



REINVIGORATING LIBERAL DEMOCRACY A RESPONSE TO THE THREAT OF POPULISM IN EUROPE

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary European populism emerged due to the overall limitations and deficits of liberal democracy. As such, this paper argues that liberal democracy, particularly in the European Union, has alienated citizens from the political spheres, hence sweeping the ground for populists to come into scene. Furthermore, through the bypass of political institutions, immediatist solutions and a simplistic rhetoric, populists are able to connect with voters in ways that old-fashioned politicians cannot. The paper also contends that populism is de facto a threat to liberal democracy, yet not necessarily to democracy in itself. That is the idea that, at present, democracy – in its broadest sense – is sufficiently consolidated so as to be able to resist to anti-democratic movements, but that liberal democracy is not as consolidated so as to prevent it from mutating to another democratic version. At the same time, populism can eventually contribute to the deepening of democratic practices if some of its more positive tenets are welcomed by non-populist politicians and incorporated within traditional political structures. As such, the paper proposes the inclusion of participatory and deliberative mechanisms, so as to allow the masses to be co-sharers of power – a demand that is promoted by populist movements –, while curbing the enthusiasm of the populist movement and its less democratic features, with the worst case scenario being the complete defragmentation of liberal democracy, the advent of totalitarian regimes, and the suppression of individual freedoms that have been hard earned since the inception of the European Union.

Keywords: Democracy, Europe, European Union, Liberal, Populism.

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RESUMO

Reinvigorar a Democracia Liberal: uma resposta à ameaça do populismo na Europa. O populismo europeu contemporâneo surgiu devido às limitações e déficits gerais da democracia liberal. Como tal, este artigo argumenta que a democracia liberal, com particular incidência na União Europeia, tem alienado os cidadãos das esferas políticas, o que possibilitou a entrada de populistas em cena. Além disso, através do desligamento com as instituições políticas, de soluções imediatistas e de uma retórica simplista, os populistas têm a capacidade de se conectar com os eleitores de uma forma que os políticos tradicionais não conseguem. O artigo também afirma que o populismo é de facto uma ameaça para a democracia liberal, mas não necessariamente para a democracia como um todo. Isto é baseado na ideia de que, no presente, a democracia – no seu sentido mais amplo – está suficientemente consolidada para poder resistir a movimentos antidemocráticos, mas que a democracia liberal não está suficientemente consolidada ao ponto de não ser possível afirmar que esta não se poderá metamorfosear em outro modelo democrático. Ao mesmo tempo, o populismo pode eventualmente contribuir para o aprofundamento das práticas democráticas se alguns de seus princípios mais positivos forem incorporados por políticos não-populistas e integrados nas estruturas políticas tradicionais. Como tal, o artigo propõe a inclusão de mecanismos participativos e deliberativos, de modo a permitir que as massas coparticipem do poder – uma demanda avançada por movimentos populistas –, e ao mesmo tempo refrear o entusiasmo do movimento populista e as suas características menos democráticas, sendo o pior cenário a desfragmentação completa da democracia liberal, o advento de regimes totalitários, e a supressão de liberdades individuais que foram arduamente conquistadas desde a criação da União Europeia.

Palavras-chave: Democracia, Europa, União Europeia, Liberal, Populismo.

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

‘The corruption of the best things gives rise to the worst’ – David Hume

The European Union (EU) is an atypical institution. Different from NATO, the United Nations or other similar, supra-institutional organisations, the EU is an institution of citizens. Its democratic foundations and parliamentary arrangements confer – in principle – a sense of interconnectedness between European peoples and nations. The peculiarity of the EU resides in the fact that it is the first non-imperial empire, ultimately created to prevent war and conflict, and upheld by several different

nation-states that are bound by political, economic, social and cultural ties. Of course, since the community was first composed of only six founding members the international geo-political scenario has mutated considerably, and many remarkable things have been hitherto achieved: peace has subsisted in European soil for decades; democracy has flourished amongst all the member states; and liberal values have largely prevailed. These successes and many others culminated with the awarding of the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize to the European Union; it is not by chance that the EU is still considered to be one of the most successful examples of inter-governmental decision-making.

