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**Beyond the Wave, the Sea: Reassessing the Southern Europe's Populist
Upsurge**

Arthur Borriello

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Abstract

The paper re-assesses the relation between the economic crisis and the rise of populist parties in the South of Europe. It argues that the former did not cause the latter directly, but rather played out as a *catalyst* of previously existing trends, i.e. the erosion of party democracy and the disintermediation of Western societies. It combines several theoretical approaches to advance an explanatory model that replaces the relation between crisis and populism – conceived of as political, performative and discursively mediated – within its structural pre-conditions. By doing so, it aims at providing a synthetic and steady explanation of the contemporary rise of populism in Southern Europe and beyond.

Keywords

Populism, Laclau, Party democracy, Crisis, Southern Europe.

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Beyond the Wave, the Sea: Reassessing the Southern Europe's Populist Upsurge

Arthur Borriello

Introduction

Despite the relative predominance of the ideational perspective – populism as a thin-centred ideology – both concepts of populism and crisis still lack a fully stable, consensual definition within academe. Paradoxically, however, the existence of a relation between the two seems to be widely accepted, with a few exceptions¹. Indeed, many of the contemporary approaches – including the Essex school (Howarth & Torfing 2005; Howarth, Norval & Stavrakakis 2000; Stavrakakis 1999), the stylistic approach (Jagers & Walgrave 2007; Moffitt & Tormey 2014; de Vreese & al. 2018) and part of the ideational branch (Mudde 2004; Hawkins & al. 2018; Ibsen 2019) – assume at least *some sort* of relation between crisis and populism, although variable in strength and scope. This view has been further enhanced by the concomitance between the aftershocks of the 2008 economic crisis and the upsurge of new populist movements, somehow reminiscent of the connection regularly established between the Great Depression and the rise of fascism.

This literature, however, rests on several questionable assumptions regarding the nature of populism and crises. On the one hand, scholars tend to opt for minimal definitions of populism to embrace the variety of its concrete manifestations; in doing so, however, they invariably underestimate what is *specific* about populism and end up conflating the ‘radical right wave’ and the ‘populist wave’ in their descriptions and explanations. On the other hand, while Moffitt’s sophisticated theorization has solved the crucial issue of non-automatic but unavoidable correlation between crisis and populism (Moffitt 2015), it leaves pending the puzzling issue of whether populism should be conceived as a “hype” (the temporary and direct consequence of a sudden economic crisis) or as a “paradigm” (a permanent political phenomenon resulting from the slow-burning crisis of representation). Are we experiencing a populist “wave”, or is populism, more fundamentally, the new political horizon of our time?

Against this backdrop, this paper reassesses the relation between the 2008 crisis and the subsequent rise of populist movements in Southern European countries. This is done by combining

a constructivist conception of crises and a provocatively ‘thick’ approach to populism. On the one hand, crises are defined as political and discursively mediated phenomena rather than objective configurations: there is no crisis until the situation is perceived and performed as such by political actors. On the other, a sharp line is drawn between populism and the radical right, as the former label is restricted to movements that emerged only recently in Southern Europe and which framed their claims in an anti-oligarchic fashion. Based on this original theoretical framework, the paper argues that the rise of populism results from the complex interrelation between the long-term crisis of party democracy and the Great Recession, the latter playing out as a *catalyst* of the former. In Southern Europe – due to the harsher nature of the recession, the reaction of traditional elites, and the position of those countries within the structure of the Euro area – burgeoning populist movements were able to frame the management of the economic crisis as the oligarchic takeover of democracy. The form taken by this populist *moment*, however, was determined by pre-existing trends, i.e., the decline of party politics that characterizes the *era* of disintermediation in which personalized, vertical, and digital forms of politics tend to prevail over obsolete mass party organisations. In other words, while the rise of populism in the South of Europe might well be a temporary phenomenon (the “wave”), it takes place within a much more permanent structural environment (the “sea”).

