that their model had to be therefore intended as a grid that serves to locate the constellations of alliances and oppositions within its two-dimensional space.

Indeed, the four cleavages foster, according to the authors, the birth of different kinds of parties: parties for the territorial defense (for instance Fianna Fáil in Ireland, or Volksunie in Belgium); Christian parties (moreover in The Netherlands, Austria, Norway, and Italy); parties for the agrarian defense (in Scandinavia, and in the protestant cantons of Switzerland); working class movements (throughout Western Europe). Moreover the two scholars, as it is well known, maintained that the traditional divisions and the party alternatives had been frozen in political terms. In fact, in their opinion, the party systems of 1960s still «reflected, *with few but significant exceptions, the cleavage structures of the 1920s*. This is a crucial characteristic of Western competitive politics in the age of “high mass consumption”: *the party alternatives, and in remarkably many cases the party organizations are older than the majorities of the national electorate*. To most of the citizen of the West the currently active parties have been part of the political landscape since their childhood or at least since they were first faced with the choice between alternative “packages” on election days» (Rokkan and Lipset, 1967: 50).

Rokkan and Lipset could not avoid to tackle the issue of the raising of many authoritarian parties and regimes in Western Europe, that they tried to explain locating them within their model of explanation. After having pinpointed that the four cleavages represent movements of protest against the established national elite and its traditional central culture, they focused on the fully-mobilized nation state – those characterized by suffrage extension and organizational growth – and highlighted the appearance of different protest alignments. Indeed, in these contexts the protest was directed against the new élites, their rising networks and the institutions which fostered them, and it had often an anti-system feature. Fascism in Italy, National Socialism in Germany, Poujadism in France, and radical rightism in the United States represent the main ideologies and movements that embodied this kind of protest.

Referring once again to the schema AGIL, the scholars clarified that such protest movements would cut across the g-l territorial axis near the g pole. The conflict, indeed, focuses on the different conceptions both of the constitution and of the national political system’s organization; the democratic system of decision-making and control is at stake; and the aforementioned movements aim to implement authoritarian forms of government in behalf of the nation as a whole. At the intersections of the poles (a-g; g-i; i-l; l-a) outside the “competitive politics” diamond, we find four different types of exercising power/ four different movements: functional corporatism (nationwide interest bargaining) at the a-g intersection; nationalist totalitarianism (nation vs. enemies) at the g-i intersection; irredentist totalitarianism at the i-l intersection; finally, communal federalism at the l-a one (Rokkan and Lipset, 1985)[[12]](#footnote-12).

Although the Rokkan’s theory has been criticized in many respects (see, for instance, Merkl, 1969), «few, if any, would seek to redraw the contour which he established in his geopolitical map of Europe, for example, and few, if any, would seek to question the importance of the cleavage structures which he identified as crucial to the development and consolidation of mass politics and party systems» (Mair, 1993: 121). However, nowadays the freezing hypothesis has been overtaken by events, and, as seen in the previous section, must to be revised[[13]](#footnote-13). In this regard, the current weakness of the hypothesis has been proved by three evidences: trends in aggregate electoral volatility; mobilization and success of new parties; decline of party in respect to its organizational and representative aspects, and emerging of new forms of interest intermediation, such as the “new social movements”.

Basing on these premises, Martin Harrop and William L. Miller (1987) have argued that two other waves of changes followed those identified by Rokkan and Lipset: the post-war *growth of the state*, and the *post-industrialism*. The first has led to growing social class divisions, or *sectoral* cleavages, between employees in the public and private sectors, between those who live in rented houses and use public means of transport and those who are home and car owners, between those who are economically dependent on state (pensioners, unemployed, etc.) and those who are not. The second has led to focus the attention not only on the material living conditions and on class politics, but rather on the quality of life and on post-materialistic values. According to many authors, these waves currently represent the main influencing factors of the electoral behavior.

Arend Lijphart, instead, observes that Rokkan and Lipset considered the four dimensions of opposition as decisive, but not as the only ones, and identifies other four additional dimensions: foreign policy, regime support, participatory democracy, and environmentalism (Lijpart, 1990).

Finally, we have also seen in the previous section how some scholars, namely Kriesi, Bornschier, Azmanova, Inglehart and Norris, think that the meaning of the cleavages has changed over time, and also hypothesize the rise of a new cultural conflict. They moreover tend to explain the surge of populist parties started in the last decades of 20th century on the basis of this new version of the cleavage theory. According to them, the rightist populist parties would manage to mobilize that part of constituency which embrace the traditional-communitarian values and which adopt a position of cultural demarcation.

As a matter of fact, also the same Rokkan’s theory would allow to explain the rise of what we currently call the populist parties, but with a high price tag. Poujadism for instance, that most scholars consider a typical populist movement, is taken into account by Rokkan and Lipset, as we have previously seen, when they speak about the emergence, in Western Europe, of many authoritarian parties and regimes. Indeed, according to some authors (Linz 1976; Griffin 1991), with whom we do not agree[[14]](#footnote-14), populism would constitute a component of fascism and National Socialism, which find a place within the rokkean schema. Finally, most of the populist parties could be classified following the aforementioned schema, taking into account some of the core issues they are related to: the territorial defense, the protection of the working class interests, and so on. Clearly, this implies a too high price tag: to consider the populist dimension as marginal, and to split the populist parties family or *familles spirituelles* in a series of parties with different purposes and objectives.

Drawing upon the rokkean theory, this study will take however a different direction from those followed by both Rokkan and Lipset and the aforementioned scholars. It indeed will try to show the emergence, in a specific historical period, of a “populist” political divide that oppose the sovereign “people” to the elite, and its continual recurrence under certain circumstances, that is when specific macro and micro-critical junctures occur. As we will try to clarify below, this political divide has to be considered in all respects a cleavage, because it has all the three properties that define a cleavage as such. Let’s start off, therefore, from the first property, the socio-structural element. This element is represented by the “people”.

***3.3. The people***

When we talk about people, it is necessary to clear the field of two false prejudices.

The first consists in maintaining the impossibility of allocating agency to collective entities, such as community and people. The community’s homogeneity is viewed as constructed from the outside, from an objectifying perspective which blurs the differences; it is a false homogeneity (Nancy, 1991; Blanchot, 2006). In this way, the people, such as other kind of communities, are considered on a par with accidental aggregations of individuals, such as, for instance, a crowd or a queue at a gate of the airport.

Actually, there are huge dissimilarities between these two collective entities. Differently from the members of a people or of a community, those of a crowd do not share nothing of their own past, nothing of their own future, and they will have nothing to do together when the temporary gathering dissolves. The idea that the people are a human aggregation with unity of intent and capacity of action seems therefore quite acceptable (Ferrara, 2019).

The second prejudice focus on the possibility of the people to be a political subject. Many Constitutions have a preamble that refers to the people. The American one, for instance, opens with the line “we the People of the United States”, and the French one declares: “The French people solemnly proclaim their attachment to the Rights of man and to the principles of national sovereignty as defined by the Declaration of 1789”[[15]](#footnote-15). Accordingly, the idea that the people perform acts, including that of giving themselves a Constitution, often recurs in the constitutional thought. But, as highlighted by Alessandro Ferrara (2019), some questions spontaneously arise: when a group of individuals is entitled to qualify as a people? Who establishes a people? How can a people be established in a democratic way, if democracy is based on a democratic rule of law, enshrined in turn by a Constitution?

The classic authors of the social contract theory – Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau – believed that the legitimacy of the political systems was founded on the consensus of the people who set up these systems. They however did not discuss the legitimacy of the people; the latter were considered a matter of fact.

A similar answer can be found in the works of some contemporary sociologists and political philosophers, such as John Ralws (1999) and Jürgen Habermas (1999). The first argues that a people does not come into being, it already exists; and the second points out that the factuality of concrete contexts determines who the people are, who hold the constituent power. Ultimately, the establishment of a people eludes a judgement of legitimacy.

It is however possible to give to the previous questions a different answer from that of the just mentioned authors, especially if we refer, as Ferrara suggests, to the two terms of Greek derivation, that is *ethnos* and *demos*. Both of them identify aggregates of individuals. The individuals of the *ethnos* share many non-political features with each other: language, ways of behaving, lifestyles, historic memories, and so on. The sort of peoples described by the term *ethnos* «standing largely outside the process of historical change, was biological, based on descent custom, and geography» (Geary, 2002: 42).

As it is well known, democracy, that is the form of government in which the people (*kurios* or *demos*) are sovereign, is based on the concept of *demos*. The Greeks gave to this termat least two main different meanings: the poor majority of the population (the set of those who do not hold wealth and properties and who cannot consequently enjoy political rights); and an *ethnos* which, at a given time, has consciously assumed a political form, and whose members live therefore within structures of shared authorities, whether they are democratic or not[[16]](#footnote-16). A *demos* is put in place by an *ethnos*, it is connected to the latter; it represents the “emerging part of the iceberg” (Ferrara, 2019). Not all the *ethnoi* become *demoi*[[17]](#footnote-17), but all *demoi* are also *ethnoi*.

Now, as Ferrara still highlights, the promulgation of a constitution represents the sufficient, even if not necessary[[18]](#footnote-18), condition of the transformation of an *ethnos* into a *demos*. An *ethnos* that become *demos* acquires a recognizable political identity, beyond the cultural one, through the act of giving itself a constitution.

Both *ethnos* and *demos* are communities that define the belonging to them through exclusion. The exclusion of *ethnos* is based on habits, traditions, and social practices, whereas the exclusion of *demos* is governed by rules and by institutionalized powers. Therefore, the sort of peoples described by the term *demos* is «constitutional, based on law, allegiance, and created by historical process» (Geary, 2002: 42).

The Bible too, after all, presents two models of people: «The first, implied in translated terms such as *goyim* (translated in the Septuagint as *ethne* and by Jerome as *gentes*) are biological […]. The other model is that of the *am* (translated as *laos*, *populous*), the people of Israel, a constitutional body like that of Rome» (*ivi*: 52–53; see also Portinaro 2013).

Stating that if “the people give to themselves a king” it pre-exists to this act is therefore not quite correct. That is, it certainly pre-exists as *ethnos*, but only from certain moments, such as, for instance, the *Glorious Revolution*, it can be considered as *demos*, as a democratic people. In fact, during that revolution, the two Westminster Houses, gathered on behalf of *demos* in January 1689, decided that William and Mary d’Orange would no longer reign by divine right, but by popular consent, giving origin to a limited monarchy. The political identity of a people, that is something of different from the cultural or ethnic identity of the same people, emerges therefore not before but by its constitutional choices (Ferrara, 2019).

In fact, the people became a relevant political actor during the course of the glorious English revolution – in an imperfect and incomplete way –, of the American revolution – in a triumphant but doubtful way – and of the French revolution – in a radical but chaotic and inconsistent way (Mény and Surel, 2000). As Barrington Moore observed many years ago, these revolutionary episodes have to be included among the factors that triggered the democratization process; the first because it helped to limit royal absolutism and the others because they helped to curb, in different ways, the power of a rural aristocracy that hindered the achievement of the democratic political system (Moore, 1966).

Indeed, the debate on the actual role of the people arose as soon as democracy began to consolidate; that is, when the principle of popular sovereignty was broadly accepted. The awareness of the distance between the real and the ideal democracy as well as the awareness of the existence of different conceptions of democracy brought out a set of questions regarding the exercise of power by the people, the relationship between the citizens and their elected representatives in Parliament, and the institutions called upon to express the people’s will (Mény and Surel, 2000). However, it must be clarified that the requests for a broader participation of the people in political life can arise not only in democratic states but also in autocratic regimes.

Some clarifications on the concept of democracy and on the idea of popular sovereignty have to be made too.

The concept and the reality of democracy trace back to the 5th century a.C. Democracy, however, as it is known, has been waned for a long time, and the actual starting point of the parabola of the modern democracy can be easily identified in the revolutions of the late 18th century.

The situation seems different as regards the idea of popular sovereignty, that is the idea that the ultimate root of power is in the people.

It is surely true that the idea of an original power of the people imbued the culture of Imperial Rome. Cicero, for instance, considered the Roman people as the unique source of the political system. And even when, after the collapse of the Republic, the effective power in Rome was in the hands of the emperor, the legitimacy of the power continued to be referred to the *lex regia de imperio*, that is the transfer of power from the people to the prince.

It is moreover true that this idea remained at the roots of the medieval juridical culture thanks to the *Corpus Juris Civilis*[[19]](#footnote-19).

However, both in the culture of the Imperial Rome and in the medieval juridical culture the concept of people was used for describing a differentiated and hierarchical totality; the status of an individual was defined by his belonging to a specific group or collective entity, and the emperor was at the top of the hierarchical order.

The concept of people as multitude, as sum of equal individuals, where an individual is an individual, and the connection of the sovereignty to this concept emerge instead only much later, with the natural law doctrine and, in particular, as we have seen in the first section, with the thought of Rousseau. There is therefore no continuity between the medieval jurists’ use of the ancient idea of the people’s original power and the concept of sovereignty of the 18th and 19th century democracy (Costa, 2014).

***3.4. The collective identity of the people***

At is point in the dissertation, it is appropriate to tackle the question of the collective identity of the people, that is the second defining element of a cleavage. In this regard, it is somehow already mentioned that the cultural and ethnic identities of a people precedes their political identity[[20]](#footnote-20). The identity of the ancient small peoples-tribes, for instance, being based on the common descent, traditions, and language, emerged in a spontaneous manner. In these tribes the term “peoples” simply meant a stock, or a union of stocks and clans. The original name they gave to themselves in their language simply meant “people” or “men”; this distinguished them form the other not authentic peoples and men. The term “Apache”, for example, seems derive from “apachu”, that in the language of the Zuni tribe means “enemy”; instead the Apaches called themselves “Tin-ne-ah”, or “Indé”, that means “people” (Merker, 2009).

The transformation of an *ethnos* into a *demos* does not happen suddenly. At first, we have a human group which accidentally assumes the characteristics of a *demos*, and which then comes to acquire a distinctive identity, that is a conscious representation of these characteristics, through a process of internal and external interaction. From the process of social differentiation within the group, a shared representation of the way of regulating the relations between the members of the group soon emerges. As Frank Michelman has highlighted (1995), the promulgation of a constitution then takes the form of an interpretative act; it brings to expression a normative content that was previously only implicit in the ethnic-cultural identity of the people.

However, in general it can be first of all stated that a human group becomes a people when it acquires a cultural and political macro-identity, that is when it begins to refer to itself as an entity whose unitary and stable connotations (tradition, religion, language, territory, entitlements and so on) can be listed; these connotations are perceived as widespread shared values.

In this regard, it has to be clarified that the “construction” of the people and the formation of its identity are strictly linked to the spread, within the processes of social representations, of what Laclau calls the *logic of equivalence*.

In his famous book *On populist reason*, published in 2005, Laclau distinguished two way of constructing the social, that he defined the *logic of difference* and the *logic of equivalence*: «either through the assertion of a particularity – in our case, a particularity of demands – whose only links to other particularities are of a differential nature (as we have seen: no positive terms, only differences); or through a partial surrender of particularity, stressing what all particularities have, equivalentially, in common. The second mode of construction of the social involves, as we know, the drawing of an antagonistic frontier; the first does not» (Laclau, 2005: 77-78).

The construction of a people, in other words, cannot be separated from an unifying representation of it, which absorbs the difference among the various social groups – workers, employees and entrepreneurs, believers and not believers, and so on. The multitude of isolated individuals transforms itself in a people, therefore, when it finds in the unified representation of its diversity the constitutive image of its unity. This representation reduce the internal boundaries between the different social aggregates and meanwhile, in order to preserve the inner unity, it reinforces the external boundaries to the people. In the case of the “nation”, this antagonistic distinction is built outside the boundaries of the states, whereas in the case of the “people”, it is built within them, pitting the people against the elite (see Bourdieu, 1991a; Cella, 2018)[[21]](#footnote-21).

All this involves the appearance of great differences both from a socio-economic viewpoint – different lifestyles, levels of income, interests, and opportunities – and, above all, from a political viewpoint – different levels of power, different possibilities to participate in the decision-making process, and different privileges.

Those who are not part of the elite soon become aware of both the increasingly great distance that separates them from the elite – this latter is seen as an otherness not comparable to themselves, as something totally alien – and their sharing amongst themselves the same living conditions, worries, and destiny; accordingly, they develop a sense of belonging towards the people, a collective identity. This happens when the populist line of division overcomes the other lines of division, such as those based on gender, social class or education, making these latter aspects almost completely ineffective. Sharing a collective identity implies both a spread of solidarity, trust, and political participation rights among who is included in the people, and the establishment of a system of resources’ allocation that penalize the outsiders.

Clearly, the elites are largely responsible for the development of this collective identity when they mainly behave and act without considering the needs of the people.

The question here at issue can be examined more in depth focusing on the organizational and relational bases of dominant cleavages.

Rokkan and Lipset highlighted that the political parties, in order to secure the loyalty of their electoral base and to prevent that the other competing parties could win votes from this base, strive to reinforce the barriers between their own social environment and the outside influence, that is to promote the development of specific political identities and subcultures. A clear example of this process is represented, according to Rokkan and Lipset, by the creation of exclusive organizational infrastructures (distinctive schools, trade unions, leisure associations, and so on) carried on by the parties of religious defence. This occurred especially in the Netherland, with the pillarization of the political system and society along religious vs. non-religious vertical networks of associations and institutions, and, accordingly, vertical forms of integration and solidarity. The aforementioned organizations, notes Mario Diani (2000: 390), «had a crucial role in securing the persistence of cleavages, strengthening citizens’ identification with specific political projects, thereby encapsulating European electorates within political subcultures and reducing electoral mobility».

Obviously, each vertical segment can be more or less isolated. The Dutch analysts, Rokkan and Lipset pointed out, «use the term *Ontzuiling* for reductions in the distinctiveness of each segment and *Verzuiling* for increases […]. In a highly *ontzuild* system there is low membership crystallization; most of the participants tend to be tied to organizations and enviroments exposing them to *divergent* political pressure. By contrast in a highly *verzuild* system there is *high* membership crystallization; most of the participant tend to be exposed to message and persuasive efforts in the *same* direction in all their “24-hours-7-day” enviroment» (Rokkan and Lipset, 1967: 131-132; see also Rokkan, 1970).

Taking into considerations these insights of Rokkan and trying to connect them to some key ideas of Simmel (1908), Diani has highlighted that the modern political cleavages can be conceived as «peculiar type of concentric [social] circles», i.e. groups or pattern of group affiliations (Diani, 2000: 395). The multiple memberships and identities are self-contained, which means that the membership of a specific group becomes dominant and determines the others. The individuals interact with each other almost exclusively within the concentric patterns of social relations, which mold both the people’s identities and the social representations too. Any identity, indeed, is shaped by and within the specific circles of recognition in which it is inserted (Pizzorno, 1991).

In the intersecting circles, on the contrary, the multiple memberships are not self-contained, none of them prevails over the others, and any individual is characterized by a specific combination of memberships. If this, on the one hand, assures the emergence of richer and more diversified personalities, and accordingly an enhancement of the processes of individualization, on the other, it can produce tensions, within each individual, between contrasting identities.

But what happens when «the strength of social linkages at the basis of political cleavages weaken, and the latter start losing their salience, that is, their capacity to shape political conflict and identities?» (Diani, 2000: 396).

The literature usually gives two different answers to this question. From a first perspective, proposed by some political sociologist, such as the same Rokkan or Juan J. Linz (1967), in the late 1960s, the weakening of the highly polarized cleavages leads to a softening of the conflicts and to a consolidation of democracy. According to a second one, put forward by many authors – the aforementioned Kriesi, Bornschier, Azmanova, Inglehart and Norris, Diani, for instance – in more recent time, it instead represents an opportunity for political change; «the launching of bridges and the development of memberships across established cleavage lines […] reflect the development of new types of collective solidarities, and therefore of potentially new cleavages» (Diani, 2000: 397). New concrete ties give rise to intersecting circles which replace the concentric one, cut across established cleavages, and undermine the traditional forms of encapsulation. The consolidated worldviews and identities are challenged, and a realignment process of alliance – previous friend can now be considered enemies, and vice versa previous enemies can be considered friends – is put in place.

Typical examples of this dynamics are represented by the women’s and the environmental movements that arose in the late 1960s.

It is however possible to give a further answer to the former question. Indeed, even if the same Simmel rightly claims that the concentric circles are typical of medieval society whereas the intersecting ones develop from modern age onwards, this does not imply the impossibility, for the concentric circles, to reappear also in the current societies. The weakening of the traditional cleavages, therefore, could lead to the emergence of another concentric circle, much wider than the previous ones, which pits the people against the elite. This happens when this circle offers a stronger recognition to the individual identities than that assured by the previous cleavages. Specific pattern of relationships, or, more precisely, specific movements or actors, bestow identity upon individuals by recognizing them as members of the people. The membership to the people undoubtedly represents a specific mode of identity, but generally it is not a strong one, because it have to face constant internal divisions. It allows an individual to be recognized and to recognize, in turns, the others; it makes the distinction, that is the determination of a difference between who share the same identity and who do not, possible.

Now, the identity of being part of the people manage to perform the aforementioned functions only in certain situations, when specific critical junctures occur. In these critical situations, the salience of the traditional cleavages fails, the external boundaries to the people become prominent, and the commitment to protect them comes to constitute an essential component of the individual identity. In this way the individuals come to identify with the people. More specifically, the people succeeds in becoming a pivotal source of the identity formation when its enemies (the elite) reveal themselves in all their force, and when they are regarded as personal enemies, as strangers who do not deserve recognition by the individuals who feel they belong to the people (on these topics see Pizzorno, 1991).