Nonetheless, instability has shaped the lifespan of the Union: youth unemployment, sluggish and unstable economic growth, an ageing population, constant threats of disintegration, the refugee crisis, terrorism and climate change, are but a few quarrels that have either afflicted or currently afflict European peoples and nations. Furthermore, the sluggish recovery from the global financial crisis of 2008 and the feeble response given by decision-makers to a series of crises have contributed to the advent of a rife feeling of dissatisfaction, for many people felt (and still feel) left behind by their governments and politicians. As a result, liberal democracy – particularly in Europe – lost much of its attraction, as it had failed to deliver what it first promised – the promotion of common good and social justice. Whilst levels of trust in democratic processes dropped to unprecedented lows, the credibility of traditional political structures vanished in the blink of an eye, and unsurprisingly, not-so-democratic movements came into scene to steal the show: Syriza, Podemos, Fidesz, Front National, the Five Star Movement, AfD, PVV, and UKIP are some of the many populist parties swiftly gaining prominence in the political arenas of Europe. These parties take advantage of stormy *zeitgeists* by promising to empower *the people*, yet at the expense of (liberal) democratic principles.

Some questions nonetheless prevail: How exactly has modern European populism taken shape? What is it about liberal democracy that makes populists so distressed and eager for change? Is democracy *really* under threat? What might be a way to counter-act the present unfolding of events and protect the integrity of the EU?

In order to provide an answer to those quandaries, this paper proposes the following line of thought: first, the definitions of liberal democracy and populism are intertwined, with the purpose of understanding the causes of the current populist wave. Secondly, it is argued that populism, while being *de facto* a threat to liberal democracy, might not be so to the wider concept of democracy, so much so that it could actually deepen democratic practices if certain populist demands are welcomed by traditional political structures. Such “middle-ground” strategy, which proposes the introduction of participatory and deliberative mechanisms onto liberal democratic stages, is approached in the third and final part, and is ultimately perceived as a means of preserving and altering liberal democracy towards a more consensus-based approach, while containing the populist movement and its less democratic demands.

2. DEFINING (LIBERAL) DEMOCRACY & POPULISM

Democracy came about to cut short the prevalence of political systems that ignored the wishes of the people. The idea expressed by Abraham Lincoln of “a government of the people, by the people, and for the people”, symbolised such desire. But is modern democracy *really* the expression of such quote? As a plural concept, encompassing several definitions, and unfolding onto many subsets (for instance, delegative, deliberative, direct, liberal, illiberal, participatory, and representative, to mention a few), it becomes particularly difficult to define democracy in a broad manner. Nevertheless, for what concerns this paper, democracy is interpreted as being related to its *liberal* variation, defined as “a political system marked not only by free and fair elections, but also by the rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion, and property” (Zakaria, 1997, p. 22). Although prevalent in the overwhelming majority of the Western world, this form of government has been widely criticised. First, its features bring it close to a thin, Schumpeterian-like, concept of democracy, which gives primacy to institutions and elites. It is primarily defined in terms of aggregation of individual preferences or interests in collective decisions through instruments such as elections and principles

such as political representation. Alas, liberal democracy has become increasingly bureaucratic, formal and overly procedure-based, which in turn has alienated most citizens from the political sphere(s). This is based upon a conception of democracy that merely hands over to the citizens the task of sporadically choosing their representatives, whereby a direct engagement is not required in the process of decision-making. Indeed, chances of participating in the political debate are mostly unrewarding, precisely due to that confinement of *real* decision-making onto a small minority. Eventually, the concept of citizenship became for the most part a “rights-entitled” concept, rather than a “duties-based” one. Exercising the right to vote, being affiliated to a political party, or being politically opinionated now seems to be sufficient for one to be considered “an active citizen”, when in fact democratic participation ought to entail much more than that.

That is precisely *why* contemporary populism has emerged: due to the ever-standing barrier between representatives and voters, which has led to a gradual popular disengagement with traditional partisan structures that are no longer able to neither meet the electorate’s interests nor effectively represent them. This has led the political scientist Cas Mudde (2017) to perceive populism as “an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism” (p. 13). In fact, with such scenery, populists had it easy when it came to convince the people that such setup was, simply-put, *unfair*. Hence, even if populism is a disputed concept, we shall take the interpretation of Cas Mudde (2015a), who also regards populism as a “thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté general* of the people”. That dichotomy of the “us and them” is central to the message set forth by populists, wherein voters who are fed up with “politics as usual” are led to revolt against a scapegoat – usually elites or minorities. Here, equally worth mentioning is the difference between left-wing populism – which involves a dyadic relationship whereby left-wing populists champion the people against an elite or establishment –, and right-wing populism – where a triadic relationship is usually established, with the populist leader leading the people against an elite that