The paper proceeds on a step-by-step basis. First, it builds on several theoretical approaches to advocate a conception of crisis as a performative, discursively mediated, and deeply political phenomenon, and proposes a “thick” definition of populism (section I). Secondly, it shows how the management of the post-2008 economic recession in the South of Europe generated a crisis of neoliberalism’s hegemony and fostered the concomitant decline of established actors and an upsurge of populist movements (section II). Thirdly, it recontextualizes this populist moment in the underlying, structural, and long-term erosion of party democracy within Western democracies (section III). Finally, based on these theoretical foundations, it attempts to clarify the relation between populism, on the one hand, and the conjunctural and structural context of its irruption, on the other (conclusional section). Overall, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive and robust explanation of the contemporary rise of populism in Southern Europe, while differentiating it from the radical right with which it is often conflated. The theoretical arguments are illustrated here and there by examples taken from recent

developments in South European politics, although it is far beyond the scope of this paper to give a proper testing of its main claims, which call for further empirical research.

Political and performative nature of crises

What is a crisis, and how does it manifest itself? Or: how do crises relate to *change* in general, and to populist upsurge in particular? In many strands of the literature, an implicit conviction decrees that crises are, at least *in potentia*, moments of rupture that involve a sudden change, often taking the form of abnormal political phenomena. For this reason, the almost synchronic advent of the most important economic recession since the Great Depression and of a “populist explosion” (Judis 2016) has proven a source of worry for many observers who consider the latter to be a menace to democracy (Urbinati 2014; Muller 2016). Yet it comes as no surprise to them. Still, “crisis” remains one of the most slippery concepts of social sciences, if only because it carries strong medical, theological, and historical connotations accumulated throughout its long etymological history (Koselleck 2006). Notwithstanding its imprecision and ambiguity – or, more accurately, precisely *because* of them – crisis is one of the most ubiquitous terms employed by political scientists (Hay 1999). It permeates many classical and current explanations of change, ranging from the liberal and Marxist traditions to the contemporary neo-institutionalist and (post-)structuralist approaches.

This paper shares in the conviction that there is a generally intimate relationship between crisis and populism, something evinced by the Great Recession and the resulting populist “wave”, in particular. However, the paper explicitly departs from two twin pitfalls in the literature. These can be summarised as respectively both an “objectivist” and a “subjectivist” reduction of the mutual relationship between populism and its crises. In the first perspective, the crisis is conceived of as an exogenous shock that affects the interests of the actors (in a rational-choice perspective), or the structures of society (in a structuralist perspective), thereby fostering ideational or institutional change. Populism is, in this view, the product of a new cleavage between the winners and the losers of globalisation – defined either in economic or cultural terms – which the economic crisis has accentuated (Kriesi & Pappas 2015; Eichengreen 2018; Norris & Inglehart 2016). In the second perspective, crisis is a dramatic moment in which the normal rules of rational or structurally determined behaviour are suspended, paving the way for irrational and emotion-driven attitudes. The populist upsurge, according to this, is the

product of conscious manipulation of disoriented voters by an opportunistic demagogue through emotional appeals to popular “resentment” (Fassin 2017). *Contra* these approaches, other theoretical traditions – mainly constructivist neo-institutionalism (Hay 2006; Schmidt 2008), discourse theory (Laclau 2005; Stavrakakis & al. 2017) and Moffitt’s style approach to populism (Moffitt 2015) – provide the conceptual tools for rethinking the relationship, neither objectivist nor subjectivist, between crisis and populism.

Following these approaches, crisis is an *endogenous, political, and discursively mediated* phenomenon. No matter the degree of “externality” of the shock that triggers the crisis, the crisis itself is always coterminous with a process of internal reassessment of its shock value. Even the apparently most objective and external phenomenon, such as a natural disaster, only becomes a *social object* through a process of intersubjective interpretation (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 108).