***3.5. The political organization of the collective identities***

Before proceeding further, it is worthwhile to briefly summarise the main points on which our thesis revolves around. The populist line of division emerges after the democratic revolutions, roughly in the same period, therefore, in which the traditional cleavage arise. It is, indeed, only starting from these uproarious episodes of change that through the approval of constitutions and the appearance of unifying representations and narratives the sovereign people comes into being, acquires a political identity, and become a relevant political actor. This leads to the development of both a debate regarding the possible different forms of participation and democracy and a strain between them. The populist line of division acquires an ever greater salience the more participation in decision making processes and in political life is hampered or even denied, and the more democracy – in the case it has been achieved – strengthens its elitist traits (see section 2 of this book). The opposition between the people and the elite, however, only very rarely has an exclusively political nature. It indeed almost always is characterized by differences in incomes, in lifestyles, in special privileges, in resources of any kind, in economic interests, and so on.

With the emergence of specific critical junctures, the traditional concentric circles weaken, and the one based on the opposition between the people and the elite takes their place. Being crosscut by divisions – of class, religion, etc. – that are only temporarily overcome, this circle usually do not have a long life. It freezes for some time, and then it unfreezes again with the appearance of new critical junctures

But here we come to the third element of a cleavage: the political organization of the opposed social groups’ collective identity. Only the development of this process is indeed able to transform a political divide in a cleavage.

Now, just this organizational manifestation in the form of collective action does not take long to manifest itself; the social conflicts expressed by the “populist” political divide are indeed soon politicized, and populist parties or movements with different features – radical rightists, radical leftists, ethno-regionalists, etc. – do emerge in the political scenario. Occasionally, some political entrepreneurs take advantage of the people’s malaise and malcontent; uttering promises that are in actuality almost impossible to achieve, they try to acquire broader visibility and to obtain better personal electoral results.

The people organization and politicization obviously presupposes, as we have seen, the construction of a people. In this respect, a paramount role in representing the people is played by the performative power of who, more or less entitled, has willing to call people an aggregate of individuals that is part of a larger social reality. This represents a sort of “performative magic”, aims to build not only the subject-collective actor, but also the group that through this subject aspire to be represented. This is what Bourdieu call the theory of unifying representation[[22]](#footnote-22).

The using of performative utterances by influential or qualified representatives forms a necessary condition for bringing about the people, with effective consequences in the political and social contexts (Cella, 2018).

In order to shed light on this third component of the populist cleavage, we will move on from a theoretical analysis to a historical-social one. The latter, as previously said, will dwell on the three waves of populisms that have followed one another over time. In this way, we will try to show that the populist cleavage activation depends on specific critical macro and micro-junctures. The macro critical junctures represent the set of events and phenomena that demarcate the birth of the three waves; very often some micro-critical junctures add to the macro ones. When the populist cleavage is active, the other lines of division and conflict lose their relevance; furthermore, the meaning of the “people” changes from wave to wave. Therefore, while supporting the idea of the existence of a unique cleavage, we however argues that its manifestation varies in place and time. We will also and above all try to enlighten the characteristics of the parties and movements that are engaged in mobilizing the individuals who feel to belong to the people. Clearly, it is not possible here to present an overview of all populist experiences emerged throughout the course of the three different waves. We will therefore focus on those the scholars usually consider as the most significant and exemplary.

***3.6. Foundational populism***

The first wave of foundational populism, as it has already been pointed out, started in the middle of the 19th century and it lasted until the end of the same century.

This wave was formed from a first macro critical juncture, that represented by the 2nd industrial revolution and by the development of capitalism. The main features of the latter consisted of: the birth of the oil industry and the use of the electrical energy; the technological progress – the invention of telephone, of internal combustion engine, of rotary printing presses, etc. –; the overwhelming development of communications, with the construction of trans-continental railway lines; the European emigration towards the Americas; the creation of large banking concentrations whose activity was mainly oriented towards industry financing; the birth of trusts and cartels; the trend towards monopolies, such as those held in the United States by *Standard Oil* and by *U.S. Steel*. This set of elements caused deep social and economic contradictions and imbalances (for a detailed discussion of these issues see Hobsbawm, 1962; 1975; 1987).

*3.6.1 The Russian Narodniks*

As stated before, many authors consider the Russian Narodniks one of the typical populist movement of this period. If, on the one hand, this is not wrong, on the other, it has to be acknowledge, in our opinion, that the Narodniks movement represents a very distinctive phenomenon, and that, as such, it bears little resemblance to subsequent populist parties and movements. In this regard, Hermet, after reminding us that the Academia, the encyclopaedias and the political science consider the emergence of Russian populism during the years 1840-1880 the founding date of populism, claims that «Although justifiable in chronological terms, this option was indeed unique in the sense that it inaugurated the use of the word “populism”, but applied it to a historical manifestation that was barely representative of the forms of expression that this phenomenon would later acquire» (Hermet, 2013: 84). And Paul Taggart (2000), whilst including the Narodiks among his cases study, admits that comparing it with the other populist movements implies many difficulties.

It is easy to say what the difficulties are: the movement contemplated a top-down involvement of the people; the number of its adherents was always very small; it was characterized by an almost total absence of both a popular participation and a people’s collective identity. The interpretations of the phenomenon, for this reason, differ a lot from each other (in addition to Hermer and Taggart, see also Venturi, 1952, Pipes, 1964, Walicki, 1973). But first things first.

It has to be firstly clarified that even if this movement emerged in the Tsarist autocracy, it however derived somehow by the first macro critical juncture. Indeed, the backwardness of the countryside was regarded as beneficial, to the extent that it had prevented the Russian peasants from being corrupted by capitalist modernization; «the people had not been contained with the false values that had come from the West and perverted the cities, as well as the entire Tsarist state» (Hermet, 2013:87).

The rise of the movement cannot however be properly understood if a micro-critical juncture is not taken into consideration too: the abolition of serfdom enshrined by Tsar Alexander II in 1861. This act disappointed the hopes of the peasant population to achieve an improvement in its living conditions, especially because it was not entitled to appropriate the land it had toiled.

Developed in the circles of the Russian *intelligencija*, the movement had a typical elitist trait. Nikolay G. Chernyshevsky, Georgij V. Plekhanov, Michail A. Bakunin, and, above all, Alexander Herzen, were its leading figures. The latter was a politically engaged intellectual who exiled in Paris and London. Here he exerted a deep influence on the radical intellectuals who lived in Russia, especially through the almanac *Poljarnja zvezda* (*The North star*) and the journal *Kolokol* (*The Bell*), both founded by himself and clandestinely distributed in Russia. It was indeed from the page of *Kolokol* that Herzen appealed to the Russian intellectuals to “turn to the people” – an appeal that was received and put into practices just over a decade later by a few thousand young people.

Being formed by different groups, the movement was very heterogeneous. Its main features were represented by: a radical opposition to the tsarist regime; the prospect of a revolutionary change, and the consequent rejection of the gradualist and reformist proposals put forward by the liberal political groups; the mythologisation of the peasant population, of the *mužik*, considered as the true people (Palano, 2017). As far as this latter point, it has to be highlighted that the Narodiks, at least in what Hermet calls their almost idyllic missionary phase, «were driven by a desire to be close to the peasants and the workers […]. It was also the period of populists’ settlement in villages, of participatory fusion with their inhabitants […], of exercising their apostolate in factories» (Hermet, 2013: 91).

From an economic point of view, they intended to promote a reorganization build around the peasant village community *občina* and on the enhancement of the political role of the *mir*, the assembly of family heads, which would have carry out self-government functions. The peasant world was therefore seen as the desired driven force behind an egalitarian and libertarian transformation of society, which should have led to an extinction of the function of the state.

The members, mostly university students, took part in two secret societies: *Land and Liberty* (*Zemlia i Volia*) and *Young Russia*; they amounted to a few hundred members at most, and often their number fell to a few dozen. Just think that at the beginning, in around 1873, the “Turn to the people” involved only 83 activists across Russia. The movement, furthermore, faced not only a massive repression by the regime, which led to the imprisonment of most activists, but also and above all a hard opposition of the same peasant population, insensible to the revolutionary propaganda and deeply attached to the Tsar.

Due to the poor results achieved, a section of *Land and Liberty*, led by Sergey Nechayev, decided to leave the society and to found the revolutionary political organization *The People’s Will* (*Narodnaya Volya*). The latter resort to violence, military actions, assassinations, and bomb attacks, in order to strike at the hearth of the despotic state. On 1 March 1881 a group of adherents assassinated the Tsar Alexander II; this triggered a harsh repression by the regime, which led to the almost complete destruction of the terroristic organization.

*3.6.2. The People’s Party*

The cotton producing areas of the old Confederacy and the wheat cultivation areas of the Great Plains represent the territories of origin of the American *People’s Party*. In this regard, it has to be highlighted that if the first wave of populism derives from the macro-juncture of the industrial revolution and the development of capitalism, this party owes its birth to a micro critical juncture too: the end of the civil war.

The south territories had in fact to face a period of worrying poverty and desolation: monoculture and overproduction of commodity weakened the agricultural sector, which, moreover, experienced a collapse in the value of properties and incomes; in addition, the crop-lien system, that is borrowing against the value of anticipated harvests, quickly led many farmers to the ruin. Even in the more prosperous West the living conditions deteriorated rapidly: the railway companies soon began to acquire control of the colonization of the Great Plains; the removal of obstacles to trade fostered the single crops, and those, in turn, caused overproduction; the monopolistic practices of the companies generated an increase in shipping costs and, therefore, a decrease in farmers’ profits; and in the 1870s a world-wide agricultural crisis broke out.

In sum, the American farmers soon became aware that the end of the war had not given them any material advantage and that, on the contrary, a plutocratic elite was born from it. Moreover, a collective identity began to develop. On the one hand, there were the “people”, comprising those who struggled daily doing a manual job: the craftsmen, the small traders and entrepreneurs, and the farmers. On the other hand, there was the elite, who had enriched itself in a parasitic and immoral way.

This conflict was first politicized by some farmer’s organizations and alliances and later by the *People’s Party* (Kazin, 1998).

The Grangers, the first organizations defending the interests of farmers, developed in this context of post-war crisis. In 1876, ten years after their birth, they were replaced by the farmer’s alliances. In the same year the Greenback Labor Party was founded with the support of the workers’ movement; after having obtained some electoral success, it faded away in no time. The openness of both the democratic and the republican party – whose voter strongholds were located in the rural area of the South (for the first) and the West (for the second) – to the demands and requirements of the North-East capitalist groups gave however rise to the need of founding a third political party which defended the farmer interests.

In February 1892, at the St. Louis convention, the *People’s Party* came into being; in the presidential elections of the same year, it collected 8.5% of the votes.

Formed by a mix of social groups and political organizations with different aims – small farmers overburdened by debt who advocate an increase in the production of paper money; urban workers worried about the increase in the cost of living; prohibitionist; reformers of the monetary circulation; socialists; disciples of Edward Bellamy and Henry George[[23]](#footnote-23) – the party managed to preserve its internal unity thanks to what Michael Kazin calls a “crusade against plutocracy” (Kazin, 1998).

Indeed, the populist reformers and activists believed that the commitment and the sacrifice imposed by the war, fought to defend freedom and one’s ways of life, had been completely useless. A new group of oppressors equipped with huge wealth, advanced technologies and foreign allies had taken power. The anti-union and speculative behavior of corporations such as *Standard Oil*, *Carnegie Steel* and *Pacific Railroad*, their gigantic size and market dominance, had profoundly compromised the principles of laissez-faire. The United States of America had been strayed from the path of righteousness and its destiny was no longer in the hands of the people.

Resting on the traditions of pietism and of Enlightenment rationalism, the activists of the party focused their rhetoric on the metaphor of «salvation from an elite whose power appeared both monstrous and seamless […]. Perhaps, by adhering to principle, the David of Populism would be able to convince enough Americans to join in toppling the Goliath of concentrated wealth and corrupt state power. But failure, warned activists, would guarantee the domination of the “money power” into a dark and distant future» (Kazin, 1998: 28).

The dividing lines between the people and the elite were perceived to have a moral nature, rather than an economic-classist one. The American populists, moreover, did not aim to abolish private propriety, but instead, following the liberal American tradition, to make it accessible to all.

“Money power” and monopoly were the typical terms used by the populists for describing their enemies. The central banks and the investment companies were criticized by the reformers too, especially for having intertwined non-transparent relations with the main manufacturing enterprises: «men like J. P. Morgan and Andrew Carnegie had assembled a malignant force of unprecedented strength and unity of purpose […]. The “money power” now signified a nonproductive, immeasurably wealthy octopus whose long, slimy tentacles reached from private firms on both sides of the Atlantic to grasp every household, business, and seat of government» (*ivi*: 31).

After all, just to have a look at some passages of *The People’s Party Campaign Book*, written in 1982 by Thomas E. Watson, a young leader from Georgia, or at the preamble and at the platform of the party, drafted by the ex-republican congressman Ignatius Donnelly and adopted in Omaha on July 4, 1982, to realize the energy that the populist criticism emanated. The latter, for instance, wrote:

We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot-box, the Legislatures, the Congress, and touches even the ermine of the bench. The people are demoralized […].

We have witnessed for more than a quarter of a century the struggles of the two great political parties for

power and plunder, while grievous wrongs have been inflicted upon the suffering people […]. They propose to sacrifice our homes, lives, and children on the altar of Mammon, to destroy the multitude in order to secure corruption funds from the millionaires […] we seek to restore the government of the Republic to the hands of “the plain people,” with which class it originated […]. We believe that the power of government – in other words, of the people – should be expanded (Donnelly, 1892).

The criticism of the populist movement to the American political system were based, ultimately, on four keynote ideas (Palano, 2017):

* the promises of the democratic ideal had been betrayed by the pervasive power of the plutocracy;
* the Washington political class was corrupt and subjected to the corporations directives;
* democracy is based on the principle of equal opportunities, and accordingly on the recognition of individual independence and responsibility;
* the small village community (and certainly not the corrupt metropolis) represented the heart of the American life, and accordingly reforms aimed at ensuring decentralization and self-government had to be carried out.

The *People’s Party* put forward also concrete proposal of reforms. Among them: a Sub-Treasury Plan, through which the farmers could have deposited the crops in warehouses built by the federal government, receiving negotiable federal notes in return; introduction of a progressive income tax; government ownership of industries of public utilities (railway system, postal service, etc.); free and unlimited coinage of silver.

The party gradually weakened over time until it disappeared completely in 1912. Many factors are behind its downfall: the different viewpoints between the southern and the western sections of the party; the division, within the party, during the presidential election in 1986 between who wanted to support William J. Bryan, the candidate of the democratic party, and who preferred the party to run alone; a fast and unexpected return to economic prosperity, favored by the discovery of new gold mines in Alaska and by the increase in the exports of agricultural products towards Europe.

*3.6.3. Boulangism*

As the *People’s* Party, the movement of Boulangism too represents, in some way, a response to the challenges and to the problems generated by the advent of capitalism and by the process of industrialization. In particular, the French context in which Boulangism arose was characterized by a deep economic, political, and also moral crisis.

Since 1873, the country had experienced an enduring economic decline, mainly caused by commercial liberalism, which had forced it to compete with states economically and industrially far stronger than it. In 1882 France faced a financial crash that brought about an outstanding increase in the level of unemployment. This crisis was inserted in a social fabric that had remained strongly marked by the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871, by the lost war of 1870-71 against the German Empire, and by the consequent loss of Alsace-Lorraine ratified by the Treaty of Frankfurt am Main.

It has to be added that the French parliamentary democracy was not still well developed. Party factionalism raged in the parliament practices and the government was unable both to make both firm decisions and to enforce them. Moreover, some corruption scandals, such as that involving the former Under-Secretary of Finance, Daniel Wilson[[24]](#footnote-24), had already broken out.

In this context of material and moral decadence, the disillusionment and the discouragement of an immense public, encompassing all the urban social groups and all sort of malcontent people, grew rapidly. The urban masses began to consider themselves completely different, from both a material and a moral point of view, from their representatives, who were deemed powerless oligarchs, and from the financiers, the capitalists and the politicians. They moreover proved particularly sensitive to the appeal of the “redeeming knight”, the “saviour” General George Boulanger and his movement (Hermet, 2013).

Boulanger, an officer with republican ideas, was chief of the occupation forces and, from 1886 to 1887, Minister of war. He committed himself in improving the living condition of the soldiers, and, in this way, he managed to secure the loyalty of both them and their families – it has to bear in mind that above all the families of the time have at least a soldier (as husband, father, or son) among their members. At the partial elections of May 1887 he obtained the 12% of the cumulated votes, despite not being candidate nor eligible. This led the government to drive him away from the capital, sending him to the military district of Clermont-Ferrand, thus obtaining the only result of increasing the Boulanger popularity even more. So, in the partial election of 1888 and 1889 he achieved a great result. As Hermet highlights (2013, 96-97), «Boulangism inaugurated a form of charismatic populism […] the characteristic form it adopted was the embodiment of the popular will in a leader who was seen as providential and whose rationally inexplicable power of fascination and control could be understood only in light of the loyal faith that the enthralled crowds had in him».

As many other populist movements, Boulangism represented an ambiguous experience, not well classifiable within the right-left category. In fact, it shifted over time from radical left to radical right political positions, and from a Jacobin-republican to a conservative and reactionary nationalism. It is no coincidence that the movement was endorsed by very heterogeneous political groups, from democrats who advocated strong state, to the nostalgic Bonapartists, to moderate monarchists, up to numerous left-wing currents (Hermet, 2013; see also Hutton, 1976).

In its first steps, Boulangism lived «a “populist” phase, spontaneous in its origins, which centered upon the electoral plebiscite for General Boulanger» (Hutton, 1976: 87). In particular, Boulangism tried to restate the value of the Jacobin ideals – democracy, egalitarianism, nationalism, and so on – reformulating them in a language in accordance with the changes generated by the advent of industrial society.

In fact, the Boulangists, similarly to the American *People’s Party* activists, were extremely worried about the consequences of the rapid industrial concentration in a country, such as France, whose main economic pillar was always represented by handicraft. Despite not opposing industrial development, they feared the concentration of wealth – saw as a “new feudalism” – the capitalists’ individualism, and the possible emergence of a powerful elite. All this would have led, in their eyes, to a dissolution of communal values (Hutton, 1976).

Furthermore, Boulangists thought that the establishment of the Third Republic and the introduction of universal manhood suffrage had not altered the traditional way of doing politics. Informal institutions, such as clubs, parliamentary coteries, electoral conventions and so on, continued to exert a great influence in the political sphere; and the main task of the parliament, in a such context, was that of balancing and satisfying the different interests of these groups. As Patrick H. Hutton has stressed (1976: 96): «Republican in name, political practice remained highly elitist in character, susceptible to the charges of bossism, venality, and favouritism which had been heaped upon parliamentary politics in France for the better part of the century».

In order to contrast these threatens, Boulangism professed the necessity of political involvement and of the people’s integration in the political process. In fact, it «offered the little man who had no party affiliation an opportunity for access to the political process […] its lasting contribution was to provide new options for a political role for the common man» (Hutton, 1976: 96 and 102).

The platform of the *Republican Committee of National Protest*, the Boulangist headquarters, included economic planning aimed at redistributing wealth, social security measures, such as those regarding old-age and accidental insurance, public works projects. The central core of the programme was however constituted by a proposal for revision of the Constitution of 1875, which intended to merge a strong state with a direct democracy. Claiming that sovereignty lies in the people and considering Boulangism as the “party of the people and for the people”, the charismatic general Boulanger had the intention of replacing the parliamentary regime with a strong presidential system, with a plebiscitary plebeian democracy (Hermet, 2013).

The propulsive thrust of the movement, however, quickly ran out. The ban of multiple candidacies undermined the opportunities for Boulangists to be elected. The defeat of the General in a duel against the president of the Chamber of Deputies Charles Floquet, who had just taken up fencing, after a break of twenty years, on the advice of his doctor, weakened his popularity. Fearing a coup, the French government issued an arrest warrant for treason against Boulanger. The latter had, however, already fled, taking refuge in Brussels. Here, in 1891, he committed suicide by shooting himself in the hand on the grave of his lover, madame de Bonnemains, who had died the previous year.

***3.7. The consolidated populism***

The second macro critical juncture is formed by two events: the collapse of the Wall Street stock market in October 1929 and the end of the Second World War. As it is well known, the downfall of the world economy had a disruptive effect on the history of the 20th century. As highlighted by Eric J. Hobsbawm (1994: 86), if this collapse had not taken place «there would certainly have been no Hitler. There would almost certainly have been no Roosevelt. It is extremely unlikely that the Soviet system would have been regarded as a serious economic rival and alternative to world capitalism. The consequences of the economic crisis in the non-European or non-Western world […] were patently dramatic. In short, the world of the second half of the twentieth century is incomprehensible without understanding the impact of the economic collapse».

In contrast to the previous recessionary phases, the Great Slump of 1929-33 seemed to jeopardize the entire economic system of capitalism: the North American industrial economy was hit by a strong recession; a crisis in the production of raw materials and basic foodstuffs broke out; unemployment reached levels never seen before; world trade dropped sharply; a frightful collapse of the coin values and the rapid erosion of the private saving hit the countries losers in the war; in such countries, the middle and lower-middle classes were reduced to poverty; the abandonment of the golden system and the adoption of protectionist measures undermine the belief in the redeeming functions of the economic liberalism.

After all, the capitalism of the years between the two wars was profoundly different from the nineteenth-century laissez-faire economic system; «what was a “free market economy” when an economy increasingly dominated by huge corporations made nonsense of the term “perfect competition”», Hobsbawm wonders (1994: 103).

In Latin America, the collapse of the stock exchange caused a fall in the prices of exported raw materials and a crisis of the liberal age’s oligarchic regimes, which were based on the primary sector export economic model. As Carlos de la Torre remembers, the oligarchical social order «combined liberal-inspires constitutions (division of powers, and elections) with patrimonial practices and values in predominantly rural societies. These estate-based societies had relations of domination and subordination characterized by unequal reciprocity. Institutional and everyday practices of domination excluded the majority of the population from politics and from the public sphere, which were kept in the hands of elites» (de la Torre, 2017: 196; see also de la Torre, 1992). Moreover, these regimes were not able to satisfy the growing demands of democratization and modernization – triggered by the victory of the Allies – coming from the humbler strata of the population. After all, the Latin American masses had shown signs of impatient towards an unmovable caste of rulers who seemed to respect only apparently the principle of popular sovereignty as early as the 1920s (Hermet, 2001). In Latin American, as elsewhere, populism had as its horizon a form of government in which the people were the holders of sovereignty, the undisputed source of the legitimacy of power, the center of social order. It did not matter in this regard that democracy was a very rare commodity at the time. It matters instead that populisms were born as promises to redeem the popular sovereignty that was neglected or trampled on by this or that elite: by the autocracy of Porfirio Diaz in Mexico, by the deceitful democracy of Argentinian Concordancia[[25]](#footnote-25), by the oligarchical pact that characterized the First Brazilian Republic (*República Velha*)[[26]](#footnote-26), and so on (Zanatta, 2013; 2017).