they accuse of protecting a third group – typically immigrants. Such monist, black-and-white interpretation of the world, deliberately ignores the complexities of a pluralist system so as to make the populist rhetoric easier to grasp. For that reason, “[t]he populist mode of democracy is a politics of arousal more than of reason” (Crick, 2002, p. 90). Furthermore, as it is contingent on the idea of crisis (see Taggart, 2000), populism is a “boomerang phenomenon”, that tends to emerge when things go awry, and disappears when things stabilise. Supporters of populism feel that they do not have a voice, and so they seek alternative ways of having their say heard. Populists unite these people through an anti-establishment rhetoric, by saying “*we are the people, and the reason we are in such a miserable state is because of behaviour of the corrupt elites*”. That is why populism “[...] yearns for a type of politics that resembles a permanent coup d’état in slow motion” (Keane, 2017). In a sense, populism “seeks to change the terms of political discourse, articulate new social relations, redefine political frontiers and constitute new identities” (Panizza, 2005, p. 9). Its “little patience with liberalism’s emphasis on procedural niceties and protections for individual rights” (Plattner, 2010, p. 88), together with the inability of mainstream political parties to connect with voters, has unsurprisingly led the politically-oblivious citizen to fall for populist ideas. This is a mode of political communication that explains the present state of affairs in simple terms, and that aims to (supposedly) guarantee the delivery of all the primary ideals that democracy seemed to assure in the first place, but eventually failed to do so: that after centuries of grief and sorrow, *the people* would finally govern themselves. Furthermore, through the bypass of political institutions, populists are able to connect with voters in ways that old-fashioned politicians cannot. The immediatist, easily-bought solutions are quite appealing to a politically uneducated electorate that is generally unaware of the complexities attached to any political decision. And so, through a simplistic, “blame-the-others” rhetoric, and by appealing to people’s emotions, policies become secondary and simple solutions are provided to complex issues. This strategy has ultimately greatly heightened the influence of populist movements in Europe: “In May 2014, around one in four Europeans voted for protest

parties and anti-establishment candidates in the first pan-European poll since the euro crisis began” (Grabbe, 2014, p. 79).

3. IS POPULISM A THREAT TO DEMOCRACY?

Populism is a threat to liberal democracy, but not necessarily to democracy in itself. That is the idea that, at present, democracy – in its broadest sense – is sufficiently consolidated so as to be able to resist to anti-democratic movements of the sort, but that liberal democracy is not as consolidated so as to prevent it from mutating to another democratic sub-type. Likewise, populism is by no means a threat to different kinds of democracy, such as *illiberal* democracy (Schmitter, 1996; Zakaria, 1997), which is when elections take place, but intrinsic liberal values – i.e. rule of law, accountability, separation of powers, protection of civil liberties, etc. – have been undermined. Answering the abovementioned question depends, of course, on whichever interpretation of populism is taken. Scholars have taken two approaches on populism: a liberal one – which perceives populism as a pathology – and a radical approach – which understands it in more positive ways, by considering that it can eventually heighten political representation (see Kaltwasser, 2012).

The first – liberal – is defended by authors such as Jan-Werner Müller (2016), who perceive populism as fundamentally anti-democratic. This has to do with their particular construal of democracy, strictly connected with liberal values. This interpretation regards the plurality of views as an essential part of any democracy, and so, proponents of the liberal approach conclude that the danger with the populist rhetoric is that it suppresses all other opinions that go against it – this becomes clearer when considering the actions of the extreme left and right. It is also important to mention that these movements can mobilize widespread protests without needing to have much parliamentary representation, nor need to be upheld by a great number of individuals to *a posteriori* appeal to the masses. Consequently, even if *parties* of the far-left and -right do not hold much representation throughout Europe (with a few

exceptions in France, Netherlands, Germany, amongst others), far-left and -right *politics* has been increasing at a quasi-exponential pace.