Failure, in other words – or, to use the Marxist terminology, “contradiction” – does not equate with crisis (Hay 1999). The material dimension of the phenomenon (in this case, the financial crash and the ensuing economic recession) may well represent the necessary precondition for a crisis, but one wouldn’t be able to talk of a crisis unless it is *perceived* as such. In other words, “the difference between failure and crisis hinges on mediation” (Moffitt 2015: 197). A crisis exists only insofar as the failure triggers a *competition* for its interpretation – in this sense, it is intrinsically political. Those discursive struggles encompass the (strongly interrelated) diagnostic, taxonomic, and prognostic dimensions: they involve competing interpretations of the causes and consequences of the situation, contrasted labelling of the phenomena at stake, and blame assigning, as well as rival solutions to rectify the failure. Speaking of a “public debt crisis”, of a “private debt bubble”, or “late capitalism crisis”, will involve considerably divergent narratives about the main cause of the failure. Depending on which narrative is preferred, decision-makers will point the finger alternatively at excessive public spending due to state profligacy, the malfunctioning of the private credit sector, or the structural contradictions lying at the heart of the model of production. In turn, those diagnoses will imply radically different paths for reform, ranging from public spending cuts, to increased public investment, to full-on anti-system agitation.

Another consequence of this constructivist understanding is that actors who engage in discursive struggles are not simply describing an objective reality external to them, but are actively participating in framing it. More precisely, they do not respond to an external crisis occurring independently from them but contribute to shape and diffuse a *sense* of crisis, to “spectacularize” and “perform” it (Moffitt 2015). It is here that the approach to crisis and populism proposed in this paper diverges from Moffitt’s in two respects. First, the performance of a crisis does not seem to be specific to populist actors and, hence, should not be considered as a *defining* characteristic of populism. During the economic recession, government leaders (including undoubtedly non-populist ones, such as Mario Monti or Mariano Rajoy) have often resorted to a rhetoric that framed it as an economic “state of exception” to justify unpopular policies. Moreover, “crisis” seems to have almost become a permanent feature of political discourse at large, way beyond populism itself (Skilling 2014). Hence, if the performing of a crisis is a key component of populist and non-populist actors’ strategies alike, it can hardly serve as a criterion to distinguish between them. Second, Moffitt’s approach still falls short of an explanation for why, in the context of the Great Recession in the South of Europe in particular, the opposition to government parties took that *distinctive* populist shape – rather than, for instance, radical left or neo-fascist traits.

To understand this, we must turn away from the dominant definitions that equate populism with a few minimal features – a style (Moffitt 2015), a thin-centred ideology (Mudde 2004), or a discursive logic (Laclau 2005) – shared by political movements regardless of their ideological positioning. Instead, we must adopt a “thicker” notion of populism (Borriello & Jäger 2020) closer to its original meaning and its most emblematic historical manifestations – the American People’s Party, the *narodniki*, and Peronism. In such a perspective, which has been recently defended by Federico Tarragoni (Tarragoni 2019), populism’s peculiarity lies in the construction of a transversal popular movement calling for a radicalization of democracy. In other words, populism in its historical and contemporary manifestations must be understood as a form of plebeian politics in reaction to the *oligarchizing* tendencies of democracies, and aiming at the social and political inclusion of previously excluded popular sectors (Vergara 2020). As will be argued in the following section, the specific nature of crisis in Southern Europe – a particularly harsh combination of skyrocketing inequalities, loss of sovereignty,

and loss of legitimacy from the governing parties – paved the way for new political actors to *frame* it as an oligarchic takeover of democracy, a sort of “latin-americanisation” of Southern Europe (Lament 2015).

Such a ‘thicker’ definition of populism, however, implies two major commitments. Firstly, populism and the radical right should cease to be viewed as near-synonyms, if only for the sake of dispelling one of the most important geographical biases in populism studies² (Aslanidis 2017; Stavrakakis 2017). Secondly, the respective upsurges of populist and radical right formations should be ascribed to different immediate causes: the anti-oligarchic framing of the Great Recession on one hand, and the politicization of migration and security issues on the other. However, as I shall argue in section three, both occur against a broader structural background that shapes some of their formal characteristics (reliance on a strong leader, weakness of intermediary structures, anti-establishment rhetoric, and importance of the digital communication). In other words, they represent two forms of “unmediated democracy” (Culpepper 2014), thereby fostering conceptual confusion between these otherwise distinct political phenomena.