This context represented a breeding ground for the emergence of populist leaders: Perón in Argentina, Vargas in Brazil, Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre in Perú, José María Ibarra in Ecuador. Most of them were able to count on well-organized political parties, which they themselves had established: the Argentina’s Peronist Party, for instance, or the Peru’s APRA (*Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana*).

Such leaders mainly aimed at instating open and free elections, at expanding the franchise, and at incorporating the masses excluded from politics. They were able, indeed, to mobilize different popular constituencies and to foster a change in the relationship between the State and civil society, embodying social groups that had not been included in the political community until then: the *descamisados*, indigenous tribal peoples, and others. In their discourse, the main distinction between the people and the elite was of socio-economic status; the people were intended as demos and were indeed identified with those who lived at the bottom and with the exploited working class. The elite, on the contrary, comprised, according to them, the local oligarchy, the foreign investors, and their political representatives (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

The inclusion of the people in the main spheres of the social, political, and economical life of the country could be achieved offering to the individuals a national, collective identity in which they could recognize themselves. In Brazil, for instance, the collective identity of *brasilianidade* was based on the myth of “racial democracy”, that is on the integration between the three main races of the country: the natives, the descendants of African slaves, and whites. In Argentina of Perón, the ideology of the racial inclusion of immigrants was based on the myth of the melting-pot, on the *Latinidad* and *Hispanidad* of both the Creole elite that had fought for the independence and the immigrants arrived in the country later. But a *Mexicanidad* and a *Chilenidad* developed and spread too (Roninger and Sznajder, 1998).

However, Latin American populists promoted a specific type of democracy. They indeed «privileged notions of democracy based on aesthetic and liturgical incorporation of common people in mass rallies more than the institutionalization of popular participation through the rule of law […]. Populist redemption was based on the authoritarian appropriation of the people’s will […] populist regimes replaced rational deliberation with plebiscitary acclamation» (de la Torre, 2017: 197).

It must in fact be stressed how it is important to «differentiate populisms as regimes in power–where the analysis of state policies and party coalitions is central–from populisms as wider social and political movements, and in turn from populist electoral movements» (de la Torre, 1992: 395-396). As a political movement, the Latin American populism committed itself in bringing into the political system the excluded. But once in power it weakened or even removed the constraints and institution of liberal democracy, strengthened the power of the government and of the premier, exerted a strong control on civil society and restricted freedom of expression and of the press.

But let’s deal with the two most exemplary cases of Latin American populisms, those of Vargas and Perón.

*3.7.1. Vargas*

Coming from an ancient family of landowners, Vargas announced his candidacy for the 1930 presidential election, as representative of the small federal states of South. Despite being defeated, Vargas however took on the presidency, leading an emergence government called to restore order after a series of insurrections against central power (Hermet, 2001; see also Palano 2017).

With the aim of winning the support of the urban working class, Vargas immediately established a Ministry of Labour. In 1934 he promulgated a Constitution which introduced a presidential form of government based on a populist rhetoric and including some form of corporatism–a fifth of the members of the Chamber of Deputies was reserved to the representatives of the professional sectors. But this constitution was only an intermediary step. In 1937, in fact, Vargas approved a new, more authoritarian, Constitution Charter, which established the *Estado Novo*. The Charter abolished the political parties; inspired by Mussolini’s Italy, it replaced parliament with a Corporative Chamber; it extended the presidential term to six years

The Brazilian case shows all the ambiguities and tensions that usually characterized both the ideological profile and the political practice of the Latin American populism. From a ideological point of view, the reference model of the *Estado Novo* were the European authoritarian government of the 1930s, in particular the Italian fascism. Despite this, during the World War II Vargas joined the military alliance of the Allies, and sent a sizeable expeditionary force off into the Italian front. From an economic point of view, he instead promoted anti-imperialism, nationalism, command economy, social protection of workers, large public investments. He indeed nationalized the oil and natural gas sectors; introduced working time limits in both factories and service industry, paid holidays for the employees, an insurance system for workers. At the same time, the Brazilian leader tried to get under control the population, encapsulating it within a network of corporatist trade unions dependent on the State. Through such measures he put himself forward as “the man of Providence”, an indispensable element of an institutionalized populist regime that will be called *Gétulism* (Hermet, 2001).

The leaders’ ambiguity was testified by the different opinions and attitudes the population showed towards him. For many people he was only an unscrupulous dictator; others, instead, considered him as the “Father of the Poor”, since he always fought against an elite formed by the big business and the rich landowners. What is certain is that he attempted to modernize the country in an historical period characterized, on the one hand, by the worsening of the living conditions following the Great Slump, and, on the other, by a strong ideological polarization between communism and fascism.

In 1945 a military coup overthrew the Vargas government. In 1951, however, he was reelected President of Brazil. During his second term, he was not able to revive the country’s economy and to cope with strong opposition and criticism. Rather than accepting the request for his resignation, he preferred to commit suicide.

Maybe, the better way to understand the populist ideals professed by Vargas is in quoting some passages of his testamentary letter:

Once more the forces and interests that oppose the people have been organized and are unleashed upon me […]. They must drown my voice and impede my actions so that I shall not continue to defend the people as I always have, especially the humble […]. I have fought […] yielding myself in order to defend the people who, if I fail, are abandoned. There is nothing more I can give you except my blood. If the birds of prey want someone's blood, if they want to go on draining the Brazilian people, I offer my life as the holocaust.

I choose this way to be always with you. When they humiliate you, you will feel my soul suffering by your side […].

I was a slave to the people, and today I free myself for eternal life. But this people, to whom I was slave, will no longer be slave to anyone […]. I fought against the exploitation of Brazil. I fought against the exploitation of the people. I have fought with my whole heart. Hatred, infamy and slander have not conquered my spirit. I gave my life to you. Now I offer you my death. I fear nothing. Calmly I take the first step toward eternity and leave life to enter History.

*3.7.2. Peronism*

Elected president of Argentina in 1946, Perón gave rise to a political movement which, due to its heterogeneous characteristics, has been compared from time to time to Fascism, Nasserism, Bonapartism, etc. (Taguieff, 2002). Peronism (also called Justicialism) actually represented a typical example of a hybrid regime, which is quite usual for many populist parties. Hybrid in the sense that Peronism, despite having gained power through elections and despite having preserved the liberal institutions of the constitutional states, infringed the principles on which these institutions were founded, and governed in an authoritarian way.

Peronism represented a complex phenomenon, had a long life, and went through several phases. It is here therefore possible to focus only on some of its main features, especially those that qualify it as a typical populist movement.

It has firstly to be highlighted that the social and political background in which Peronism developed was characterized by a gradual detachment between the oligarchic regime and the popular masses, that lived on the edge of the country’s social life and were excluded from political participation. A small oligarchy of breeders held a position of social dominance, and approximately 50 percent of the companies in Argentina was controlled by British and American large industrial groups. It was therefore quite predictable that strong feelings of discontent towards the ruling elite arose among the humbler strata of population.

It is precisely on these feelings that Péron and his *Justicialist Party* took advantage in order to achieve power and to carry out their plans for change. Already during the 1946 presidential electoral campaign, in fact, Péron aimed to promote the emergence of a new historical subject, formed by an alliance between the people and the army, which would have had to face an unspecified “liberal-oligarchic bloc”. The latter was later identified both in the forces that opposed the leader’s political projects and in the international capitalist movement, which had in Sprulle Braden, American ambassador in Buenos Aires, one of its best known prominent members.

Among the “Twenty Truths of the Perónist Justicialism”, presented in a speech of October 17, 1970, made at the Plaza de Mayo, Péron included the following:

1. True democracy is the system where the Government carries out the will of the people defending a single objective: the interests of the people.

2. Perónism is an eminently popular movement. Every political clique is opposed to the popular interests and, therefore, it cannot be a Perónist organization.

[…]

9. Politics do not constitute for us a definite objective but only a means of achieving the Homeland’s welfare represented by the happiness of the people and the greatness of the nation.

10. The two main branches of Perónism are the Social Justice and the Social Welfare. With these we envelop the people in an embrace of justice and love.

[…]

20. The best of this land of ours is its people[[27]](#footnote-27).

The economic policy implemented by Péron aimed to increase the revenues of the urban working classes, also through the adoption of typically Keynesian measure, such as the expansion of public spending, credit subsidies, and so on. Moreover, the same working classes were mobilized through their unionization in professional organization and their automatic enrollment in the *Justicialist Party*. This should have foster the emergence of solidarity between social classes and harmony between capital and work; in this way, the organic unity of the nation would be achieved under the protective wings of the state.

The economic development strategy adopted by the populist regime was based on import substitution industrialization (ISI), that is the replacement of foreign imports with domestic production. The responsibility for economic development and industrial modernization was entrusted to the state, which had not only the task to govern, but also that of driving the social change (Taguieff, 2002).

Within and in line with this framework, the nationalization of public utilities services (railway and telephone networks, *Banco Central*), which were owned by foreign companies, was carried out.

Beyond to mobilize the popular classes, especially the urban one, to start up an industrialization process, and to adopt a nationalist economic policy, Peronism was characterized for the adoption of the so called *Third Position*. It was a doctrine, an ideal reference for the Argentinian policies and choices, which tried to find an alternative to the opposition between the United States of America and Soviet Union, capitalism and communism, individualism and collectivism. Thus, in the speech to the Legislative Assembly of May 1, 1951, Péron, presenting the thesis of the third position, declared that neither capitalistic individualism nor communist collectivism were able to achieve human happiness. The first leads to the exploitation of the people, and submits them to the «omnipotent, cold and selfish will of money». «Our own people», he added, «have been subjugated for many years by the power of capitalism enthroned in the government of the oligarchy, and have been plundered by international capitalism, which dictated here as if it were at home, through the venal servants of plutocracy». Communism, instead, produces misery, and submits men to the oppressive and totalitarian power of the state.

After about ten years of government, Péron was deposed and lived in exile until 1973, when the military junta was ousted from power. Re-elected president, he died of a stroke the following year.

*3.7.3. Poujadism*

As we have stated previously, the second wave of populism includes also another movement, that of the French Poujadism.

The end of World War II had triggered processes of rapid industrial development and urbanization, both in France and in other countries, included many Latin American ones too. These processes had caused, in turn, a decline in the small-scale agriculture and a consequent depopulation of the countryside.

Provincial shopkeepers and craftsmen, who were very numerous in France[[28]](#footnote-28), were certainly among the professional groups more adversely affected by this change. Their traditional consumer base was gradually dissolving because of the massive migration to cities; the end of post-war rationing impoverished them; and, above all, the initial development of larger retail outlets and supermarkets threatened their own survival. However, the event that triggered the revolt of the shopkeepers and that gave rise to the Poujadist movement was the government’s decision to resolutely contrast the widespread practice of tax evasion. Nothing strange, if one did not take into account the fact that many small retailers had to pay a disproportionate number of taxes (Shields, 2007; see also Fitzgerald, 1970)[[29]](#footnote-29).

So, in July 1953, Pierre Poujade, an unknown stationer and municipal councilor of the small town of Saint-Cére, led a local protest against what was considered an unfair tax system and against the venal tax auditors. The protest suddenly spread throughout France. The movement was officially founded in October of the same year. Its enemies were well identified: «tax officials, politicians, corporate capitalists, technocrats, intellectuals, uncomprehending journalists – so many cosy, metropolitan elites conspiring against the honest toilers of France in the name of “progress”» (Shields, 2007: 69). Its manifesto was rather vague and structured on a few points: convocation of an Estates-General in order to tackle the people’s grievances; introduction of a fair tax system; end of the tax inspections; extension and equality of the social security rights. These ideas were spread through two Poujadist newspapers: *Fraternité Française* and *L’Union*. Finally, in November 1953, the Union for the Defence of Shopkeepers and Artisan (*Union de Défense des Commerçants et Artisans*, UDCA) was founded.

In calling Estates-General, Poujadism «embraced a primitive ideal of direct democracy and associated itself with a popular mythology rooted in the Revolution of 1789: the defence of *les honnêtes gens* against an overbearing regime, what Poujade called “the pure French tradition” of protecting the weak against oppression by the strong […] his care [reffered to Poujade] to attack the Fourth Republic, rather than the Republic per se, calling not for a new model of government but for “a return to the most basic principle of the Republic: the people!”» (Shields, 2007: 81-82).

In 1955 the Faure government fell, and early election were announced for June of the following year. The Poujade’s movement was not wrong-footed by this occurrence, given that it was in a sort of permanent campaign for about a couple of years. A Poujadist party, called (*Union et Fraternité Française*, UFF) was founded in a hurry. This party adopted typical anti-political stances and a negative platform. It indeed appealed to the discontent of the masses, attacked the parties of the whole political spectrum and the financial elites. Poujadist propaganda, James G. Shields stresses (2007: 71), «railed against the “fraud” of parliamentary democracy and “exploitative gangs” growing fat on the toil and suffering of the people […] it espoused the cause of the small man, attacking big capital and the self-serving politicians who promoted it».

The party had also acquired a nationalist nuance, given that it championed the French Union and the retention of the French Algeria. This fact pushed some young nationalist exponents, such as Jean-Marie Le Pen and Jean-Maurice Demarquet, to enter in the movement. In some situation, UFF assumed also xenophobic and anti-Semitic tones.

The intent of the party in relation to the upcoming elections was not to win them, but to put pressure for the convocation of an Estates-General. The party, indeed, abhorred the traditional way of doing politics, and did not want to become one of the many institutionalized parties; the same Poujade decided not to compete in the election, reserving the role of leader unrelated to dirty politics.

The results obtained in the election were amazing. UFF ranked fourth, with a percentage of 11.6, equal to 52 seats out of 596.

The elected did not have any political experience, and they proved incapable of effectively intervening in the parliament. «Those whom Poujade described fondly as “my sausage merchants’ were soon mocked by Le Pen as “these cretins who are going to save France”» (Shields, 2007: 75). Furthermore, a conflict between the original, apolitical, poujadist wing and the nationalist, authoritarian, lepenist wing of the party soon arose. This conflict represented one of the main causes of the rapid disintegration which the party run into. In the 1958 parliamentary elections UFF reached almost 1.5 per cent of the vote, and in those of 1962 only 0.68 per cent.

***3.8. The multifaceted populism***

The third macro critical juncture is represented by globalisation and includes the broad immigration flows and the economic crisis that broke out in 2008. Many comments have been previously made on this juncture, as seen by analysing the works of Kriesi, Bornschier, Azmanova, and Inglehart and Norris.

Let’s add only a few words about the phenomenon of globalisation, given the extraordinary importance it has acquired in recent time. In this respect, Saskia Sassen, for instance, interprets globalisation as the third historical assemblage of territory, authority and rights, that follows the Medieval and the nation-state ones (Sassen, 2006).

First of all, it has to be highlighted that this phenomenon is not one-dimensional, that is it consists in an intensification of worldwide social relations, the latter interpreted in a broad sense, as economic, cultural, politic, and juridical ones. Heavily influenced by the technological development, by the growing speed of transport, and by the IT revolution, this process have took on a particular consistency since the last two decades of the twentieth century, creating a worldwide network of spatial connections and functional interdependencies (Giddens, 1990). Indeed, the date of birth of globalisation cannot be traced back neither, as many authors claim, to the development of the long-distance colonial pillaging in the 16th century, nor, as others stress, to the agreements for governing the cross-border transactions reached at Bretton Woods in July 1944. The former was not intended to create a global economy; rather, the «major powers in Europe in the mid-sixteenth century shared a need for imperial geographies to build national political economies to accumulate national wealth» (Sassen, 2006: 88). The latter, in turn, designed a world scale «to govern the international system in order to protect national economies from external forces. In this sense, some of the major systemic features of the Bretton Woods era had more in common with the earlier world scale than with today’s global scale» (*ivi*: 144). Ultimately, the tipping point for entering in the global era is reached in the 1980s, when a new type of economic actors – investment bank, offshore financial markets, etc. – came to the fore, and when a global economic system really emerge, even if, actually, some critical globalising capabilities developed in previous periods (Sassen, 2006).

As it is well known, the phenomenon of globalisation has given rise to an endless debate concerning its effects on both the states and the living conditions of individuals. In this respect, the so-called apologist of globalization – Ohmae (1995), Soros (2000), for instance – consider globalisation as a development, an expansion of modernization and industrial revolution; it is an overwhelming and beneficial process, because it is intended to spread the Western civil society achievements in the rest of the world.

The critics of globalisation, such as the no-global movements, emphasize, on the contrary, its negative effects: the growing polarisation in the wealth distribution, the financial market turbulence, the irrational use of the resources, and so on.

Other authors, including Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson (1996), think that globalization represent a fundamental change in international economy, but that both its novelty and the relevance of its economic effects should be curtailed. And still others (Stiglitz, 2002a), acknowledge that globalization represents a new process, with positive and negative effects. The latter are usually overlooked or underestimated by the dominant elites, and could actually be limited by not leaving globalisation to its own devices. It is not globalisation per se, but the methods by which it is managed that have to be rejected.

In conclusion, it is surely undeniable that a network of social connections and functional interdependencies have developed in recent decades. And it is true that the process of globalisation connects to each other almost exclusively the industrialized countries. However, it also produces significant effects in the areas of the world that are on the edge of the integration processes, and these effects are generally not positive.

*3.8.1. Nationalist populism*

The first type of populism generated by this juncture is nationalist populism. Being identified with the nation, the people are here intended as ethnos; the elites are perceived as agents of a foreign power, even if not as aliens per se, bowing down to cosmopolitanism and globalism; moreover, specific groups of others (as, for instance, ethnic minorities, immigrants, or undeserving beneficiaries of the welfare state) become the scapegoats of the people’s difficult living conditions (Mudde, 2007; Ruzza, 2017).

This kind of populism finds its highest form of expression in the populist radical right (PRR) parties. These parties, Mudde clarifies, are radical because they oppose the core values of liberal democracy, such as, for instance, political pluralism and the constitutional protection of minorities; and they are right-wing because they believe that inequalities are constitutive of the social order. The PRR party family, more in detail, share an ideology whose components are represented by nativism, authoritarianism, and, obviously, populism.

The first component «holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (“the nation”) and that nonnative elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state. The nativist dimension includes a combination of nationalism and xenophobia» (Mudde, 2007: 22). Authoritarianism, instead, represents «the belief in a strictly ordered society, in which infringements of authority are to be punished severely. In this interpretation, authoritarianism includes law and order and “punitive conventional moralism”» (Mudde, 2007: 23). This component does not correspond to an anti-democratic attitude, even if sometimes they are closely related to each other; it does not even imply blind obedience, because it is always possible (although difficult) to criticize and to rebel against a widely-accepted authority. The third component has been addressed in the first section of this book, so there is no need to add anything else to what has already been said above.

On the basis of this definition, Mudde identifies 111 PRR parties in Europe in the period between 1980 and 2005; many of them are still alive today, an others have joined them. Nowadays, in Western Europe the most relevant are the Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ), the Alliance for the Future of Austria (*Bündnis Zukunft Österreich*, BZÖ), Flemish Interest (*Vlaams Belang*, VB), the Danish People’s Party (DF, Dansk Folkeparti), the National Front (FN, *Front National*), the Popular Orthodox Rally (*Λαϊκός Ορθόδοξος Συναγερμός*, LAOS) the Northern League (*Lega Nord*, LN), the Party for Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV), the Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*, SD), and the Swiss People’s Party (*Schweizerische Volkspartei*, SVP) (Mudde, 2017b).

*3.8.2. Latin American neo-populism*

The second type of populism is represented by the Latin American neo-populism or radical populism, which shows similar characteristics to the populism that spread in the same area approximately fifty years earlier, seeking to mobilize the marginal popular classes and to achieve their social and political inclusion. Chávez in Venezuela, Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador are the protagonists of this new upsurge of populism.

As highlighted by many authors (Levitski and Roberts, 2011; de la Torre and Arnson, 2013; de la Torre, 2017), three elements fostered the emergence of the aforementioned leaders:

* A crisis of political representation. In the period preceding the emergence of the radical populism a profound split between the people and the mainstream parties arose. A strong resentment against the established parties, considered subjected to the will of local and foreign elites only interested in exploiting the people, rapidly spread.
* A widespread popular resistance to neoliberalism. In the all three Latin American countries, many uprisings and turmoil preceded the seizure of power by the populist leaders. These protests were triggered by different events: the hike in the gasoline price in Venezuela, many political corruption scandals in Ecuador, the water privatization, growing taxation, the sale of the gas reserves to multinational corporations, and the uprooting of coca plantations in Bolivia.
* A shared perception that the national sovereignty had shifted to foreign actors, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the United States. This perception stemmed from the fact that the governments had adopted economic policies aimed at implementing neoliberal reforms and free trade.

These policies heightened the social and economic exclusion of the disadvantaged classes and the indigenous people, thus hampering the access of the poor to their constitutional rights.

In this context, the platforms promoted by the radical populist leaders planned first of all to get rid of the corrupt politician and the established parties. The enemy of the people was indeed identified in the oligarchic and corrupt government, with the white elites that had fostered the exploitation of national resources by the foreign companies, that had privatized the state, using it for their own interests, and that had plundered the nation’s wealth (Coronil, 1997; de la Torre, 2007). The virtuous people, instead, were considered being mainly formed by the urban poor and the mestizos; but Morales gave to the people a different meaning, identifying it with the indigenous people.