The second vision of populism – the radical one – is laid down by Ernesto Laclau (2005) and Chantal Mouffe (2005), who have argued that populism is the essence of democratic politics – not liberalism. In fact, if one considers the populist demand that the will of the people ought to be superior to every other standard (Canovan, 1981, p. 4), then it seems that populists are actually arguing for an *intense* kind of democracy, one that ultimately brings the people closer to the spheres of power. From that point of view, populism is *obviously* democratic – yet just not a liberal one. Therefore, if the concept of illiberal democracy is nevertheless *democratic*, it seems fair to assert that populism is a threat to democracy-as-Western-Europeans-know-it – liberal democracy –, but not to the normative ideals that compose the more *radical* visions of democracy. Following that rationale, populism could be perceived as a force for unity. Firstly, by challenging the *status quo*, populism gives a new impetus to the democratic game, as it forces traditional political structures to re-evaluate and rethink their engagement with the electorate. Secondly, it can bring citizens closer to the spheres of political influence. In fact, many disenfranchised citizens are now participating in the political debate, and had not populism come into scene, a new surge of voters would not have gotten involved with politics. Finally, populism can bring back to the table some of the issues that do concern the electorate, but that have been progressively pushed aside by the elected.

Both visions – liberal and radical – have merits. On the one hand, populism is *de facto* anti-democratic because it suppresses a certain fragment of society; that, on itself, is enough reason to consider the populist agenda as contrary to the basic values of democracy. In fact, it is almost paradoxical that populists vindicate *more democracy* in exchange for *less democracy*. In other words, populists claim they are *excluded* from the political debate, and so, democracy must be deepened so as to allow them to participate; however, in exchange they also demand the *exclusion* of those who disagree with them. On the other hand, discarding the agonistic view of democracy proposed by Laclau and Mouffe is precisely what has enabled the sudden and frantic

upsurge of populist movements in Europe. Not consenting these groups to participate in the democratic debate has now turned them into subterfuges for those the discontent and disenfranchised. It is therefore necessary that populist ideas and anxieties are acknowledged by traditional partisan mechanisms and incorporated into the political debate if they contribute to a deepening of democratic practices and intrinsic values.

Unfortunately, the problem is that leaders of the *status quo* are now forced to incorporate *democratic* and *not-so-democratic* populist ideas onto the agenda. Indeed, many leaders who have not been traditionally tied with the far-right (or even the right in some cases) are now shifting their policies towards that end of the spectrum, an idea corroborated by Larry Diamond (see Heaven, 2017). The advent of terrorism and pressures from the far-right to deal with the immigrant flow (and to some extent with the most recent refugee crisis) has forced various European leaders to steer their policies towards the far-right, clearly constituting a democratic recess. The most recent example is that of Germany, which has seen the extreme right-wing party AfD obtaining approximately 13% of the vote in the last German federal elections of 2017, and which led Chancellor Angela Merkel to say that she would listen to the AfD's voters "by taking up their worries" (Erlanger & Eddy, 2017).

4. PARTICIPATION AND DELIBERATION AGAINST POPULISM

Populist accusations that major contemporary political decisions are taken behind closed doors, that the overwhelming majority of people are not heard and listened to in supposedly democratic decision-making processes, that democratic debate is inexistent, and that therefore the role of the citizen, rather than an active one, tends to be exclusively observational, are not just well-founded: they are factual. To counteract this set of circumstances, and given that the agonistic *vis-à-vis* the liberal democratic approaches are conflictive, I propose that liberal democracies ought to incorporate certain Rawlsian-Habermasian, consensus-based, participatory, and deliberative mechanisms in order to (1) *appease*, *educate*, and *empower* the masses, but

also to (2) contain the populist wave through the integration of some of its less-harmful tenets (for instance, the call for more popular input). Curiously, populist parties “[...] are usually the only parties which mobilise the theme of popular sovereignty, viewed with suspicion by traditional democratic parties” (Mouffe, 2005, p. 53). At the same time, populism “[...] tends to favour political participation, since it contributes to the mobilization of social groups who feel that their concerns are not being considered by the political establishment” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 82-83). The problem, of course, is that such appeal to participation and mobilization only occurs prior to populists getting into power. After they are elected, populists “[...] have a more complicated relationship with the [...] respect of the rules of public contestation” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 93). It seems, then, that populists use a catch-all strategy, fostering participation as a means to gain popular support and acquire as many votes as possible. Liberal democratic institutions could follow the same strategy, but rather to send a message to the electorate that they can be heard within a liberal democratic framework, without the need for them to recur to populist movements. As such, participatory and deliberative mechanisms could be the vehicles to achieve such end.