In short, populism’s main peculiarity is to frame a certain situation as an oligarchic diversion of democratic principles. Still, the question remains as to what crisis drove the recent populist upsurge in Southern Europe. Skimming the populism literature, two broad narratives appear regarding the contemporary rise of populist actors in general. For the first one, populism is the product of a slow-burning crisis of representation plaguing Western democracies: declining party mediation turns populism into a permanent feature of contemporary political systems (a populist *age*). According to the second narrative, populism is a *wave*: the proliferation of populist actors, in this view, constitutes a temporary response to the material and symbolic effects of the Great Recession. The next sections provide a glimpse of what a unified approach could look like. On the one hand, the context of the Great Recession is key for understanding the populist upsurge in the South of Europe and its specific politico-normative content. On the other, a broader underlying trend explains the forms taken by contemporary political challengers – populists, neo-fascists, and technocrats alike – in Western democracies at large. This argument echoes a claim regularly made in the literature, according to which the central phenomenon of our time is the changing growth model (Hopkin & Blyth 2019) and the related

transformation of party organization occurring since the late 1970s, which takes the form of “cartelization” and “crisis of institutional mediation” (Blyth & Katz 2005; Brubaker 2017). However, we contend that the more specific definition of populism adopted here allows to better distinguish the direct effects of the Great Recession from the consequences of these underlying long-term transformations.

Crisis of what? Neoliberalism’s shaky hegemony

Any crisis is not an abstract phenomenon coming out of the blue. Instead, it is always the crisis of a certain social formation. In poststructuralist approaches, crises are equated to the dislocation of a given social order, which always rests upon political foundations – an instituting moment that orders society and determines the content and boundaries of the various spheres of activity (Lefort 1986: 20). Once this configuration is sedimented through routinised material and symbolic practices, it tends to reproduce itself through the predominance of *social* logics (the rules that enable the functioning and the reproduction of practices) over *political* logics (the forms of transgression, contestation, protection or restoration of practices) (Glynos & Howarth 2007). In the process of its reproduction, it tends to obscure its own political foundations, thus appearing as a *natural* order of things. Crisis conjunctures are precisely those in which the material and symbolic practices lose their natural appearance and give way to the reactivation of political logics. The political nature of the social order comes back to the fore, as the actors now tend to deploy competing political logics aiming at contesting or defending it. This opens a window of opportunity for new actors willing to irrupt onto the political scene and create new political subjectivities. The nature of the structure that lapses into crisis, of course, is indispensable for understanding the way actors attempt at framing it: the current populist upsurge cannot be understood without investigating the status of neoliberalism.

Anyone speaking of a social order in crisis, struggling to obscure its own political nature, immediately conjures up the spectre of neoliberalism. As the historian Quinn Slobodian argues, the qualitative novelty of neoliberalism stems from its focus “not on the market per se but on redesigning states, laws, and other institutions to protect the market” (Slobodian 2018: 6). In other words, rather than a political project aiming at ‘freeing’ or ‘unleashing’ markets from the influence of the state, neoliberalism is better conceived of as “a simultaneous roll-back *and roll-out* of state functions” (Peck, 2001: 447). This echoes the view according to

which the idea of markets functioning alone is nothing more than a myth diverting attention away from the institutional design creating and protecting them (Fligstein 2001). In such a perspective, the European integration process constitutes the most blatant example of such a process of “marketisation” (Crespy 2016) achieved through strong institution-embedding (Caporaso & Tarrow 2009).