Another key element of the platforms was the implementation of participatory forms of democracy. The radical populist leaders «claimed to be the embodiment of superior forms of democracy that would solve the participatory and representative deficits of liberal democracy, and fulfill the democratizing goal of promoting equality and social justice» (de la Torre, 2017: 201). However, they did not really have the same idea of democracy and participation.

Correa believed that democracy corresponded to the state ability in enhancing social justice. Moreover, he did not promote concrete forms of participatory democracy. He indeed established a sort of technopopulism, where technocratic experts, gathered in The National Secretariat of Planning and Development (*Secretaría Nacional de Planificación y Desarrollo* SENPLADES), had the main task to modernize Ecuador and to liberate the people, without any direct participation of the latter. The rule of the people was narrow down at acclaiming the technocratic elite during periodic plebiscites (de la Torre, 2020).

Chavez, instead, thought that an authentic democracy could be achieved only instating new direct and participatory forms of democracy. He created populist organizations, such as Bolivarian Circles, from the top down. The main purposes of these circles consisted in serving the interests of their community, organizing supporters and common people, discussing local issues, channeling demands, etc. As admitted by Kirk A. Hawkins and David Hansen (2006: 104), these circles «lacked one of the most fundamental attributes of a civil society capable of sustaining participatory democracy: autonomy from the state […] they embodied a strong charismatic linkage to Chávez that undermined their unique sense of identity and frequently compromised their ability to act independently. In addition, through their uncritical acceptance of current government aid programs, they participated in a system with strong clientelistic overtones that undermined the principle of citizenship essential to democracy» (see also de la Torre, 2017).

Morales, finally, identified democracy with new forms of indigenous communal democracy, that would have strengthened the political participation of the indigenous people. The participatory populism of Morales, finally, was essentially bottom-up. His party, the Movement for Socialism (*Movimiento al Socialismo*, MAS), was indeed «the political instrument of strong social movements. Participation in Bolivia remains to a large extent grounded in communitarian traditions, where all participate and deliberate until a decision is made» (de la Torre, 2020: 103). The Bolivarian network of autonomous movement organizations was indeed able to affect the government’s decisions, to negotiate with it, and even to challenge Morales in the name of the people. It managed, for instance, to impede the increase in the price of gasoline, or to block the plan to build a road through the *Territorio Indígena Parque Nacional Isibor-Sécure*.

A third key element of the radical populist platforms was represented by the request of State intervention in economy, in order to redistribute wealth and so lower the gap between the richest and the poorest.

The goals of these manifestos had to be achieved through a transformative and revolutionary constituent power, which means that constitutional assemblies, together with social movement and common citizens, should have on the one hand to expand the basic individual rights and to grant these rights also to the previously excluded and disadvantaged people, and, on the other hand, to concentrate power in the presidency. Actually, just this concentration of power will lead, in Venezuela and Ecuador, to a dismantlement of the liberal system of check and balances, to a repression of the free and independent press, to a total control of the institutions of accountability and of the courts of justice, to a restriction of information and association freedoms. In the end, the populist democracy shifted towards what can be called electoral authoritarianism (de la Torre, 2020).

*3.8.3. European radical left populism*

The third type of populism is embodied by some radical left parties and therefore represents a progressive form of populism. In Western Europe populism has almost always been referred to the radical right party family. However, the increasingly visibility of the populist radical left (PRL) parties in the European context, due to the diffusion of a populist *Zeitgeist*[[30]](#footnote-30)*,* has led many authors to deal with this issue (March, 2011; Rooduijn and Akkerman, 2017; Charalambous and Ioannou, 2020; Damiani, 2020).

Two features qualify these parties as radical:

* their rejection of «the underlying socio-economic structure of contemporary capitalism and its values and practices (ranging, depending on party, from rejection of consumerism and neo-liberalism to outright opposition to private property and capitalistic profit incentives)» (March, 2011: 25);
* their advocacy of «alternative economic and power structures involving a major redistribution of resources from existing political elites» (*ibidem*).

And other two features qualify them as leftist:

* their «identification of economic inequality as the basis of existing political and social arrangements and their espousal of collective economic and social rights as their principal agenda» (*ibidem*);
* their anti-capitalism, which «is more consistently expressed than anti-democratic sentiment, although a radical subversion of liberal democracy may be implicit in the redistributive aims of many parties» (*ibidem*).

With regard to this last point, all the authors concur that the PRL parties, given the political opportunity structures of the Western European countries’ political systems, are not in general anti-system parties, but rather anti-establishment ones. In fact, although they intend to replace the governing elite and hold a resentment toward the political system, they however do not want to subvert the latter (Damiani, 2020). Moreover, they do not refuse – at least in words – the democratic rules and procedures, even if they aim to enhance them implementing forms of direct or participatory democracy (March, 2011).

A last distinguishing feature of the PRL parties would consist, according to Luke March, in their internationalism, term by which they intend on the one hand the creation a network of international relations, and, on the other, the relationships between local problems and inequalities and global issues and powers.

These political parties are populist in juxtaposing the “moral people” against the “corrupt elite” and in aiming to become the *vox populi* rather than the vanguard of the proletariat. The people are intended here to represent the totality of globalization losers; thus, these parties strive to defend against economic insecurity. Moreover, the populist radical left parties consider the EU as a vanguard of globalization and criticize it for its support of free-market integration at the expense of state-led regulation (March, 2011).

Clearly, the number of the PRL parties is much lower than that of the PRR ones. Nowadays, among the main PRL parties of Western Europe we have to be included: The Workers’ Party of Belgium(*Partij van de Arbeid van België*, PVDA), Unbowed France (*La France insoumise*, FI),theSocial Democrat Party(*Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus*, SDP), the Coalition of the Radical Left (*Συνασπισμός Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς*, *SYRIZA*), Sinn Féin (*Sinn Féin*, SF), theSocialist Party (*Socialistische Partij*, SP), and the Podemos movement (*Podemos*).

*3.8.4. Populism neither leftist nor rightist*

Finally, the fourth type of populism is characterized by how it locates itself outside the classical political right-left axis. The Five Stars Movement (*Movimento 5 stelle*, FSM)[[31]](#footnote-31) represents one of the best paradigmatic examples of this form of populism. Founded by the comedian Beppe Grillo in 2009, the movement has acquired growing consensus in a short period. Due to the incessant scandals regarding political corruption and, above all, to the privileges of an immovable “caste” of politicians – both on the left and on the right of the political spectrum –, most of the citizens came to have an increasing mistrust in politics and to see themselves increasingly distant and detached from the political elites[[32]](#footnote-32).

This outbreak of discontent offered to the political forces explicitly critical toward the establishment the opportunity to gain a broad consensus. Actually, Grillo and the FSM have proven capable of mobilising the anti-establishment resentment, of providing a political outlet for the protest, and a common identity based on the elite-people dichotomy to the individuals.

In fact, the political worldview of the FSM rests on the juxtaposition between the “good people” and the “bad elite”. The latter includes the political “caste”, that is considered the main responsible for the country’s awful economic and social situation, and other two castes, that is the economic powers, and the media. As Grillo clarified in his blog in 2013:

The castes are united together and form an immense body, a super social group […] which feeds on the blood of those who produce […]. The castes do not derive their power from controlling means of production, but from controlling means of information […]. The political caste, the caste of the newspapers, the bureaucracy caste, the caste of the central government, the caste of unnecessary bodies … the Italian caste is like a parasite that kills the body that hosts it (quoted in Ivaldi, Lanzone and Woods, 2017: 359-360).

Statements of the same tone can also be found in the manifestos for the 2009 and 2013 elections. In the opening section of the 2013 programme, for instance, it was stated that the «Parliament does not represent citizen any longer, as they cannot vote for candidates, but only party symbols […]. Parties have replaced popular will and avoid its control and judgment» (quoted in Mosca and Tronconi, 2019: 1267).

The mainstream parties, that is the centre-left Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, PD) and the centre-right People of Freedom party (*Popolo della Libertà*, PDL), were considered similar and very close to each other, so much that the first was called “PD minus L”. Both of them have betrayed and have cheated the virtuous people, that is the common men who experience the difficulties of everyday life, such as workers, retirees and small entrepreneurs.

The movement’s anti-establishment claims result in an advocacy of deliberative and participatory democracy through the introduction of the binding mandate, law-making referendum without quorum, the recall election. But the novelty of the FSM can be found in its proposal of a direct “internet democracy” as an alternative to the representative one. The movement, in fact, gives to the new media the ability to «put the power directly in the hands of the people», to enact a «bottom-up deliberative democracy» (Ivaldi, Lanzone and Woods, 2017: 369). In this respect, the FSM “Rousseau” online participatory platform, open to the movement activists, represents an experiment of this kind of democracy on a small scale.

The ideological profile of FSM cannot be reduced to the sole anti-establishment stance. In order to better understand this profile it is therefore necessary to dwell on two other issues that, given their importance, the movement had to face: economy and immigration (Mosca and Tronconi, 2019).

Concerning the economy, the FSM has always characterized for proposing a mix of leftist and conservative-right economic policies.

The former include the assignment of a central role to the state and the public intervention in promoting the economic development; the expansion of the welfare state; the opposition to the austerity measures vehemently fostered by the European institution (“Troika” and SME); and, moreover, the request for an universal basic income (*reddito di cittadinanza*), that was actually introduced in 2019.

The latter encompass the reduction of taxes on enterprises, measures to support small and medium enterprise, the repeal of the municipal tax property and of the hated and feared tax enforcement agency *Equitalia*.

Finally, even if the FSM does not have a clear position on the issue of immigration, it however approaches the problem through the lens of both international humanitarianism and national securitization. In the 2018 electoral manifesto, for instance, after having expressed restrictive declarations on the reception of migrants, four policy proposal regarding the establishment of legal channel of access to Europe, the revision of the Dublin III regulation, faster procedures for the recognition of the refugees’ status, and the embargo on the sale of weapons, were made (Mosca and Tronconi, 2019).

The FSM’ populism, in conclusion, shows original and contradictory features. It is indeed anti-establishment, and, with regard to other issue, it adopts an approach that is neither leftist nor rightist, or, if it is preferred, both leftist and rightist. It is no coincidence that it has been defined as “centrist” and “eclectic” (Mosca and Tronconi, 2019), or as “polyvalent” (Pirro, 2018). As Andrea L.P. Pirro clarifies (2018: 445), «the “polyvalent” nature of the M5S’s populism would rest in *the ability to push the “thin-centred” nature of the populist ideology to its zenith by being able to detach itself from any particular ideology, and/or attach itself to diverging but coexisting ideologies*».

**4 - The dark side of populism: from anti-liberal configuration to populist plutocracy**

We have previously tried to show how, since the democratic revolutions, Western countries have been pervaded by strains among different ideas and practices of democracy – namely, the elitist, constitutional, and participatory conceptions. We have also highlighted how, according to many authors, with whom we agree, populism tends to emerge when the people’s participation in the decision-making processes has been restricted, when democracy has sharpened and radicalized its elitist traits, or when a merely formal and procedural conception of democracy has been achieved. In opposition to these conceptions of democracy, populism would consider the participatory form of democracy as the best.

Based on this conclusions, we consider worthwhile to take into account the possible effects that populism may have on the democratic form of government. This issue undoubtedly represents one of the crucial point on which the literature on populism has focused on over time. In particular, many authors have emphasized the pro-democratic and pro-systemic inner nature of populism (see, for instance, Canovan 1981 and Arditi 2003), whereas others have shed light on its anti-liberal and anti-systemic drift (Abts and Rummens, 2007; Pappas, 2014). In the first part of this section, we will then dwell just on this double face of populism, following, in particular, the insights of Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt (1998; 1999) about the paradoxes of democracy and the differences between the republican and the communitarian version of participatory democracy. The issue at hand is certainly very controversial, and it is not therefore our ambition to put an end to a discussion that will remain open for a long time. We are rather particularly interested in exploring the “dark side” of populism, that is the challenges it can pose to the democratic institutions of any country.

In this respect, the second part of the section will tackle the rise of a phenomenon almost always overlooked by the scholars and the political analysist to date: the populist plutocracy. The accession to power in many parts of the world of outsider plutocrats who have adopted populist strategies and styles of communication have in fact foster, according to us, a deep transformation of democracy, which has acquired the traits of a populist plutocracy. First of all, this study will attempt to clarify the meaning of the concept analysing the thesis of the leading scholars on two previous similar phenomena: plutocracy and demagogic plutocracy. It then will examine three case studies of populist plutocrats, which are Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand, and Donald Trump in the United States.

***4.1. Populism and democracy: participation and anti-systemic configurations***

Participatory democracy, as Eisenstadt highlights (1998; 1999), has two types, the republican and the communitarian, and the latter can in turn assume both moderate and radical forms.

The first conceives political participation as a duty of the citizens; this consists in incessant deliberations on relevant issues, especially those concerning the common good, taken within the existing rules and institutions. Citizens usually trust the latter, as they are believed to form part of the civic tradition of the community.

Even if this conception is in general neutral towards the governmental objectives and range of action, many of its exponents usually believe that they should not be too broad, especially with reference to private property. Indeed, unlike the classical liberals, the republicans think that private property does not rest on basic natural rights, but that it rather represents a necessary condition so that the citizens could freely – that is without any economic concern – exercise their civic duties (Eisenstadt, 1998).

The second is actually a family of conceptions. Generally, it considers participation as the main right of the citizens, who are given the ability to control the rules and to decide upon them. In this way, it counterposes itself to liberalism, because the latter emphasizes too much the relevance of electoral competition and the differences and divisions among the citizens, so proposing an atomistic portrayal of society. On the contrary, the development of a society which offers to its members the opportunity for effective participation and which reinforces the community bonds among them, allows those members to acquire the necessary skills to participate in a fruitful way, to become responsible, and to behave unselfishly.

Differently from the participatory conception of democracy, which stresses the importance of the development of autonomous, but potentially isolated, citizens (see section 2 of this book), the sub-type of communitarian democracy has its main objective in integrating the individuals into a community and emphasizes the relevance of the inclusion of all the members of the social community into the political community. A meaningful autonomy and a meaningful live can be indeed experienced only within a community (Katz, 1997). In this way, participation is seen as a tool through which the common good is defined, or even as the same common good. Moreover, participation is often deemed more important than the maintenance of the main representative institutions.

If, as we have seen (section 2), the liberal and the pluralist conceptions of democracy legitimates themselves on the basis of the ideas of freedom and multiple interests, for «the various communitarian/participatory conceptions of democracy, equality has predominated – whether of responsible citizen, of members of the overall social community, of the local community, or of the community of the work place» (Eisenstadt, 1998: 221).

This second conception is not internally consistent. Generally, it views the state and the other collective agencies in a positive way, because their main tasks consist in providing the basic services to the community and in fairly redistributing the economic resources. Sometimes, however, the same institutions are seen in a worse light, because they tend to undermine the citizens’ political participation, or to perpetuate the unequal distribution of resources. Moreover, if, on the one hand, the communitarian conception promotes participation at every level of social life and accordingly sympathizes with associations, on the other, in supporting a direct and non-mediated form of participation, it sometimes looks with suspicion at the formal features of these associations, conceiving them as no more than representatives of specific interests. In a radical approach, this conception reaches as far as to not giving any value to the representative institutions.

As we have seen in the second section of this book, according to the liberal or constitutional conception of democracy, the constitutional arrangements and rules represent the core element of democratic regimes. But for the communitarian perspective things are different. In fact, as Eisenstadt sharply points out (1989: 219): «Even among the milder versions of communitarian participatory democracy, which accept the necessity and legitimacy of both representative and intermediary institutions or associations, neither such institutions nor the rules of the constitutional-democratic game are conceived as constituting the central core of democracy».

These two different forms of participatory democracy vie with one another continually, thus pulling populism in opposite directions

Indeed, in supporting a republican or a moderate communitarian version of democracy, populism may come to represent a sort of antidote that helps democracy to revitalize itself, fostering the appropriate measures to enhance the people’s political participation and to reduce the gap between the people and the elite: the institutions of the referendum, the recall election, etc.; populism is, therefore, essentially pro-systemic because it does not strive to go beyond the democratic form of government; rather, it may lead, as has been emphasized by many authors (Canovan 1981; Arditi, 2003), to a sort of hyper or radical democratism.

However, some integral features – both defining and facilitating – of populism as well as the specific characteristics of the ideologies with which populism merges itself may push it towards the radical communitarian version of democracy and towards an anti-liberal, sometimes also anti-systemic, configuration. The political conflict, indeed, may come to focus on the different conceptions both of the constitution and of the national political system’s organization; the democratic system of decision-making and control may come to be at stake, and the populist political forces may finally implement authoritarian forms of government on behalf of the nation as a whole.

The monolithic conception of the people as a homogeneous unity, for instance, may imply not only, as previously highlighted, the marginalization of specific groups but also the rejection of the opinions of those who disagree with the majority; this entails, accordingly, the erosion of pluralism and deliberation. As pointed out by Katz in reference to the concept of community: «The individual is totally identified with the community and in fact ceases to exist as an autonomous political personality. “The government embodies the unitary community …– the citizen is the community, which is the state – and thus functions directly in the name of the citizenry”. Thus, opposition to the government as the community’s voice is possible only from someone outside the community, so that dissent becomes indistinguishable from apostasy, indistinguishable in turn from treason» (Katz, 1997: 80). Furthermore, conceiving that verbatim the “peoples’ government” means, as highlighted by many scholars including Kriesi (2015), to discard the liberal system of checks and balances.

Moreover, perceiving the people as a homogeneous entity entails that the people’s will can be considered as something of a transparent nature, immediately accessible to charismatic leaders who aim to hear the people’s voice. These latter are usually outsiders who are able to embody the people’s demands; they have a direct, unmediated ability to discern the complaints of the people and to act as spokespersons of the people’s voice. Most of the time, these leaders tend to overcome the political parties’ role – as that of other organizations or agencies – and to reduce their power; indeed, in their opinion, the parties bring about artificial divisions within the homogeneous people and corrupt the bond between the leaders and the supporters. It is not by chance that the populist parties are usually personal parties, meaning that the charismatic leader dominates his party, that the length of the party life depends on the length of the leader’s political life, and that the political communication is focused on the leader (Mudde, 2004; Abts and Rummens, 2007; Kriesi, 2015).

Finally, when the thin-centred ideology of populism merges with ethno-nationalism, it suddenly acquires authoritarian traits, and anti-immigrant xenophobia prevails in the anti-elitist discourse; accordingly, the democratization requests become secondary, if not even decorative, whereas the appeal to defend the group identity obtains greater relevance (Taguieff, 2002).

If we now have a look to the three populist waves, we can note how some populist parties or experiences have tended to realize a republican or, at least, a moderate communitarian form of democracy, whereas others have been more in favour of the radical communitarian version, regardless of which wave these parties belong to.

The *People’s Party*, for instance, represents the perfect example of a protest movement that tried to enhance the functioning of democracy. Indeed it did not question, as highlighted by Hermet (2013), the core values of American democracy and the Constitution; the party was substantially reformist because it aimed to stifle the abuses committed by the political elite and the powerful businessmen. In addition, it strived to gain power through electoral means and did not intend to overthrow existing institutions.

Just over a century later, the *Five Star Movement* was founded also with the goal of restoring the normal functioning of Italian democracy. For instance, in the course of the final meeting of the 2013 electoral campaign, Grillo declared the intention to further a «democratic and non-violent revolution that raises the powers and overthrows the pyramids. The citizen becomes the State and enters Parliament». Moreover, the protest collective action of V-Day organized by Grillo a few years before had promoted three law initiatives: prohibiting convicts from being candidates for Parliament; establishing a maximum of two legislatures for the members of Parliament; and introducing direct preference in the political elections.

Let us now consider the parties and experiences that followed a different path from that just described, fostering a radical communitarian form of democracy and sometimes coming to establish authoritarian forms of government.

The deep ambiguities of populism are certainly well exemplified, for instance, by Boulangism. Indeed, although «the nationalist orientation of Boulangism revealed, without a doubt, an authoritarian and militaristic approach, it nonetheless pursued a heterodox democratic project» (Hermet, 2013, 96). Actually, the project of Boulangism was to modify the 1875 Constitution, to overthrow the parliamentary system, and to implement a unifying plebiscitary and Caesaristic form of democracy based on the sovereignty of the people embodied by a leader and on the binding mandate.

In a different geographical and temporal context, the Latin American consolidated populism also arrived at results that are in some ways at odds with the republican participatory democracy. As has well pinpointed by Zanatta (2017), this kind of populism represented an anti-liberal reaction that drew on the organicist and corporatist tradition that spread in the region through the colonial expansion of the Christian empires of Spain and Portugal. Due to deep social inequalities based on both economic and ethnic differences, the groups of people that fostered social and political inclusion considered liberal democracy as strange and hostile; on the contrary, these groups were in most cases in favour of the archaic communitarian democracy that was invoked by the populist leaders, intolerant towards the mediations and the institutions of representative democracy, and striving to unify the people against its internal and external enemies.

Therefore, according to the Latin American populist forces of the mid-twentieth century, an authoritarian but popular regime devoted to “social justice” seemed to be the most authentic form of democracy.

Finally, looking at the Europe of the eighties and nineties, it is possible to observe that the conception of democracy promoted by the populist radical right parties was also at odds with liberal democracy. In an empirical study, Mudde (2007) maintains that although these parties are not antidemocratic in a procedural sense, they oppose some fundamental values of liberal democracy, most notably, political pluralism and the constitutional protection of minorities. Indeed, in interpreting societies as homogeneous collectives, the radical right populist discourse promotes a monist and communitarian version of democracy that is most strongly expressed in its nativism (mono-culturalism or ethnocracy), authoritarianism (pushing the limits of the rule of law in favour of a state of security), and populism (the “general will” of the people cannot be limited by anything). Therefore, the preference of populist radical right parties is to-wards an ethnocratic regime with strong authoritarian and plebiscitary elements. Consequently, as stated by Mudde (2007, 156), «the more liberal a democracy is, the more antisystem the populist radical right will be. Similarly, we can posit that the more ethnic and plebiscitary a democracy, the more pro-system the populist radical right».