But what are these mechanisms? Participatory democracy “provide[s] citizens with the opportunity to work directly with government officials and their fellow citizens in formal, state-sanctioned public venues, allowing them to exercise voice and vote in decision-making processes to produce public policy solutions that may resolve intense social problems” (Wampler, 2007, p. 1). Participatory democracy allows for a greater social inclusion and access to services; facilitates dialogue between politicians and citizens, therefore improving decision-making due to an enhanced exchange of data and ideas between those two actors; and pushes forward the idea of separation of powers, by ensuring that checks and balances are also instigated by the people. Deliberative democracy, on the other hand, is a system that “encompasses a talk-based approach to political conflict and problem-solving – through arguing, demonstrating, expressing and persuading” (Mansbridge et al, 2012, pp. 4-5). Furthermore, it is a “rational communication process of weighing arguments and alternatives that precedes

choice [...]. During deliberation, information, which was incomplete at the start, becomes firmer. Individuals are able to gain new perspectives, not only in regards to potential solutions, but also in regards to their own preferences" (Chwalisz, 2015, p. 34).

Implementing participatory and deliberative democracy within a liberal democratic framework is defensible due to three main arguments. First, participation and deliberation contribute to the notion of common good. This has to do with a principle of no self-harm, which means that if the body of power is constituted by all, then no one will do anything to harm the other, because the other is himself. Hence, by fostering a civic culture, participation and deliberation shift the rationale of the citizen, and cooperation becomes the preferred political goal; such idea is in contrast with the arguments of Laclau (2005) and Mouffe (2005), who consider that democracy is actually a place for conflict – not consensus. Secondly, participatory and deliberative tools infer citizens with more responsibility, and increase democratic accountability. That is the idea that if *the people* become part of the process they shall honour different points of view, even if not agreeing with them. In due course, citizens learn how to compromise, a feature that is essential for the establishment of a healthy democratic environment. Thus, because citizens are part of the political process, and because their opinions are heard, the democratic process becomes more responsive to the general will. Last but not least, participation and deliberation function as a way of educating the citizenry. Participating in any political process requires an understanding of what politics is. With deliberation, citizens who are unaware of how political procedures effectively work can progressively become accustomed to them. At the same time, deliberation prompts a *collective knowledge*, that is, a collage of ideas, opinions, data, and discussions exchanged amongst the citizenry. From that, any decisions made after that stage are considered as *better* than at a previous stage. Here I refer to the research conducted by Claudia Chwalisz (2015), who has concluded that when confronted by accurate data, populists end up having a much more 'mild' approach to political issues. All in all, cultivating the art of dialogue might very well function as a pre-emptive mechanism to the emergence of populism.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although populism is not by any means a recent phenomenon, it now stands as a major threat to liberal democracy and, as a consequence, to the well-functioning of Europe and the European Union. Populism is ultimately a response to the limitations and deficits of liberal democracy. In actual fact, representation has become far-fetched, and popular participation, other than the sporadic electoral vote, is but an ideal. In turn, a feeling of disillusionment and misrepresentation has risen, which has eased the permeability of the populist rhetoric, of the “us” – the majority – against “them” – the corrupted elites and unwanted minorities. Nevertheless, the volatility of populism is what is mostly concerning: history has proven that it can either lead to an invigoration of popular movements and the establishment of legal reforms, or it can lead to totalitarian practices. If some of its more positive tenets are welcomed by non-populist politicians and incorporated within traditional political structures, disenfranchised citizens can be brought closer to the political stages, which would eventually contribute to repoliticise some of the issues that mostly concern the electorate. In due course, the optimum scenario is the inclusion of participatory and deliberative mechanisms in the political stages, with the worst-case scenario being the complete defragmentation of liberal democracy, the advent of authoritarian regimes, and the suppression of individual freedoms that have been hard earned throughout history. This is also how the EU must strengthen itself, by promoting a framework of common denominators and therefore allowing member states to reach cohesive and prosperous political, social and economic scenarios. Times are changing. Liberal democracy must accompany this trend.

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