***4.2. The populist plutocracy: a short introduction***

The dark side of populism does not include only the possibility that democracy could assume worrisome authoritarian traits, but also, as already noted, the possible transformation of democracy in populist plutocracy.

The discussion of this topic can be approached by remembering first of all that since the mid-nineties onwards, some of the richest men in the world have entered in politics, so promoting a deep transformation of the field of politics itself, and an erosion of the boundaries between politics and the economy. The thought goes first of all to those leaders who became prime ministers or president of the republic in their respective countries: Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand, Christoph Blocher in Switzerland, Sebastián Piñera in Chile, Mauricio Macri in Argentina, Andrej Babis in the Czech Republic, and, obviously, Donald Trump in the Usa. But also other billionaires, such as Ross Perot in the Usa, Bogoljub Karić in Serbia, Boris Kollár in Slovakia, and Aivars Lembergs in Latvia, can be mentioned.

Due to the fact that some of the aforementioned leaders have used the populist discourses and rhetoric, many scholars have analysed their political carriers and their decisions adopting a populist perspective. In this vein Taguieff, for instance, defines those leaders as “telepopulist” demagogues, since they resort to a «form of populism adapted to the demands of television and able to inflect each of the classical type of populism» (Taguieff, 1997: XVIII). Other scholars, instead, have preferred to focus on their wealth, and consider them as a typical example of plutocrats which are mainly driven in their actions by a patrimonial instinct. Referring to Berlusconi, Paul Ginsborg maintains for instance that the ex-prime minister had a patrimonial conception of the State, in which public and private, government and patrimony, State and person are not separated. In addition, the author clarifies: «Personal authority and charisma […], unlimited acquisitive ambitions and ownership, the arbitrary whim of the patron resting on a weakened rule of law, the reciprocity of favours, all these are cornerstone of Berlusconi’s project» (Ginsborg, 2005: 119).

These two different perspectives are usually adopted in a completely separate way, that is just a few analysis focus simultaneously both on the wealth and on the populism that would characterized some of the aforementioned leaders. A conference on the so called “populist plutocrats” was actually held in September 2017 at Harvard Law School. Even if it focused the attention on some populist plutocrats, namely Berlusconi and Thaksin, or on the resistance to the projects and objectives of other populist plutocrats, such as those of Joseph Estrada in the Philippines, Alberto Fujimori in Peru and Jacob Zuma in South Africa, it did not clarify in detail the meaning of the term populist plutocrat. The only references to the concept were made in the opening relation and in the summary of the conference programme, that briefly described the populist plutocrat as «a leader who exploits the cultural and economic grievances of poorer, less-educated voters against traditional elites in order to achieve and retain power, but who, once in office, seem substantially or primarily interested in enriching him- or herself, along with a relatively small circle of family members, cronies, and allies». Other works on the topic, which mostly try to apply the concept to the study of single cases, can be found, but they are not very numerous – see, for instance, the interesting analysis of Chris Baker on Thaksin (2005).

Furthermore, no reflection, as far as I know, has been made about the possibility that the accession to power of these leaders could promote a peculiar form of government, that is the populist plutocracy. On this possible outcome of populism it is therefore now necessary to draw our attention. In order to clarify what the term does really mean, the paragraph below will be devoted to exploring in a concise way the history of the concept of plutocracy from its conception by the Greek philosopher to its more recent application to the globalization phenomenon.

***4.3. For a history of the thought on plutocracy***

Many scholars, during the time, have used the term plutocracy for describing some aspects of the political and social situation in which they lived. Close to a scientific use of the term, it can be found also a polemical use, that sometimes mixes with the first one; moreover, this polemical usage has not a distinctive political connotation, and a democracy characterized by clear plutocratic traits has been criticized both from the right and the left of the political spectrum. Talking about a history of such a concept is probably not entirely correct too, because a settling or a stratification of the concept meaning is almost completely absent: every period, movement or author has tackle the issue as it were the first time, without any clear reference to what was previously said or written (Barbieri, 2016).

Xenophon is probably the first thinker who used the term plutocracy, whereas Plato and Aristotle will prefer the term oligarchy, to qualify the form of government in which the magistrates are chosen among the richest. The Greek philosopher considered this form of government as not righteous, insofar as it protects exclusively the wealthy, since wealth is incompatible with virtue, and because those who are money-hungry cannot improve themselves in any way.

In the modern age, the term was used within the so called utopian socialism, in particular by one of its renowned exponents, Pierre Leroux. The social and economic background of his reflection, such as of other thinkers – the sociologist William Graham Sumner, for instance, or the founding fathers of the American populism – is represented by the deep antagonisms and imbalances produced by the industrial revolution and the development of capitalism.

In *De la ploutocratie ou du gouvernement des riches*, written in 1843, he carefully analyzes the socio-economic stratification of his time, and strongly criticizes the bourgeois elite which holds much of the county’s wealth. His analysis show that the political and financial power is in the hands of a small number of bourgeois family (about 46,000 units); the lever of power are controlled by a narrow plutocracy. The plutocrats, Leroux states, «draw up the state budget and rule pursuing their own interest. The political law is subordinate to the economic law […]. If they were able to preserve this situation as it is, I would propose that the nation replace the cult of the proletarian Jesus with the cult of the god Pluto» (Leroux, 1843: 260; our translation).

An analysis of plutocracy and of the consequences it produces on the American political life can be found in many works of Sumner, who have many merits. He has indeed distinguished the figure of the plutocrat from that one of the capitalist; he has identified the political use of the capital as the main criterion to define the plutocrat; he has linked the appearance of the plutocracy to the modern age; he has examined the relationship between democracy and plutocracy; and finally, he has been the first to shed light on the demagogical aspect of plutocracy.

According to Sumner (1888: 143-144), a plutocracy is «a political form in which the real controlling force is wealth […]. The principle of plutocracy is that money buys whatever the owner of money wants». As just said above, Sumner does not mistake plutocracy for capitalism: «Not every rich man is a plutocrat […] a great capitalist is no more necessarily a plutocrat than a great general is a tyrant» (Sumner 1889: 145-146). For Sumner, the plutocrat is

a man who, having the possession of capital, and having the power of it at his disposal, uses it, not industrially, but politically; instead of employing laborers, he enlists lobbyists. Instead of applying capital to land, he operates upon the market by legislation, by artificial monopoly, by legislative privileges; he creates jobs, and erects combinations, which are half political and half industrial; he practises upon the industrial vices, makes an engine of venality, expends his ingenuity, not on processes of production, but on “knowledge of men”, and on the tactics of the lobby (*ivi*: 146).

The author considers the plutocracy as «the most sordid and debasing form of political energy known to us» (*ivi*: 144), and believes that democracy and its institutions can favor the advent of plutocracy. The latter is characterized by a small and strong organization, clear objectives, and a strict discipline, whereas the masses are disorganized, do not have clear interests and ideas, are not able to control themselves. After all, the plutocrats do not hesitate in seducing, lying, and corrupting the masses. Indeed,

The masses continually trust the demagogs who flatter them and make them all sorts of promises, but deceive them and betray them to the plutocrats. They refuse to trust the “gentlemen”, who would not promise much and would perhaps tell unflattering truths, but would not lie and would not betray (Sumner, 1880: 268).

Born in Paris in 1848, the sociologist Vilfredo Pareto wrote his main works between the early 1900s and 1923, the year of his death; he is therefore a contemporary of Sumner, whose writings however he did not know. His reflections on the “demagogic plutocracy” refer to the period after the First World War, that the well-known historian Eric J. Hobsbawn defined the age of catastrophe[[33]](#footnote-33). According to Pareto, this period was characterized by three trends: the weakening of central authority and growth in the forces of anarchy, the transformation of sentiments of the bourgeoisie and of the class that still rules, and rapid movement on a cycle of demagogic plutocracy (Pareto, 1921).

As for the last point, the author pointed out that since the last part of the 19th century the classes of the wealthy speculators and of wage earners – especially the factory workers – were gradually acquiring greater relevance. Although these classes traditionally aimed to safeguard divergent interests, they began to ally each other in order both to impose themselves over the state and to exploit the other social classes – in particular the property owners and the military. This ally was however absolutely neither transparent nor equal.

In particular, Pareto thought that the slowdown of the circulation of elites, the spread within that class of the humanitarian sentiments, and the growing of the industrial and the commercial interests, have favored the class guided by the “instincts of combinations”[[34]](#footnote-34) – namely the plutocracy – to gain the power. Plutocracy, however, does not have the necessary strength to stay in power; it therefore seeks to ally with workers. It has to be nevertheless clear that the «plutocrats are able to forge an effective union because they are astute and can deceive the masses by manipulating public sentiment. This gives rise to the widely observed phenomenon of demagogic plutocracy» (Pareto, 1921: 55).

To the age of catastrophe refers also the reflections of Oswald Spengler and Gabriel A. Almond on plutocracy. The first, at the time an unknown secondary school teacher of science, German history, and mathematics, in his *The Decline of the West* criticizes the parliamentary democracy, doomed to assume clear plutocratic traits. The issue is tackled by Spengler when he analyses the phenomenon of the development of bourgeoisie or the Third Estate and of the towns. If in fact «by “democracy” we mean the form which the Third Estate as such wishes to impart to public life as a whole, it must be concluded that democracy and plutocracy are the same thing under the two aspects of wish and actuality, theory and practice, knowing and doing» (Spengler, 1922: 401).

As the work of Sumner, also that of Spengler contains some interesting considerations, though not widely developed, relating to the relationship between plutocracy and manipulation. For the thinker, the erosion of the caste and the professional classes have engender a shapeless mass that can be easily manipulated by the political forces. The struggle for dominion turns into a strength for the control of the media, which can orient the public opinion in one or another direction. For the multitude, the truth is

that which it continually reads and hears […] the public truth of the moment, which alone matters for effects and successes in the fact-world, is to-day a product of the Press. What the Press wills, is true. Its commanders evoke, transform, interchange truths.

[…] it is precisely this that smooths the path for the coming Caesars of the world-press. Those who have learnt to read succumb to their power, and the visionary self-determination of Late democracy issues in a thorough-going determination of the people by the powers whom the printed word obeys.

In the contests of to-day tactics consists in depriving the opponent of this weapon […]. No tamer has his animals more under his power […].

And all that they learn in this mind-training, is what it is considered that they should know a higher will puts together the picture of their world for them […].

This is the end of Democracy (Spengler, 1922: 461-463).

Some years before the outbreak of the Second World War, the American political scientist Almond ended his PhD thesis on plutocracy and its connections with the world of politics, which will be published only fifty years later with the title *Plutocracy and Politics in New York City*. That city is in fact considered the best place for analysing on a limited scale the change in the attitudes and the practices of the American plutocracy.

For Almond, when

the term plutocracy is used to designate a form of political order it denotes a political structure in which the wealthier classes have a formally exclusive control in the political sphere […] the term denotes a form of political order, and not a special social class […] the wealthier elements of the population tend to control public policy, whether its control be legally exclusive as in plutocracy properly speaking, or whether its control be informal and indirect (Almond, 1938: 3-4).

It has also to be distinguished, according to Almond, between a close and an open plutocratic order. In the first case, the admission to the political oligarchy takes place through marriages or cooptation, while in the second specific economic requirements are required: a certain level of wealth, for instance, or the payment of certain taxes.

Given these premises, the author analyzes the changes over time in the relationships between plutocracy and politics. In particular, he distinguishes four different phases: the first covers the period between the colonial era and the first decades of the nineteenth century; the second goes from the end of these decades to around 1850; the third extends on the entire second half of the nineteenth century; and the four regard the periods of crisis – scandals of political corruption, war, economic recession – that occur at any time.

If in the first phase the plutocrats exercised a personal control in politics, in the second and, above all, in the third, politics became a full time occupation, and a new class of professional politician arose. The plutocrats began therefore to influence and to manipulate the decisions of that class, in this way multiplying the opportunities for corruption. In the period of crisis, however, things change again: the plutocracy, for many and different reasons, and through many and different means, regain a paramount role in politics.

The latest reflection on plutocracy has had to face with two great historical phenomena: the economic boom of the fifties and sixties, and the globalization processes that started in the early eighties.

Three main factors contributed to the development of the phase of expansion of the world economy, labelled by Hobsbawm the “golden age”: the restructuring and reform of capitalism, the innovative high technology, and the internationalization of economy. Of course all that glitters is not gold, and some scholars shed lights on the downsides of the advanced industrial societies, which predetermine everything the individual is or does, and of the cultural industry, whose main goal is the adaptation of the individual to the common mentality.

Analyzing the western political system, the French political scientist Maurice Duverger believes that it is doomed to develop firstly in a plutocracy, and subsequently in a technocracy. According to Duverger, the liberal democracy constitutes, at least apparently, a perfect unity; its economic structures correspond to its political structures, they rest on the same bases. The actualities of the situation are however quite different: the ownership of the means of productions generates inequalities, and the economic democracy is dismissed by an oligarchy formed by the great barons of finance, trade and industry, which tend to dominate the state. This plutocracy in it is deeply supportive, although it does not represent a homogeneous and organized group; moreover, it does not have a centralized structure, and its members meet in informal clubs and groups. It rules in an indirect way, making use of an intermediate class formed by petty politicians, officers and manipulators of the public opinion, which the plutocracy control by means of subsidies, remunerations, the assignment of executive positions, cooptation, corruption, and so on.

For Duverger, in conclusion the western political system is like Janus, because of it has two opposite but complementary sides. It is indeed characterized on the one hand by pluralism, freedom, competitive election, and on the other by the wealthy, the capitalists and the big corporations. The western regimes are therefore only partially democratic. It would be more accurate to call them pluto-democracies, because the power rests both on the people (demos) and on the wealth (plutos) (Duverger, 1955; 1972).

The increasing interest the scholars have shown in respect to the topic of plutocracy during the last decades is due, as previously touched upon, to the growing economic inequalities produced, according to many experts, by the processes of globalization or, at least, by their not correct management. In this regard, the financial journalist Chrystia Freeland believes that the economic change caused by the technologic revolution and globalization is leading to a golden age dominated by a few thousand of plutocrats, very similar to that occurred in the nineteenth century. The aforementioned change concern billion of persons located in the most disparate areas of the world. For this reason: «an important characteristic of today’s rising plutocracy is that […] today’s super-rich are “global high rollers”» (Freeland, 2012: 3). Even if the plutocrats live far away from each other, they are deeply interconnected and is possible to see them as a community. As Freeland states, the super-rich «are becoming a transglobal community of peers who have more in common with one another than with their countrymen back home. Whether they maintain primary residences in New York or Hong Kong, Moscow or Mumbai, today’s super-rich are increasingly a nation unto themselves […] new virtual nation of mammon» (Freeland, 2012: 5; see also Rothkopf, 2008).

***4.4. Plutocracy, demagogic plutocracy, and populist plutocracy***

It should first be noted, if there was a need and referring to the etymology of the term, that “plutocracy” describes a distinctive form of government. Although it is possible to find traces of plutocracy within each historical epoch, it develops fully, as highlighted by some authors, e.g. Sumner, with the advent of modernity, that is of capitalism – of a certain type, however, as we will clarify below – and of mass society.

Nowadays, identifying in a simplistic way plutocracy with the government of the rich is not very satisfactory, precisely because of this connection between plutocracy and modernity. The plutocrat, as Sumner has pointed out, is not consistent with the wealthy person, let alone with the capitalist; and plutocracy is moreover characterised by the political use of capital, by the commingling it produces between the political and the economic spheres, by the privileged position it grants to the supported and subsidised entrepreneurs.

It becomes clear that the plutocrats are never totally unrelated to politics, beyond how they love to present themselves in public. They have always had a close relationship with the world of politics, or at least with some of its members, and their success is due at least in part to this relationship.

Plutocracy manages to acquire a demagogic connotation especially starting from the third information revolution of the 1950s-1970s[[35]](#footnote-35). As it is well known, the emergence, during this period, of broadcast media caused the rise of the mass audience and a consequent deep transformation of political communication. On the one hand, new media effects, such as framing, agenda setting, and priming, came to the fore; on the other, the electoral campaign shifted from being party-based to being candidate-centered. The prominent role that political parties had indeed played until then gradually weakened, and politics began to revolve around new politicians with strong communication and mobilization skills (Bimber, 2003; see also Wattenberg, 1991). The latter can behave in a demagogic manner, which means that they aim at gaining the popular support through promises that are not kept or that are unachievable, or through favourable policies that do not produce any practical outcome.

Relying on the insights of the previously mentioned scholars, particularly Sumner and Pareto, we can therefore define the demagogic plutocracy as that form of government in which the power is held, directly or indirectly by the economic and financial elites who protect their interests through cunning and manipulation, and who are substantially indifferent to the common good (Barbieri, 2016).

Differently from this kind of plutocracy, the populist one rests also on the appeal to the people. It has firstly to be remembered that critics of populism often blame their opponents for usually adopting demagogic practices. As Stanley highlights (2008, p. 101), the «nature of this criticism has contributed to populism’s being associated with demagogy to the extent that the two concepts are frequently conflated». Although the equation of populism with demagogy must be rejected for many reasons – demagogy is something inherent to representative politics; populism is almost always combined with participation; the constituent elements of the two concepts are very dissimilar (see section one of this study); etc. – the populist plutocracy always hold a certain amount of demagoguery.

On the basis of this brief remarks, and referring once again to some of the Pareto’s suggestions, we consider as populist plutocracy that form of government in which:

1. The ruling elite is composed of or is strictly controlled by – we are here drawing on the work of Almond – wealthy entrepreneurs and speculators who protect both their own interests and those of the class from which they come through cunning, appeal to the people, and populist rhetoric;
2. Cunning can be used, even simultaneously, in two different directions:

b.1. political protection, patronage, and corruption (side of interests);

b.2. deception and manipulation (side of feelings);

1. There is no consideration for the general interest and the common good.

As for this last point, it has to be emphasised that all forms of plutocracy hold, as pointed out by the Greek philosophers, an essentially anti-virtuos connotation. The plutocratic ruling elite, in fact, show an irrepressible inclination to put its interests before those of the state and, accordingly, a substantial indifference towards the common good (remember, in this regard, the considerations expressed by Leroux and Pareto).

From this perspective, even if the populist plutocrat leaders usually resort to the populist strategies and forms of communication, they do not utterly embrace the populist ideology. On the one hand, they have no difficulty in admitting the existence of a juxtaposition between “the people” and “the elite” and in supporting the idea of popular sovereignty; but on the other they deprived both this idea and the conception of democracy of their meaning. The populist plutocrat leaders are indeed very interested in knowing the opinions, the attitudes, the fears and the hopes of the people, and for this purpose they do not hesitate in widely using surveys, focus group, and other similar research techniques. Their goals are those of establishing a quasi-direct relationship with the followers, of weakening the intermediation organizations such as the political parties, of embodying the people’s will. They moreover tend to implement policies that go along with the people’s wishes. But finally they do not even have any intention of enlarging the people’s participation in the decision-making processes, and believe that democracy consist only in free, frequent and competitive elections.

Following Wirth (2016) and Reinemann (2017), it can be therefore stated that the populist plutocratic leaders usually adopt the typical populist communication styles almost exclusively for strategical and tactical purpose, that is for maximizing the votes and mobilizing voters; they moreover do not really share the inner meaning of the populist ideology. In short, we are faced with an exemplary case of empty populism, where the leader are mostly driven by pragmatic and opportunistic goals (see the first section of this book).

The three basic features of the populist plutocracy highlight, on the one hand and as already noted, the fallacy of the equivalence among the rich, the capitalist, and the plutocrat, on the other the link between the demagogic and the populist plutocracies and a specific type of capitalism, that they contribute to produce and in which at the same time they thrive. We are here referring to the crony capitalism, whose origins date back to the first decades of the 19th century, and whose harmful effects have been denounced by many analysts (see, for instance, Stiglitz, 2002b).

In a renowned book dating back some thirty years roughly, entitled *The Myth of the Robber Barons* the historian Burton W. Folsom Jr. observed, in a probably too blunt but surely explanatory way, that two different entrepreneurial figures had emerged in the American and English contexts of the period: the “political entrepreneur” and the “market entrepreneur”. The former seeks to obtain success through government aids, pools, vote buying, stock speculations; accordingly, he or she is not interested in introducing technological innovation, in increasing productivity, and in lowering prices. The other refuses the government support, tries to succeed by creating and marketing a good product at low costs; unlike the previous one, he or she is fully convinced of the opportunities opened up by innovations and technological improvements.

In the Folsom’s opinion, Edward K. Collins, Henry Villard, Erbert Gary and the founders of the Union Pacific were the best examples of political entrepreneurs. Cornelio Vanderbilt, Thomas Gibbons, James J. Hill, the Scrantons, Charles Schwab, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Mellon, represented, on the contrary, the leading exponents of market entrepreneurs (Folsom, 1987).

Folsom underlines that the emergence of the class of political entrepreneurs is closely connected to the development of crony capitalism, that is «a market economy where the rules (and their enforcement) are not impartial, because they are affected by family connections, political connections, clan connections, or open bribes. It is a very widespread degeneration of a competitive market system» (Zingales, 2018; see also Zingales, 2012) – in this regard, it should be stressed that both the distinction between the political and market entrepreneurs and the concept of crony capitalism are present, albeit not openly mentioned, in the work of many of the authors previously taken into account.

Even if capitalism is nowadays very different from that to which Folsom and the other authors referred, it can however continue to take on a prevailing crony configuration. The political entrepreneurs have not disappear at all, and are rather among the main key players of the current development of populist plutocracy.

If we look, for instance, at Italy, we can observe that the limited nature of the capital market and the territorial cleavage between North and South have fostered the rise of a capitalism deeply linked to the world of politics and that of banks. This on the one hand has weakened free competition and control rules and institutions, and on the other has advantaged cartels and monopolies (see Rossi, 1993). Furthermore, the great private entrepreneurship has begun to show signs of regression and decline since the 1970s. It imploded in family oligarchies which sought to obtain monopolistic positions, exclusive public licenses and concessions, state favoritism, so making themselves exempted from competition. To accomplish this, they did all they could for financing the parties, the political leaders, and the election campaigns, and for influencing the government decisions.

Currently, capitalism is characterised by a fabric of medium-sized internationalized companies, and by a core of science oriented entrepreneurs. Moreover, it is increasingly being configured as a “relational capitalism”, hinged on the net elites who made their relational networks the new currency of power. These elite are formed by the top groups of the four pillars of advanced societies: economy and finance, politics, information (media), and knowledge (university); due to their ability in networking and in building up social capital, they can be defined as the elite of relational capitalism (Carboni, 2015).

Such capitalism, as highlighted by Carboni, can however take two different forms. Its inherent relational nature can be of a high cognitive level; it can indeed foster the thrive of expertise’s bonds and networks, which are indispensable for developing an expert knowledge and for implementing successful activities. But it can also be bent to crony and corrupting ends. The relational capitalism thus degenerates into crony capitalism. The phenomenon of interlocking, of multiple membership in competing companies, increases extremely. Conflicts of interest spread in all fields, from economy, to media, up to politics. Relationships based on particularism and familism are greatly strenghtned. The political entrepreneurs, finally, become increasingly influential.

After having clarified what populist plutocracy does mean, we are going to analyse, in the next and final part of this study, three case studies of populist plutocrats: Berlusconi, Thaksin, and Trump. The choose of these cases depends on two different criteria. The first is a geographical criterion: the three leaders reside in three different parts of the world. The second is instead a time criterion: the three leaders have ruled in different periods – Berlusconi in 1994-95, 2000-05, 2005-06, 2008-11; Thaksin in 2001-06; and Trump in 2017-present.

In particular, we will attempt to use the category of populist plutocracy for penetrating the transformations of democracy that may have occurred under the government led by the aforementioned renowned entrepreneurs. To avoid some kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, that is to focus only on the events that could confirm our thesis, a detailed analysis of all the policies implemented by the three leaders would be carried out. This would take a long time, would probably require the involvement of experts on each of the countries taken into consideration, and in addition would go beyond the objectives of this work. We have so decided to concentrate on the main reforms, including, as far as possible, those regarding taxes, proposed or enacted under the three leaders’ governments, since we are convinced that precisely these reforms could contribute to promote a populist plutocracy. We are however aware of the limits of such an approach; a deeper exploration on this point might be therefore developed in further research.

***4.5. Berlusconi***

The entrepreneurial carrier of Berlusconi begins, as it is well known, in the construction industry. In 1961 he founded the *Cantieri Riuniti Milanesi* srl and in 1963 the *Edilnord* sas; after having constructed some blocks of flats in Milan, he carried out two building project: one in the commune of Brugherio, just outside Milan, for some 4,000 people, and the other, called *Milan 2*, in Segrate, this also near Milan, for some 10,000 people.

It is not known, however, the origin of the capitals which allow Berlusconi to carry out these projects (see Fiori, 1995).

A few years later, due to the low profitability of the housing market, Berlusconi decided to shift his attention to the world of the commercial television, which seemed to offer great opportunities for a dynamic and ambitious entrepreneur like him. In 1975 he founded the holding *Fininvest* spa, which has been operating, since then, in the media, publishing, investment, insurance, financial services, and sport sectors. In 1978 his television channel *Telemilano 58*, which will later take the form of a national television network under the name of *Canale 5*, started broadcasting; the following year he founded the advertising company *Publitalia*, and soon after he buy two other private channel: *Italia 1* and *Rete 4*, thus building a television empire in competition with *Rai*, the public broadcaster. As Paul Ginsborg remember, the role played by *Publitalia*  within *Fininvest* was of the utmost importance: «The increase in its turnover was spectacular: 12 billion lire in 1980; 900 billion by 1984; 2,167 billion by the end of the decade. Already by 1984, 85 per cent of Fininvest’s income came from the television division, and nearly 2,000 members of its 3,500 workforce were employed there […]. As early as 1983, Publitalia had cornered 43 per cent of the total market of television advertising» (Ginsborg, 2004: 33 and 46).

Even if the economic rise of *Fininvest* in the second half of the eighties was truly amazing, the holding began to suffer from heavy debts in the early nineties (they exceeded the capital by 3.4 times); this leaded to its reorganization and to incorporate the three television networks in a new private television group subsidiary to *Fininvest*, named *Mediaset* spa. However, in 1993 *Fininvest* was the twelfth television company in the world, with a turnover of 11,552 billion lire, and in 2005 Berlusconi was ranked by Forbes as the first richest person in Italy and 25th in the world, with a net worth of $12 billion.

Between 1993 and 1994 Berlusconi decided to establish the political movement *Forza Italia* (*Go Italy*, FI) and to enter politics. This intention came from the situation of political crisis in which Italy brought at the beginnings of the 1990s. The arrest of Mario Chiesa, prominent exponent of the Milanese branch of the *Partito Socialista Italiano* (*Italian Socialist Party*, PSI), allows the prosecutors to uncover a complex, widespread, and sprawling system of corruption – soon called *Tangentopoli* (Bribesville) – which involved politicians and political parties of all colors and stripes, especially those in government like the *Democrazia Cristiana* (*Christian Democratic*, DC) and the PSI. The latter fell and dissolved in a short time (on this episode of the Italian history see Mershon and Pasquino, 1995 and Bufacchi and Burgess, 2001).

These events produced, as obvious, many consequences on the citizens’ attitudes towards politics. On the one hand, the confidence in institutions quickly crumbled, the aversion toward the parties and the political system grew enormously, and the professional politicians fell into total disrepute; on the other, the moderate and centrist constituency, driven by conservative stances and frightened by the possible victory of the left in the upcoming national election, lost their traditional reference points.

Berlusconi soon understood, also thanks to the information gathered through surveys and marketing analysis – until then never used in the Italian politics –, that a new political force, centrist and moderate, but whose attractiveness was essentially based on its novelty and on its antipolitical characteristics, had ample room for success (Campus, 2010). In fact, at the 1994 election, FI , just a couple of months after his birth, turned out to be the most voted party, with a percentage of 21.01, and the center-right coalition won the political competition.

It must however be clear that «Berlusconi’s entry into politics was also an intentional act responding to powerful private motives» (Hopkin and Paolucci, 1999: 321). His economic empire and his position of dominance in the television field were achieved also thanks to his close relationships with some prominent politicians overwhelmed by the *Tangentopoli* scandal, such as the leader of PSI Bettino Craxi. Therefore, Berlusconi remained devoid of any political reference and exposed to the risk that a left-wing government would not have helped his holding in debt, and that it could even contrast his quasi-monopolistic control of the commercial television. As Jonathan Hopkin and Caterina Paolucci states (*ibidem*): «Hence, originally FI was little more than a personal instrument, created for this specific private purpose: to win the election in order to prevent a hostile left from jeopardising Berlusconi’s own economic empire».

Moreover, the features of FI were very peculiar. If we look at the party’s organisational structure, we can note how «the party was based on the corporate structures used by Berlusconi, “almost as if it were a mere subsidiary of Fininvest” […] the people involved in it were not, nor aspired to be, professional politicians, but were rather managers and professionals […]. Forza Italia qualified as a sort of antipolitical party, made of and by nonpolitical people and structures, and centred on an outsider to politics» (Campus, 2010:95). The group which helped Berlusconi in arranging the party’s political strategy was formed by the two Vice-President of *Fininvest*, the President of *Publitalia*, a number of *Fininvest* managers, and a *Mediaset* TV celebrity. The party’s political marketing was handled by the survey agency *Diakron*, founded and run by two former *Fininvest* managers. The insurance agents networks of *Programma Italia*, a branch of *Fininvest*, organized and managed the network of the *Forza Italia Clubs*, a sort of local sections of the party. The clubs’ supervising body, *Associazione Nazionale dei Clubs di Forza Italia* (*National Association of the Go Italy Clubs*, ANFI) was established by a former manager director of *Fininvest France*. *Publitalia* run the process of recruitment and selection of the candidates for the elections (Hopkin and Paolucci, 1999).

Given these distinctive features, it is not incorrect to define FI as a “business firm” party (Diamanti, 1995; Hopkin and Paolucci, 1999).

It must be added that the professional status of the FI elected candidates in the 1994 competition was aligned to this model of party organisation. In fact, as many as 35% of the FI members of parliament were entrepreneurs, executives, or dealers (against 16% of all the elected)[[36]](#footnote-36), and 25% practiced other kind of liberal professions (against 22% of the total); only 8% of the elected were teachers or University professor (against 18% of the total), none were employee (against 3% of the total) or union officials (against 2% of the total), and only 3% were professional politicians (against 9% of the total). Hereupon, the occupational composition of the ruling class changed as compared to the previous parliamentary terms. The entrepreneurs and the other liberal professions – doctors, engineers, accountants, consultants, insurance agents, public relation officers, and so on – grew enormously, whereas the professional politicians and the interest group representatives declined widely. In just two round of elections, the number of entrepreneurs tripled, and the number of professional politicians halved; the category of the public sector officials and employees, which really included many full-time politicians decreased by one third (Mastropaolo, 1994).

The entry into politics of Berlusconi represented therefore a deep renewal in the Italian political background in many respects: the rise of a plutocrat outsider, the appearance of a new model of party organisation, a radical turnover of the members of Parliament. It is also necessary to mention here the use of a new – for Italian politics, with very few exceptions – linguistic style with a clear populist hallmark. Berlusconi has indeed been considered populist for a long time, especially when he decided to establish his “personal party” and enter politics in 1993. The numerous corruption scandals that shook Italy during the early nineties were the seeds of the FI leader’s anti-establishment and populist rhetoric: discredit for the governing political parties, distrust of politics *per se*, a battle against corrupt elites and their communist allies, the necessity for radical change. From the outset, Berlusconi moreover presented himself as a newcomer to politics, as a self-made man temporarily lent to politics, as a businessman coming from outside the corrupt and inefficient elite.

In this vein, Geoff Andrews (2005) uses the expression “postmodern populism” to define the political approach and the mode of governance adopted by Berlusconi. According to the author, the phenomenon Berlusconi represented, in fact, a response to the crisis of the state in the aftermath of *Tangentopoli*, postmodern because it changed the traditional relationship between citizen and politics, and populist because it appealed directly to citizens, considered as consumer.

Taguieff, instead, referring to the involvement in politics of rich entrepreneurs, such as Berlusconi in Italy, Ross Perot in the United States, Stanislaw Tymiński in Poland, Fernando Collor de Mello in Brazil, and Bernard Tapie in France, speaks about “telepopulism”, that is «a form of populism adapted to the demands of television and able to inflect each of the classical types of populism. Telepopulism contains an appeal to the people, but in such a way that it draws the bulk of its symbolic effectiveness from the resources of the media and from the leader’s telegenic capacities» (Taguieff, 1997: XVIII). The scholar notes how the recent years has been characterized, from a political point of view, by the unexpected emergence of new demagogic leaders, who are distinguished by the tenacity with which they celebrate their diversity and by making promises that cannot be kept. «When such hucksters address “the people,” it is to make them dream: such demagogues promise everything. They address their audience primarily through television […].The “telepopulist” demagogue is viewed by the people (*dēmos*) or a large part of the public as a new historical instance of the Savior-figure» (*idem*: XVII-XVIII; see also Taguieff, 2002).

In this respect, it is probably not by chance that both in 1994 and in the following election FI was the party most voted by housewives and by women who watched television many hours a day (Mannheimer, 1994; ITANES, 2001).

The thesis that Berlusconi is a populist leader is not only asserted from a theoretical point of view, as in the aforementioned studies, but is also confirmed from an empirical one. In this regard, Kirk A. Hawkins and Bojana Kocijan (2013) undertook a project to measure the level of populist discourse in speeches (campaign, ribbon-cutting, international, and famous speeches) given by chief executives in Central East Europe, Baltic States and Central Asia, applying the pedagogical assessment technique of holistic grading[[37]](#footnote-37). The levels of populism expressed by the FI leader during his second-third term (2001-05; 2005-06) and his fourth term (2008-11) reach average values (respectively 0.8 and 0,9 out of 2.0). This allows, according to the scholars, to define Berlusconi as “somewhat populist”.

Even today Berlusconi can be depicted as populist, despite being in office as Prime Minister four times between 1994 and 2011[[38]](#footnote-38). A recent study on the 2018 Italian national electoral campaign assigns indeed to the FI leader a score of 0.7 on the holistic grading scale, ranked him in the third position, immediately after Matteo Salvini, leader of the radical right party *Lega* (0.8), and Luigi Di Maio, leader of *Movimento 5 stelle* (0.75) (Barbieri, Mincigrucci and Verza, 2019).

Turning now to an analysis of the main policies put in place by the Berlusconi government, we can see how they pursued, in large part, four main objectives: to prevent a possible conviction of Berlusconi and his assistants in the numerous trials in which he was involved; to protect and to foster the interests of his companies; to serve the interests of the richest classes; and finally to strengthen the role and the powers of the Prime Minister (Barbieri, 2016).

As for the first objective, the following measures can be mentioned:

* 1994: “Biondi” decree law[[39]](#footnote-39). It prohibited the pre-trial detention in the cases of both crimes against the Public Administration and financial crimes (corruption, bribery, etc.) – few days before some officers of the financial police confessed that four companies of the holding *Fininvest* had corrupted them. The parliament did not approve the decree.
* 2001: International letters rogatory law. It stated that the foreign judges had to transmit the requested documents in original or in certified copy, otherwise they would have been invalidates – the law seems designed to hinder the trial “SME-Ariosto 1” concerning the non-sale of *SME*, the largest Italian food group, to the holding CIR, owned by a competitor of Berlusconi, Carlo De Benedetti; Cesare Previti, lawyer of *Fininvest*, FI member of parliament, and Minister of Defence, was convicted of bribing judges (the crime was subsequently statute barred), while Berlusconi was acquitted. The courts did not apply the law, because it was in contrast with international conventions.
* 2001: Decriminalisation of false accounting law – as a result, all trials that involved Berlusconi for false accounting were annulled.
* 2002: Legitimate suspicious “Cirami” law[[40]](#footnote-40). It stated that any trial could be moved to another court if the judges were biased against the indicted – the lawyers of Berlusconi and Previti attempted, to take the trial “Imi-Sir/Lodo Mondadori” out of the jurisdiction of the Court of Milan, to no avail[[41]](#footnote-41).
* 2003: “Lodo Schifani” law[[42]](#footnote-42). It banned to process the five highest offices in the state. The law was declared unconstitutional the following year.
* 2005: “Ex-Cirielli” law[[43]](#footnote-43). It reduced the statute limitation – many indictments concerning Berlusconi and Previti were thus nullified.

With regard to the second objective, other measures can be mentioned:

* 1994: “Tremonti” law[[44]](#footnote-44). It lowered of 50% the taxes on the company profits, if the latter were reinvested for the purchase of “new capital goods” – thanks to this law, *Mediaset* save 243 billion lire of taxes.
* 2002: Tax amnesty. Both *Mediaset* and Berlusconi use the law to remedy their tax evasion.
* 2003: “Gasparri” decree law[[45]](#footnote-45). It allowed *Rete 4* to broadcast, albeit without the television broadcasting concession since 1999. The President of the Republic refused to sign the act, because of its unconstitutionality.
* 2004: “Gasparri” law. It reformed the Italian broadcasting system, allowing Berlusconi to maintain the control of his three national televisionchannels, one of which (*Rete* 4) was still using a frequency that had been legally attributed to another channel (*Europa 7*, owned by the entrepreneur Francesco Di Stefano).
* 2005: Finance Act. It provided a public contribution of €150 (2004) and €70 (2005) for buying a TV digital decoder – *Solaris* company, one of the main distributor of decoder in Italy, owned by Paolo Berlusconi, brother of Silvio, benefitted from the incentive.
* 2005: Supplementary pension decree law. It included rules that made convenient, from a fiscal point of view, to underwrite contributions pension schemes – also the insurance company *Mediolanum*, partly under the control of *Fininvest*, benefitted from the decree law.
* 2008: “Tremonti” economic measures. It includes the doubling of the value added tax (from 10 to 20%) for the pay TV sat and TV internet – *Sky*, the main competitor of *Mediaset*, was thus disadvantaged.

About the third objective, it is necessary to take into consideration the proposal of the FI leader concerning the taxes and the adoption of the tax shield during his fourth term. It is indeed well known that one of the main objective of FI since its foundation has always been the lowering of taxes. During any electoral campaign Berlusconi has always declared that he aimed to reduce the state power and intervention, to support the free market, and, above all, to lower taxes. The measures undertaken in order to realize such objectives were considered necessary for triggering the industriousness and the initiative of citizens. During his speech at the talk show *Domenica Live* on December 14, 2018, he stated: «On many occasion I have said that our “lay religion” implies lower taxes, lower taxes, lower taxes. Today we are oppressed by a fiscal tyranny» (quoted in Barbieri, Mincigrucci and Verza, 2019).

In 1994 Berlusconi proposed to introduce a flat tax of 30% with the captivating watchword “less tax for everyone”, then repeated endlessly in every electoral campaign. In 2001 he promoted and signed the “Contract with Italy”, a synthesis of the coalition programme, during an episode of the talk show *Porta a Porta*. One of the central points of the contract was that related to taxes; it provided for the introduction of two tax rates: total exemption of income up to 22 million lire per year, tax rate of 23% for income up to 200 million lire per year, and tax rate of 33% for income over 200 million lire per year. In the following years other similar proposal will be put forward: in 2004, for instance, Berlusconi endorsed the project of his allies based on three tax rates: non tax area for income up to €7,500, 23% for income up to €70,000, and 39% for income over €70,000. In 2012 the three tax rates changed: 20% for income up to €15,000, 30% for income up to €55,000, and 40% for income over 55,000. Finally, in 2018 Berlusconi proposed the introduction of a flat tax again, this time however with a lower rate of 23%.

Excluding the however important abolition of the taxes on inheritance, on donations, and on propriety (ICI), Berlusconi was never able to keep his promises, accusing from time to time, for this, his allies, the oppositions, the Maastricht criteria, and so on. In fact, if we have a look to the OECD data on tax revenue we can note how, during the Berlusconi governments, the share of the Italy’s output that was collected by the government through taxes roughly always remained at the same level: in the first term (1994-95) it went from 38.7% to 38.6%; in the second (2001-05) from 40.3 to 39.1; in the third (2005-06) from 39.1 to 40.6; and in the fourth (2008-11) from 41.5 to 41.9% (https://data.oecd.org/tax/tax-revenue.htm).

Moreover, it is important to highlight how, according to the esteems of the Mestre *Associazione Artigiani e Piccole Imprese* (*Craftsmen and Small Businesses Association*, CGIA), the change put forward by Berlusconi would actually have benefitted the wealthiest classes. Analysing the 2004 proposal, CGIA observes the lack of benefit gained by the lower-middle classes: equal to zero for who earns around to €15,000 per year, €2.31 per month for income of €19,500, €5.53 for income of €20,000, and €18 for income of €22,000. The situation is certainly different in the case of the highest income brackets: saving of €70 per month for who earns €30,000 per year, €430 for income of €100,000, €681 for income of €150,000, and €1,430 for income of €300,000.

The CGIA analysis of the 2012 reform hypothesis comes to similar conclusions: only about the 4% of the taxpayers, those with the highest incomes, would have great economic advantages. More in detail, who had an income between 55,000 and 75,000 euros (about 2% of population) would have save €2,162, and who had an income over €75,000 (another 2% of population) would have save €3,805 (<http://www.cgiamestre.com/3-aliquote-grossi-vantaggi-solo-per-il-4-circa-dei-contribuenti/>).

Similar considerations apply to the tax shield, promulgated in 2009 in order to encourage the repatriation of the capital detained oversees[[46]](#footnote-46). The law provided for a tax of 5%, guaranteed the anonymity to those who would avail themselves of the shield, and considered many tax offences not punishable: fraudulent tax return, untruthful tax return, omitted tax return, concealment or destruction of accounting documents, etc.

Differently from Italy, the tax shields launched in the Unites States, in France, and in Great Britain did not provide for anonymity, included much more restrictive rules, and had much higher costs. The *Associazione Nuova Economia Nuova Società* (*New Economy New Society Associations*, NENS) has indeed highlights that the total cost for the repatriation of €100 of capital assets held abroad would amount to: €44 in the United Kingdom, €49 in the United States, and only €5 in Italy (against the 43% of ordinary taxes that would be paid if the €100 had been regularly declared) (NENS, 2009) [[47]](#footnote-47).

The tax shield, therefore, represented in Italy not so much a valid means of contrasting tax evasion and tax havens, as a measure to favor wealth holders and cheated taxpayers.

We finally come to the last point of the question, the Constitutional reform approved in 2005 and then rejected in the popular referendum of the following year. Such a reform included a huge growth in the powers of the now called Prime Minister, instead of President of the Council of Ministers. It established that:

* The Prime Minister should be elected directly;
* He did not need to receive Parliament’s confidence;
* He set out national politics;
* He acted under his sole responsibility;
* Once elected, he had to present his program in Parliament;
* He had the power to appoint and dismiss ministers;
* He had the power to dissolve Parliament;
* He could be removed only in exceptional cases.

Meanwhile, the President of Republic was deprived of almost all of its powers, so taking a strictly ceremonial role.

The reform project was hit, as it is known, by a wave of criticisms, many of which focused on the too many powers conferred to the Prime Minister, on the loss of the role of constitutional guarantee played until then by the head of the state, on the breaking of balance between the different institutions of the state. It was said that the reform aimed at introducing a strong or absolute premiership, or a presidential democracy with few limits to its action.

The political project of Berlusconi was indeed based on an erosive mix between a conception of formal democracy and a conception of negative freedom (Ginsborg, 2005; Viroli, 2011). In the Berlusconi’s perspective, democracy simply consists in frequent elections and in the direct election of some offices. These hallmarks, however, are not able, by themselves and how it is well known, to guarantee the fairness of the context in which they take place. Freedom is instead perceived as in the absence of obstacles; in fact, the individual is considered free when he can act as he sees fit, when he is not subjected to constrains imposed by force, when he finds only a few limitations in the law – so much that in this case we speak of freedom from the laws. As highlighted by many scholars, this kind of freedom is very weak, because it is compatible with the unlimited power of a sovereign; it is the freedom of the servants or of the subjects, always ready to please the will of the master, but at the same time fearful of losing the acquired benefits (Viroli, 2011).

It is not coincidence that the FI leader took a very dim view of his critics, going as far as to provoke the expulsion of some renowned journalists from the public broadcasting, as guilty, in his opinion, of having used it criminally.

***4.6. Thaksin***

Thaksin Shinawatra is one of the richest entrepreneurs in Thailand. He comes from a prominent Chinese business family that settled in Chiang Mai, and owes his success to the opportunities that opened up in the field of telecommunications during the 1986-1996 strong economic growth and to the rising stock market produced by the financial liberalizations began in 1988.

As Baker points out (2005: 111): «All Thaksin’s business started from a government concession or license». Indeed, between 1988 and 1992 the government gave him seven telecommunications concessions: for paging (1989), for operating a mobile phone network (1990), for data transfer services and card phones, and for launching a satellite. Accordingly, the asset value of the Shinawatra companies grew from 0.6 to 56.0 billion bath over five years. In the mid-nineties the net worth of Thaksin was estimated to be 60-80 billion bath ($2.4-3.2 billion); in 2019 he has got a net worth of $1.9 billion, and he is ranked by Forbes as the 19th richest person in Thailand.

Clearly, to secure the concessions «Thaksin had to gain favour from politicians (especially military) and senior bureaucrats. Some of these contacts later became executives and directors of his companies» (ibidem). In this respect Baker remembers that Thaksin, in order to repay a military politician for the help, gave him a Daimler; furthermore, the Thai businessman publicly thanked “Big Jod” General Sunthorn Kongsompong for the satellite concession.

In 1999, after having being in charge as foreign minister (1994) and deputy prime minister (1995 and 1997), Thaksin founded the Thai Rak Thai (Thai love Thai, TRT) party. In the general election of January 2001, TRT obtained 40.6% of the vote and 248 seats out of 500, that means three seats less than the absolute majority. Thaksin became prime minister and formed a coalition with the Chat Thai party of Banharn Silpa-archa and the New Aspiration party of Chavalit Yongchaiyud (both ex-prime minister).

It has to be taken into account that in 1997 Thailand, such as other Asian countries, was hit by a harsh economic crisis which went on in the following years. In 1998 the economy fell of over 10%, the Thai currency lost 60% of its value, the banking system started to malfunction, and almost half of the loans resulted unpaid. The International Monetary Fund intervention in order to tackle the crisis provided for a stand-by credit of 1-2 billion of special drawing right (about $1.6 billion) and simultaneously required an orderly adjustment of the domestic economy. The IMF believed that the crisis was essentially due to the exorbitant borrowing and the inadequate investments of the Thai companies, and more in general by an “Asian model” of development based on a crony capitalism. According to the IMF, most of the domestic firms in difficulties should have failed, and the purchase of assets by foreign investors should be promoted (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2004; Baker, 2005).

The TRT party was therefore founded with the aim of countering the impact of the economic crisis. As Thaksin, many of the Thai entrepreneurs often operating in the service sector made their fortune thanks to state protection, licensing arrangements and government concession, both under military dictatorships and democratic regimes. In the previous decades these businessmen were able to exert some control over parliament, but they never directly involved themselves in the political competition. With the emergence of the crisis they however became aware of the need to engage personally in politics, in order to safeguard their interests, and suddenly endorsed or entered in the Thaksin’s party. Among these, Chatri Sophonpanich, head of the Bangkok Bank, and Dhanim Chearavanont, head of the Charoen Pokphand (CP) group, the largest Thai conglomerate (chicken business, agribusiness, and above all telecommunication).

The weight of the plutocrats within the Thaksin’s cabinet was after all very significant. Pitak Intrawitayanunt, political ambassador of the CP group, was appointed deputy prime minister; the telecommunication bureaucrat Sombat Uthaisang became deputy interior minister; Adisar Potharamik, an entrepeneur of the Jasmine telecoms group, minister of commerce; Pracha Maleenon, executive director and Ceo of the diversified media holding company Bec World Public Company Limited, deputy minister of communications; Suriya Juangroongruangkit, head of the auto parts manufacturer Thai Summit Group, minister of industry; Thanong Bidaya, president of Thai Military Bank (TMB), minister of finances. But also other important business groups, such as the Srivikorn family (hotels, school, sanitary ware, and carpets), the M. Thai property group, the Italthai construction, and the Grammy entertainment group gave their support to the party (Baker, 2005).

As Baker highlights (2005, p. 130): «Thaksin’s rise was a logical extension of Thailand’s business-dominated ‘money politics’, but also a dramatic change of scale. It brought some of the wealthiest elements of domestic capital into the seat of power. It superseded ‘money politics’ with ‘big money politics’».

Thaksin is not only one of the most prominent plutocrats in the Asian world; he is also a populist leader. Many scholars have indeed considered Thaksin as populist from an economic point of view, that is as a leader who made unrealizable redistributive politics promises to a disorganized mass (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2005); others have applied the political-strategic approach, and have depicted the figure of Thaksin as that of a personalistic leader who tends to bypass the existing representative institution (McCargo, 2002; Jayasuriya and Hevinson, 2004).

One of the most accurate study on the topic is that carried on by Kirk Hawkins and Joel Selway (2017). The authors analyse the discourses of Thaksin through the technique of holistic grading, and compare the level of populism reached by Thaksin with those of others important world politicians.

The level of populism expressed by Thaksin during his first term (2001-05), is very low (0.1 average score out of 2.0). He usually presented himself as a reformer who would have modernized Thailand, in particular its bureaucracy and its political system – it was no coincidence that he wore business suit, fill his speeches with English terms, and quoted Bill Gates; the slogan that better represents this phase of his political carrier is “Think new, act new for every Thai” (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2014). «Thaksin’s first term speeches show only incomplete instances of populist ideas» (Hawkins and Selway, 2017: 384). Indeed, the prime minister’s rhetoric does not make any reference to “the people”, does not conceive any radical social change, nor does identify, in a Manichean way, any malevolent elite to oppose. Thaksin speaks about the hardships of the ordinary Thais and identifies himself as one of them only in the campaign speech. “The people” represents for him, however, a broad category that includes almost all the citizens, from the rural farmers, to the big businessman, up to the state bureaucrats; the attempt to define a morally pure majority is therefore missing (Hawkins and Selway, 2017).

During the second term things change. The level of populism expressed by the Thai leader increases from 0.1 to 0.8 average score. Clearly, this level is undoubtedly lower than those reached by the Latin American leaders (Chavez, 1st and 2nd terms, 1999-2006: 1.9; Morales, 1st term, 2006-2009: 1.6); it however allows to define Thaksin as a “moderate populist leader” (ibidem).

He began to appear in public in shirt sleeves, to use frequently dialect terms, and to tell events of his private life. Moreover, he now refers very often to “the people”, that he mainly intend as the poor, especially the rural poor. At the same time, he identifies the conspiring elite with the traditional, old politics and politicians – the Democrat party and the bureaucracy – and with the opponents who try to overthrow his government and so to subvert the will of the people – the Yellow Shirt movement and the “silent force” of the “influential people”. The most famous slogan of this period is certainly “The heart of TRT is the people” (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2014).

The aforementioned authors highlight how the Thaksin rhetoric was based on three different messages. The first, “I give to all of you”, meant that the deployed policy measures, especially the social provision schemes – health scheme, debt relief scheme – were available to all; the second, “I belong to you”, meant that he represented himself as an ordinary person, as a member of the people; the third, “I am the mechanism which can translate the will of the people into state action”, meant that he wanted to establish a direct connection with the people, and that “he was the government”.

According to the aforementioned authors, this shift towards a populist rhetoric was essentially due to the criticisms and attacks expressed against many policy decisions taken by Thaksin: the use of force against protests over the construction of large-scale infrastructures; the privatisation of state enterprises; the sale of ShinCorp telecom company to the commercial investment company Temasek, owned by the Singaporean government, and the subsequent allegations of corruption resulting from this sale[[48]](#footnote-48).

As we has previously seen, the big businessmen supported the Thaksin’s attempt to gain power and to control the state for the main purpose of protecting and fostering domestic capital. However, other two groups gave their endorsement to Thaksin too: the small and medium entrepreneurs, and the rural people.

The first group was harshly hit by the collapse of the banking system, which deprived it of credit. Formed by businessmen mostly engaged in managing familiar companies of no more than 20 workers, this group did not consider itself neither expression of any Asian or crony capitalism nor responsible for the crisis; accordingly, it regarded the IMF measures as ineffective, unfair, and substantially not enhancing the domestic capital. Responsive to these demands, Thaksin began very soon to present himself as the protector of the small entrepreneurs interests, and launched a recovery plan of the sector based on the promotion and a combination of local craft skills and high technology.

The second group was badly affected by the crisis too; furthermore, it was excluded from politics for a long time and it was only partially integrated in the national market economy. Phongpaichit and Baker (2014) refer to it as an “informal mass” composed of agrarian workers and urban informal workers (family and sub-sector stores, illegal or semi-illegal enterprises, seasonal agricultural work, casual employment, and so on), which represented around 67% of the workforce in 2004, and obviously also the large majority of the electorate.

This group suffered the fallout of the agrarian decline and of the liberalization policies, in particular the end of the land frontier expansion, the shift of investments from agriculture to industry, the loss of control over natural resources that were threatened by many several infrastructure projects: two power plants, a gas pipeline, several dams, an experimental nuclear project, etc. In order to secure the approval of this sector of population, Thaksin implemented a rural electoral platform which should have produced a growth of the local consumption, the incorporation of the peasant economy in the national and regulated market, and the conversion of the peasants into petty capitalists. The platform focused on three points: agrarian debt relief; an universal and cheap health care, known as the 30-baht scheme, based on a retail model with a low price (30 baht) per visit; and the one million baht per village fund, designed as revolving microfinance loans for small-scale enterprise (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2004; Baker, 2005; Phongpaichit and Baker, 2014).

By means of such measures Thaksin aimed not so much to implement land or tax reforms, to help the farmer, to empower them or change their structural position, as to turn them to businessmen and to strengthen the domestic private enterprise. As the same Thaksin admitted on several occasions (*The Nation*, May 10, 2001; speech in Tokio, November 20, 2001), the aforementioned policies should have led to a reduction of the poverty, of the disparity between the poor and the wealthy, as well those between the rural and urban sectors, and to an improvement of the quality of life among the lower strata of Thai society. These results would have in turn produced a stable social platform, a “cushion” of social harmony and political stability, which was indispensable for protecting the investments and the profit making, for ensuring the economic recovery and the entrepreneur-led growth, and, finally, for deepening and expanding domestic capitalism. The rural people, after all, did not manage to enter in the organized politics, and continued to have a paternalistic relationship with the political elite.

For Phongpaichit and Baker (2004) the implications of the alliance between the big business and the rural mass seemed therefore clear: «in the wake of the 1997 crisis, which had savaged Thai domestic capital, big business saw the need to control the state in order to shake off IMF tutelage, resist further takeovers of cash-strapped local firms by foreign investment, and restart economic growth; but to win power the businessmen needed to share the fruits of economic growth more widely than in the past. Thailand’s pluto-populism was government of the people, by the rich, for the rich – and a little bit for the people too» (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2004: 2).

If the policies which should have produced a cushion against protest and dissent proved to be ineffective, they could be replaced, according to the Thaksin’s point of view, by the use of more authoritarian methods, aimed at imposing an iron social discipline. In 2001, for instance, the government drafted a security bill which gave law enforcement extensive powers of search and arrest; the following year it drafted a bill, subsequently withdrawn, which decreed that any public demonstration and protest needed a special permission; it then tried to criminalize them too; in 2003 it issued the Act on the Investigation Procedure of Special Cases, which broadened the authorities’ powers of search and detention; it tried to place the police force under the direct control of the prime minister (*ivi*).

Moreover, the Thai leader continually tried to undermine the role of the parliament, the check-and balance system, the intermediaries bodies, such as NGOs, between the leader and the people. In this vein, he repeatedly asserted in many occasions that the typical institutions of liberal democracy – rule of law, human rights, freedom of criticism, checks and balances, and so on – often represent an obstacle to achieving the well-being of the people, which can be on the contrary fulfilled only by giving great power to the government. For Thaksin, the adversary politics of the opposition parties, for instance, «*may not be for the best interest of the people*. *On the contrary, it may be a betrayal of our social contract to the people*» (Keynote Speech, Philippines, September 2003, quoted in Phongpaichit and Baker, 2004: 15). He furthermore considered the jurisdiction of the independent bodies, whose members are appointed by a few people and institutions, over a public office or institution – as, obviously, the one he held – elected by millions of people, a nonsense. He also added that if such independent bodies had become antagonist to the government, he would have stopped funding them.

One of the main enemies that Thaksin tried to oppose and to put under control was however represented by the critical press and public platforms. In 2000, the Thaksin’s family companies acquired the majority shares and control of ITV, the first TV channel independent of government. Most of its programs, which dealt with news reporting and investigation journalism since forever, just before the 2001 election began to focus more on entertainment than on news. Twenty-three journalist who blamed Thaksin to interfere in the election reporting were immediately sacked, and others suffered the same fate in the following years. Other five free-to-air channels were subjected to extensive restrictions: news programming was shortened and lightened in its content; public debate on social and political issues was removed; pressure were put in order to convey a positive image of the government.

All the electronic media were controlled by the government, the army, and the Shinawatra family, despite the 1977 Constitution had established they should have managed by many private companies.

As for the press, the government tried to control it through a strategy based on four points: friendly but threatening phone calls to the editors; “corrupting” the journalists with facilities; demanding the ejection of the too critical journalists; running as it pleased the advertising budget at the disposal of the government agencies.

The political and entrepreneurial carrier of Thaksin was however interrupted by the military *coup* in September 2006, which established a regime surely more authoritarian and worse than that implemented under the Thai leader. Many factors contributed to the execution of the *coup*: the established elites’ fear of having lost their power; the urban middle class’ fear of the emerging rural masses; the loyalty to the monarchy; the criticism to the privatization programmes; the perception of a widespread corruption; and finally also the undemocratic measures adopted by the government leaded by Thaksin.

***4.7. Trump***

There is a wide consensus among scholars in depicting Trump as a typical populist leader. This is surely true, but some clarifications must be made. As an interesting study of Kirk Hawkins and Levente Littvay (2019) shows, during the American electoral campaign of 2016, the highest level of populism was expressed by Bernie Sanders (score of 1.5) soon followed by Trump and Ted Cruz (0.8); instead Hillary Clinton, John Kasich and Marco Rubio never exceed the score of 0.5, so characterizing themselves as non-populist leaders. Among many world heads of government, Trump result however to be moderately populist, with a few leaders – especially the Latin American ones, such as Chávez, Morales, Correa, and Ortega – who reach the highest scores[[49]](#footnote-49).

In his speeches, interviews and participations to public events Trump has very often employed a populist rhetoric. In fact, he has repeatedly attacked the elite and, conversely, praised the wisdom of the people; he has promised to drain the swamp in Washington of the corrupt establishment and lobbyists and to govern instead by the rule of the people; he has censured a maleficent global elite for draining the national wealth and for maneuvering the economy against the working class (Weyland and Madrid, 2019). Many evidences on the use of this kind of rhetoric can be found in the Trump’s talks given both before and after his election.

In an opinion/commentary written for the *Wall Street Journal* in April 14, 2016, for instance, Trump stated:

I, for one, am not interested in defending a system that for decades has served the interest of political parties at the expense of the people. Members of the club—the consultants, the pollsters, the politicians, the pundits and the special interests—grow rich and powerful while the American people grow poorer and more isolated […].

The only antidote to decades of ruinous rule by a small handful of elites is a bold infusion of popular will. On every major issue affecting this country, the people are right and the governing elite are wrong (Trump, 2016).

Similarly, during the acceptance speech for nomination at the Republican National Convention (July 21, 2016) he stated:

As long as we are led by politicians who will not put America first, then we can be assured that other nations will not treat America with respect. The respect that we deserve. The American people will come first once again.[…]

My message is that things have to change and they have to change right now. Every day I wake up determined to deliver a better life for the people all across this nation that had been ignored, neglected and abandoned.

I have visited the laid-off factory workers, and the communities crushed by our horrible and unfair trade deals. These are the forgotten men and women of our country, and they are forgotten, but they will not be forgotten long. These are people who work hard but no longer have a voice. I am your voice.

I have embraced crying mothers who have lost their children because our politicians put their personal agendas before the national good.

I have no patience for injustice. No tolerance for government incompetence. When innocent people suffer, because our political system lacks the will, or the courage, or the basic decency to enforce our laws, or worse still, has sold out to some corporate lobbyist for cash I am not able to look the other way. And I won't look the other way. […]

I have joined the political arena so that the powerful can no longer beat up on people that cannot defend themselves.

Other elements contribute to define Trump as populist too. He is an outsider and personalistic leader who ran for president without relying too much on the party organization; he has built a direct relationships with his followers, especially through the massive use of twitter; he has adopted a coarse political style, and he has flaunted the “socio-cultural low” (Weyland and Madrid, 2019).

Hawkins and Littway note however that the Trump’s populist discourses are inconsistent over time. The authors’ analysis show indeed that the Trump level of populism was higher in the prepared speeches and debates (that is given with a teleprompter) than in the extemporaneous ones (given without a teleprompter). In the latter, the anti-elite and anti-establishment message is very strong, Trump portrays both himself and his team as the competent response to the establishment, whereas the appeals to the people and to their sovereignty are almost all absent. On the contrary, in the first kind of discourses the references to the American people and to their paramount role in the political system are not lacking, so giving to the discourse’s people-centrism element the same relevance of the anti-elite element.

It seems, therefore, that the variability of the Trump discourses level of populism mainly depends on the interventions of his speechwriters, who enhance the pro-people elements of the prepared talks, so making them fully populist. This does not means that Trump is an insincere populist; if anything, the «more accurate label is a “half-populist”» (Hawkins and Littvay, 2019: 16; see also Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018).

However, before being a populist Trump is obviously a plutocrat. According to the Forbes estimates, the net worth of Trump amounts to $3.1 billion. Beyond his homonymous real estate organization, Trump holds $170 million of liquid investments, which include shares of big bank and multinational companies he harshly criticized during the electoral campaign, such as Citigroup ($1 million worth of shares), JP Morgan Chase ($1m), Wells Fargo ($1m), Morgan Stanley ($1m), Morgan Sachs ($1m), Ford Motors ($1m), Google, Berkshire Hathaway, Apple ($2m). Even if he in general opposes the big business, he however own shares in big pharma companies – Pfizer, Merck, Celgene and GlaxoSmithKline – multinational oil companies – Shell, Chevron and Exxon Mobil – consumer good firms – Procter & Gamble and Johnson & Johnson – energy companies – Phillips 66, Kinder Morgan, TransCanada, and other investments may be mentioned in addition (Wang, 2016).

Given the enormous wealth he holds, Trump therefore represents a typical example of populist plutocrat. As such, he has implemented many policies that are in favor not to the people, to the forgotten or disadvantaged men, but to the wealthiest classes and the businesses.

Already the list of who was included in the campaign economic advisers committee shows how much the big business counts in the Trump’s choices. Among the advisers, one can indeed be found many real estate top manager: Howard Lorber (manager of Douglas Elliman and owner of Vector), Steve Roth (chairman of Tornado Realty Trust), Daniel Andrew Beal (real estate investor and founder of Beal Bank and Beal Bank Usa, worth $10.5bn); private equity managers: Tom Barrack (founder of the property investment firm Colony Capital, worth $25bn), Steve Fienberg (co-founder of the hedge fund Cerberus Capital Management, personal wealth of $1.25bn), John Paulson (hedge fund manager, worth $8.6bn), Steve Mnuchin (ex-chief information officer of Goldman Sachs, and founder of Dune Capital Management). The team also included Stephen Calk (founder of Federal Savings Bank and National Bancorp Holdings), Dan DiMicco (former CEO of Nucor steel), Harold Hamm (tycoon of the shale oil and founder of the Continental Resources, worth $9.3bn), David Malpass (chief economist at Bear Stearns) (Coles, 2017).

The selection of many members of the Trump cabinet seems, after all, to have been followed the same logic. Gary D. Cohn, former chief operating officer of Goldman Sachs, was appointed as Director of the National Economic Council (he resigned on March 6, 2018); Rex Tillerson, chairman and CEO of ExxonMobil, was nominated Secretary of State (he was dismissed on March 13, 2018); Steve Mnuchin is the Secretary of the Treasury; Andrew F. Puzder, former CEO of fast-food conglomerate CKE Restaurants, was appointed as Secretary of Labor (he withdrew on February 15, 2017); Elaine L. Chao, ex-vice president for syndications at Bank of America Capital Markets Group and ex-international banker at Citicorp, is the Secretary of Transportation; Betsy DeVos, daughter of the billionaire Edgar Prince, is the Secretary of Education.

The emergence of a populist plutocracy was however favored above all by the implementation of specific policies, such as, firstly, the tax reform signed into law on December 22, 2017. The reform included tax cuts for both individuals and businesses, that shall be enabled via $1.5 trillion in deficits over ten year – according to the governmental estimates the tax cuts should push the GDP growth at 4%.

As regards the individual income tax, the law provides for a change in income level of individual tax brackets, and a reduction of the tax rates. In particular, the rate for the highest tax brackets ($500,000 and up; under the previous law was 426,700 and up) decreases from 39.6% to 37%. The law also establish several deductions, tax reliefs and an overhaul of the taxation on real estates and inheritances. In order to avoid a never-ending increasing of the public debt, these measures will remain in effect for ten years.

As regards the corporate tax, the tax rate is lowered from 35% to 21% with no time limitation. The multinational will be able to bring their assets back to the United States paying a one-time tax of 8%, that grows at 15% in the case of cash. The Alternative minimum tax on corporations, that is the tax conceived to prevent the companies from paying little or no tax, was repealed. The pass-through entities, that is companies in which only the owners or the investors are taxed on the revenue, will benefit of a deduction of 20% and of a tax rate of 29.6%.

As many analysis show, the tax reform will benefit higher-income taxpayers, whereas on the contrary the lower-income taxpayers will be disadvantaged; accordingly, the income and wealth inequality is bound to increase. The Congressional Budget Office, for instance, has provided the estimates of the distribution of impact by income group under the Tax cuts and Jobs Act (H.R. 1). Clearly, any income group may contribute to reduce the budget deficit (positive effect), so bearing a net cost mainly produced by a subsides lowering, or, on the contrary, may contribute to increase the budget deficit (negative effect), so receiving a benefit mainly produced by the tax cuts. As table 1 shows, the lower income groups are those that will incur over the time the major costs of the reform. In particular, in 2019 only the income groups earning less than $20,000 would incur a cost; between 2021 and 2025 the threshold of the income categories that bear the costs of the reform increases to $40,000, reaching $75,000 in 2017. Moreover, from 2019 to 2027 the amount of costs grows. The higher-categories would receive the greater benefit in 2019, and then will be less advantaged over the years. The income groups earning between $100,000 and $500,000 are in general the most benefitted by the reform.

Tab. 1 - Allocation of Changes in Net Federal Revenues and Spending Under H.R. 1 (Millions of Dollars)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Income Category | 2019 | 2021 | 2023 | 2025 | 2027 |
| Less than $10,000 | 1,530 | 5,890 | 7,540 | 8,790 | 10,120 |
| $10,000 to $20,000 | 150 | 8,120 | 10,700 | 11,320 | 16,290 |
| $20,000 to $30,000 | -1,090 | 7,910 | 9,440 | 11,430 | 17,100 |
| $30,000 to $40,000 | -4,770 | 310 | 2,490 | 2,840 | 7,850 |
| $40,000 to $50,000 | -6,450 | -2,590 | -1,240 | -590 | 5,510 |
| $50,000 to $75,000 | -23,050 | -18,760 | -14,910 | -14,380 | 4,030 |
| $75,000 to $100,000 | -22,580 | -21,030 | -17,090 | -17,240 | -1,720 |
| $100,000 to $200,000 | -70,690 | -65,880 | -50,780 | -49,790 | -7,600 |
| $200,000 to $500,000 | -65,650 | -62,040 | -47,250 | -48,140 | -6,680 |
| $500,000 to $1,000,000 | -23,990 | -21,800 | -14,180 | -13,790 | -3,300 |
| $1,000,000 and over | -36,940 | -30,130 | -10,160 | -9,960 | -8,920 |
| **Total, All Taxpayers** | **-253,500** | **-200,000** | **-125,440** | **-119,500** | **32,690** |

Sources: Staff of the Joint Committee on Taxation and the Congressional Budget Office.

The law approved by the Congress does not focus only on cutting taxes. Some amendments inserted by the republicans demolish considerable parts of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), the reform of the health insurance sector issued under the Obama presidency with the aim of increasing the number of the insureds and reducing the cost of the insurance policies. With removing the penalties and fines for those who are not insured, the new law actually repeals the ACA individual mandate, that is the obligation for most Americans to get covered. It is expected that the government will save over $300 billion between 2018 and 2027, which will be used for cutting the taxes. The premiums on the health insurance will increase by about 10%, and a large part of population – according to the Congressional Budget Office about 13 million of Americans by 2027 – will lose coverage. In this regard the Gallup data shows that the U.S. adult uninsured rate reached the level of 13% in the fourth quarter of 2018. This level is the highest in more than four years. The increase of the rate between the third quarter of 2016 (the end of the Obama administration) and the fourth quarter of 2018 is of 2.8 percentage points, that corresponds to about seven million adults without health insurance. The groups most hit by the repeal of the individual mandate are those usually considered the weakest: those younger than 35 (Q4 2018 uninsured rate of 21.6%; 4.8 point increase from Q4 2016), women (12.8%, +3.9 pct. pts.), those with an annual household income under $24,000 (25.4%, +2.8 pct. pts) or between $24,000 and $48,000 (19.1%, +3.0 pct. pts), and finally those who live in the southern states (19.6%, +3.8 pct. pts) (Witters, 2019).

The expansive rollback of the Dodd-Frank Act, approved by the House on May 22, 2018, represents another policy that, according to many pundits, would benefit the wealthiest classes and the business. The Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act consists in a stringent set of regulations on the banks and financial institutions which was issued under the Obama administration in order to prevent systemic financial crisis similar to that occurred in 2007-2010.

Right after the approval of the Act, the corporate lobbies started to pressurize the Congress to repeal or, at least, to weaken it, and an anti-Dodd-Frank bill was actually enacted in 2014. During the electoral campaign Trump promised to dismantle Dodd-Frank, which, for him, harmed the average working American. As highlighted by Coles (2017), Trump wanted actually to protect the interests of the small-to-medium-sized business owners and of the pension-investing middle class Americans, who would have probably voted for him. However, the rollback of the act represents a measure aimed at allowing corporations and financial institutions to carry out risky, but profitable transactions, and, more in general, at pursuing neoliberalism. Indeed, the small and medium-sized banks, that is those with assets of less than $250 billion, will no longer be subject to federal oversight and will no longer have to face the so-called stress tests. Only fewer than 10 big banks will continue to abide by the Dodd-Frank rules, even if the Trump administration is trying to weaken other types of restrictions on these institutions, such as the Volcker Rule. The latter forbids banks to making risky financial operations using money of the account holders.

***4.8. The three leaders and the populist plutocracy***

Even if Berlusconi, Thaksin, and Trump have different histories, they however have many aspects in common. All of them represent typical examples of outsider leaders – that does not means, as already pointed out, unrelated to politics – who gained political power after being successful in the business world. More in detail, all three:

* Entered politics late in life, and were renowned entrepreneurs;
* Took advantage of their expertise in business and economy, juxtaposing it to the ineptitude and the slowness of the professional politicians;
* Held the highest offices of state within a very short period;
* Win popular support in a period of political or/and economic crisis.

As for this last point, it has to be remembered that Berlusconi entered in the political scene in a harsh phase of crisis that bring to the dissolution of the party system and to the loss of trust in institution. Thaksin, for his part, came to power in a period of severe economic crisis that required the intervention of the IMF. Before the Trump election, the economic situation of the United States was undoubtedly better of those of Italy and Thailand. However, the consequences of the Great Recession were still present, especially in the industrial area of the three swing state – Ohio, Wisconsin and Michigan –, hit by a new wave of job losses, due to the competition of Mexico and of the American southern states.

In such contexts, presenting themselves as managers who would have modernized their own countries, and who would make their governments efficient, was an easy task for the three leaders. They seemed to be, in the eyes of voters, the only ones capable of solving the problems that the professional politicians did not know how to deal with, or that they themselves had created (Campus, 2010). However, as emerged by this work, all three leaders, before taking office, were political entrepreneurs who achieved success – especially Berlusconi and Thaksin – thanks to government concessions or licenses, and to friendship and protection of some politicians.

As highlighted, the discourses of the three leaders can be considered as populist. However, in general none of them has adopted effective measure for enhancing the people’s participation in the decision-making processes, and therefore none of them has truly shared the thin beliefs of the populist ideology all the way[[50]](#footnote-50).

Yet, the antipolitics and populism of Berlusconi, Thaksin, and Trump, do not have represented only a rhetoric or a political style aimed at obtaining the largest possible approval, but also and above all an instrument for fostering a project of change of the political system and, in particular and not necessarily in an intentional way, a populist and plutocratic form of democracy.

Bearing in mind the three components of the populist plutocracy, it must be first of all emphasized, once again, that in all three cases the ruling elite was composed by the richest bankers, Ceo, businessmen – in the Thaksin and the Trump cabinet, above all – but also by entrepreneurs, professionals, and managers of the holding owned by the same leaders – here the reference is to the Berlusconi cabinet.

The case of Berlusconi clearly shows how many of his legislative proposal sought to avoid a possible conviction against him.

The measures adopted by the three leaders have somehow protected and promoted, both directly and indirectly, the interests of their financial empire. Berlusconi and Thaksin, for instance, decided to enter politics when the outbreak of the economic and political crisis devoid them of the usual protection guaranteed to them by their close ties with some of the prominent politicians or high-ranking military officers. Many laws enacted under the government of the Italian leader seems moreover to be expressly devised for increasing his companies’ revenues.

According to several analysis, the tax proposals and reforms put forward by the three leaders, especially Berlusconi and Trump, would have or have benefitted the wealthiest persons, included therefore themselves. These measures derive, at least in part, by a laissez-faire logic, according to which the economic advantages received by the wealthy entrepreneurs and producers would enhance, for a ripple effect, the economic situation of the working- and middle-class families. Despite this, there are still many doubts that this result has actually been achieved, given the growing economic disparity in the countries run by the aforementioned leaders.

In short, the analysis of the three cases shows that the leaders’ actions have almost always been aimed at protecting the interests of wealth holders, big speculators, and, more in general, of the plutocrats’ class of which the governments were a direct offshoot, and the premiers essential embodiments.

A second point of discussion pertains the means used by the leaders in promoting their decisions. It has been highlighted that both Berlusconi and Thaksin were often accused of having committed corruption. The same charge was recently made against Trump too. We are certainly unable to make judgments about these allegations; we can only observe how, according many political experts, both patronage and cronyism flourished under the Berlusconi and the Thaksin governments.

Beyond this, in our opinion it is important to highlight that the three leaders did not have the strength necessary to keep themselves in power, and that they were therefore forced to make a sort of alliance with the popular classes. In other words, they tried to obtain the consent through cunning, that is using demagogy – empty promises, playing on popular emotions, and so on – and adopting populist rhetoric and styles of communication.

In fact, it has been observed how Berlusconi, for instance, has always sought to appeal to the “people of viewers”, especially the housewives, counting on his telegenic capacities and, of course, on his control of many networks. Thaksin, for his part, implemented a rural electoral platform also with the aim of ensuring the approval of the rural masses.

The discourses of the three leaders are full of demagogic messages, first of all that of “cut taxes for everyone”, as also of typical populist expressions, some of which have already been quoted: “ the heart of TRT is the people”, “I give to all of you”, “I belong to you” (Thaksin); “the people are right and the governing elite are wrong”, “I am your voice”, “the powerful can no longer beat up on people” (Trump). Besides, the analysis carried out by Hawkins and his colleagues have shown that the discourses of the three leaders express significant level of populism, enough to define those leaders, in comparison to the Latin American ones, as moderate populists. The populist style and rhetoric are however mainly used, as already highlighted, for strategical and tactical purposes.

From all this derives the inability of the three leaders to take care and to protect the general interest and the common good. Democracy has turned into populist plutocracy.

1. Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo and Ostiguy (2017) note that the number of books in English in which the world “populism” or “populist” appears in the title has increased from nearly 50 in the 1950s, to more than 300 in the 1970s, up to more than 700 in the 2000s. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mudde (2017a) and Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser (2019) argue that this approach also comprises some of the scholars, such as Laclau, Jagers and Walgrave, and Moffit, which we considered more appropriate to classify within the communicational approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Freeden points out that the ideology construction and usage represent a side of the political behaviour, and that the decision-making process constitute the real essence of politics. Reducing the plurality of the concepts’ meanings to a single, certain and monolithic meaning, that allows to forge the political identities and to make decisions, is therefore the main task of any ideology. «In concrete terms, an ideology will link together a particular conception of human nature, a particular conception of social structure, of justice, of liberty, of authority, etc. *‘This is* what liberty means, and *that is* what justice means’, it asserts» (Freeden, 1996: 76). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The heartland represents a territory of the imagination, embodying the positive aspects of everyday life, where a virtuous and unified population resides (Taggart, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It is no coincidence that a number of authors have attempted to combine the different approaches (see, for instance, Caiani and Graziano, 2016; Wirth et al., 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Think, for instance, about the *Apologue* of Menenius Agrippa. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rousseau was not surely the first to make such considerations. To those Greek intellectuals who believed that the people were prone to vices and could not be educated, Protagoras, the most outstanding of the Sophist philosophers, answered that through the participation to the public debate and the decisions, the common man could achieve the political virtues. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. These remarks were not very dissimilar to those made more than a hundred years before by the German Calvinist jurist Johannes Althusius. In fact, Althusius maintained that the sovereignty – unique, indivisible, and inalienable – belongs to the people, and that the rulers exercise their power exclusively on the basis of a delegation from the people. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In the part of the book focused on the explanations of the PRR parties electoral failures and successes, Mudde refers, in turn, to the work of Eatwell (2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. These three different concepts (elitist, constitutional and participatory) derive from three general views of politics showing opposite characteristics: elitism, pluralism and, certainly, populism. Elitism argues, in the same way of populism, that society is divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the people and the elite. But, differently, it considers the elite as virtuous, gifted, and endowed with the highest qualities, while the people are considered ignorant, coarse, and inferior both from a moral and intellectual point of view. Pluralism, on the contrary, does not share such a dichotomous and Manichean perspective; indeed, it maintains that society is cross-cut by a plurality of groups with different ideas, values, and interests (Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. On this regard, Carole Pateman distinguishes three levels of participation: pseudo, partial and full. The first type allows a discussion of the decision and stimulates a feeling of participation, but this decision has already been made by the leader or the management. The second implies that citizen or workers have an influence over the making of a decision, but only the governors or the management have the power to make that decision . The third entails that all the members of an organization can contribute in an equal way to determine the outcome of decisions. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The study of the nationalist-fascist monolithic party fronts is deepened by the scholars in other works (see Lipset, 1960; Rokkan, 1981) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Michal Shamir go as far as to maintain that «*party* systems have not been “defreezing” in the last few years; they have never really been frozen» (Shamir 1984: 35). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The three components of the utopian ideology of fascism – the creation of a *holistic nation* capable of facing both internal and external threats; the rise of a “new man”, forged on the values of community and belligerence; the establishment of a *third way authoritarian state* – are indeed very different form those of the thin ideology of populism (Eatwell 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. After all, The Virginia Declaration of Rights (1776), had already stated that it was «made by the representatives of the good people of Virginia, assembled in full and free convention». [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Indeed, as Giovanni Sartori points out: «*Demos* in the fifth century B.C. meant the Athenian (or similar) community gathered in the *ekklesía,* the popular assembly. However, *demos* can be assimilated to the entire body; or to the *polloí,* the many; or to the *pleíones,* the majority; or to *óchlos,* the mob (the degenerative meaning)» (Sartori, 1987: 22).

    This eterogenity of the demos meanings will continue to characterize the history of the concept, that, from time to time, will come to designate an organized totality of producers, warriors, or even believers (Portinaro, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Aristotle, for instance, in *Politics* argued that there are wild peoples who do not differ from animals. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In fact, in the United Kingdom and in many countries of the British Commonwealth do not exist a code called constitution. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Kantorowicz argues instead that the principle of popular sovereignty was foreshadowed during the Struggle over Investitures, and that it imbued the ideologies of the 12th century. He moreover adds that the whole history of Rome between the 13th and the 14th centuries centered on the theory of Roman popular sovereignty. The question arose when Barbarossa demanded to held his imperium from God, and not, as the Roman leaders claimed, from the citizens of Rome, until finally «in 1328, an emperor, Louis of Bavaria, actually received the diadema at the hands of the senators and people of Rome, not in St. Peter’s, but on the Capitoline Hill» (Kantorowicz, 1961: 95). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Even if many authors equate cultural identity with ethnic identity, we believe that the two, while presentig many overlaps, represent something of slightly different. Ethnic identity has indeed a more restricted meaning of cultural identity. It refers to a common heritage or origin, which covers only a fragment of the group’s culture (see, on this, Abou, 1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. It should be noted that a division between the people and the elite characterizes any social system and that this division can be exacerbated by the appearance of certain critical junctures. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. In the lecture at the Collège de France of November, 28 1991, Bourdieu wrote that «words are not just descriptive of reality but themselves construct reality […] in certain cases, imposing a representation means imposing reality when a reality has to be made. If you name something that had previously been unnameable, you make it public, publishable […].The fact of making the unnameable nameable means acquiring the possibility of making it exist, having it known and recognized, legitimizing it» (Bourdieu, 1991b: 330-331). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Bellamy was a writer and a journalist who became famous for his book *Looking Backward*, where he imagined an utopian society of future based on the state ownership of industry and on the rejection of the value of competition. George was an economist, politician, and writer; he proposed to introduce a single tax on the unimproved value of land. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Wilson was the son-in-law of the President of Republic Jules Grévy. He was first convicted, and then acquitted, of selling decorations. Because of the scandal, Grévy was forced to resign. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The Concordancia was a united front of center and right forces which controlled politics in the 1930s mainly through electoral fraud. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The Republic rested on the maintenance of a set of arrangements (the oligarchical pact) established between the central government and the provincial administrations. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. https://library.brown.edu/create/modernlatinamerica/chapters/chapter-9-argentina/primary-documents-w-accompanying-discussion-questions/what-is-peronism-by-juan-domingo-peron-1948-the-twenty-truths-of-the-peronist-justicialism-juan-domingo-peron-1950/. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. France had one retail store per 62 inhabitants, compared with one store per 89 inhabitants in Britain, and one per 91 in the United States (Shields, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The café proprietors and the owners of small garage, for instance, were respectively burdened by twenty-four and twenty-five different taxes (Lipsedge, 1956). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. With this term Mudde intends that «populist discourse has become mainstream in the politics of contemporary western democracies» (Mudde, 2004: 562). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. The “five stars” represent the key issue of the movement, that is: public water, environmentalism, sustainable mobility, sustainable development, and right to Internet access. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. From 2005 to 2013, trust in political istitutions and in parliament respectively fell 17.0 and 15.4 percentage point. From 2009 to 2013, the level of dissatisfaction with democracy increased greatly, reaching 69 per cent in 2013. In 2012, a survey carried out by a private research institute on behalf of one of the main Italian newspapers showed that the 91 per cent of respondents had “little” or “very little” confidence in political parties (Bobba and McDonnell, 2015).

    Among the most interesting studies on Italian populism, see Biorcio (2015) and Tarchi (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. The “short century” which goes from 1914 to the aftermath of the Second World War was in fact characterized by a series of terrible events: the outbreak of the First and the Second World War; the collapse of the western civilization of the nineteenth century; the rise of the Russian revolution in 1917; the emergence of an economic crisis on a world-wide scale; the emergence and the seizure of power by Fascism, National Socialism, and other similar movements (Hobsbawm, 1994) [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. The first class of residues, namely the *instinct of combinations*, represents an inclination to combine certain things with certain other things. It takes the form of cunning, manipulation, deceit and corruption. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. It is Bruce Bimber (2003) who speaks of four information revolution. The first (1920s-1930s) was caused by the development of a political communication system based on penny press and on a national postal service. It encouraged the emergence of a national identity and of a broad political participation, and transformed the proto-parties into the main agents of political intermediation. The second (1880s-1910s) boosted the development of a highly specialized information and of a new figure of political intermediaries, the interest groups. The fourth (1990s-present) involves internet and the associated technologies, which led to a condition of “information abundance”; this latest revolution promoted the birth of post-bureaucratic political organizations (on these issues see also Poster, 1995 and Blumler and Kavanaugh, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Alfio Mastropaolo (1994) notes how this percentage is significantly higher than that reached in Europe by any other moderate-conservative party. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Unlike the standard techniques of content analysis, holistic grading does not break a text or discourse in parts, paragraphs and sub-paragraphs and does not consist in counting the recurrence of certain – in our case “populist” – terms. Instead, it considers the text as a whole: the graders assess the discourses under study and assign them a score indicating the level of populism on the basis of both a rubric and some “anchor texts”. The rubric is designed on the basis of the supposed characteristics of populism, juxtaposing them with the elements that constitute the concept of pluralism. Thus it enables the evaluation of the discourses under analysis, specifying the qualities associated to a simple 3-point scale of 0 (*non-populist* or *pluralist*), 1 (*mixed*), or 2 (*populist*) (see also Hawkins, 2009 and Hawkins and Castanho Silva, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. In fact, as Bonikowski and Gidron suggest: “The longer the political career of a candidate, the less credible the candidate’s populist challenges may appear to the electorate” (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016, 1603). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Alfredo Biondi was Minister of Justice from May 1994 to January 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Melchiorre Cirami was senator of the *Federazione Cristiano Democratica* (*Christian-Democratic Federation*, CCD) party. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. The “Lodo” (arbitration award) *Mondadori* concerned the sale of the publishing house *Mondadori*. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Renato Schifani was a FI senator; he became president of the senate in 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Edmondo Cirielli was a MP of the right party *Alleanza Nazionale* (*National Alliance*, AN). He disowned the law, because of the large changes made in parliament. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Giulio Tremonti held many political offices: Minister of Finance, Minister for Economic Affairs and Finance, Deputy Prime Minister. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Maurizio Gasparri was a MP of AN. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Two other tax shields had already been issued in 2001 and 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. The association was founded in 2001 by Pier Luigi Bersani, secretary of the PD-*Democratic Party* from 2009 to 2013, and Vincenzo Visco, over time Minister of Finance, Minister of Treasury, and deputy Minister of Economy. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. As early as 2000, Thaksin was indicted by the National Counter Corruption Commission for having concealed assets amounting around $100 million, which were registered in the name of his cook, maid, gardener and driver.

    The Constitutional Court acquitted Thaksin; seven judges voted against him, whereas eight voted in his favour – three of them declared they had voted taking above all into account the political advisability of their decision. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Hawkins and Littvay analysed the discourses (speeches and debates) of the aforementioned politicians through the pedagogical assessment technique of holistic grading. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Among the three leaders, Thaksin is probably the one who, more than the others, sought to improve the life conditions of the informal mass through the implementation of the rural electoral platform. This represented an undoubted novelty for the Thai politics, and its relevance should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, the real purposes of this reform did not so much lie in empowering the structural position of the rural mass, as in creating a “cushion” against protest and dissent which would have allowed to protect and to strengthen the domestic capitalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)