Born as a counter-hegemonic project – a counter-revolution against the prevailing “social-democratic” hegemony in Western democracies (Berman 2006) – neoliberalism progressively became the new hegemon. On the one hand, neoliberalism can be said to be hegemonic insofar as it has progressively sedimented within institutionalized practices. Those practices unfold at the macro (competition laws, deregulation of finance activities, free trade agreements, golden rule of budget balance, etc.) and micro levels (extension of the private management tools to the spheres of culture, health, education, etc.), thus permeating society as a whole. On the other hand, its hegemony manifests itself in the political realm, by the progressive rallying of all the main partisan forces to its basic principles. Most decisively, the co-optation of the families that once had represented its most ferocious adversaries have consecrated its hegemony: the ideological conversion of social-democratic parties to the Third Way (Escalona 2018) and the implosion or transformation of former communist parties after the fall of USSR have been fatal.

The more its logic became enshrined in routinised practices and accepted across the political spectrum, the more neoliberalism was able to suppress its own contingent and contestable nature. Henceforth, the dominant discourse was increasingly *post-political* (Mouffe 2005). Ideological conflict was a relic from the past. From now on, politics would unfold as the reasonable management of globalized markets, and the partisan disputes would revolve around the best way to mitigate their collateral damage. Politics and institutions would not have to withdraw, but would strengthen so as to serve the markets and protect their autonomy, thereby giving form to the most cherished of the neoliberal pioneers’ dreams. In this picture, the stability and legitimacy of this social order was ensured by the articulation of material and symbolic promises. Facilitated access to credit for households was substituting for the falling gains of productivity and wage increases (Streeck 2011) – a system that has been coined as a form of “privatised Keynesianism” (Crouch 2009). The promise of uninterrupted growth,

enjoyment, and self-entrepreneurship – ‘no burst, only boom’ – gave neoliberalism its symbolic and fantasmic grip (Glynos & al. 2012).

This is precisely what lapsed into crisis with the financial crash and its aftermath. The growth model based on private debt to “buy time” (Streeck 2014) collapsed, carrying its legitimacy with it. On the one hand, the material conditions of working and middle classes brutally deteriorated with the slowing down of economic activity and were further aggravated by the harsh austerity policies imposed by elites (in particular, in the countries of the so-called EU “periphery”). On the other hand, dreams of uninterrupted growth and household prosperity based on self-entrepreneurship vanished. The narrative that sustained neoliberalism became suddenly inaudible when governments decided to rescue private banks while imposing cuts on their own population. The legitimacy of neoliberalism and its libidinal promises, in short, was teetering on the brink, as its institutions were no longer able to meet the material and symbolic needs of the population, thus opening a process known in post-structuralist circles as *dislocation* (Laclau 1990).

The existence of these unfulfilled demands, left alone, would not be enough to speak of a crisis in the subjective, performative, and political sense described above. What was crucial in that regard was *the congestion of the channels of representation in which those demands were classically voiced*. More than economic recession and austerity measures *per se*, it was the (perceived) convergence of political elites around the latter that opened an unbridgeable breach between a large part of the citizenry and its representatives. Not only did actors from the left to the right of the political spectrum enact similarly harsh austerity policies across Southern Europe, they also systematically proposed the same discourse of justification for those measures, regardless of partisan boundaries and respective national contexts. Political elites tried to depoliticize the economic issues and to depict austerity policies as admitting no alternative. This was done by deploying a large range of discursive strategies (Borriello 2017): depiction of the crisis as an economic state of exception (Fonseca & Ferreira 2015); naturalization of economic phenomena (Bickes & al. 2014); moralization of austerity (Kelsey & al. 2016); and invocation of external constraints (Watson & Hay 2004). This discourse tended to exacerbate the neoliberal logic by accentuating the logic of submission of political institutions to the market logic, and condensing the post-political pretention of (hegemonic) neoliberalism.

Crucial, in that respect, was the commitment of centre-left parties to neoliberal policies and discourse: by conveying the idea that there was no alternative to austerity and giving up on channelling the frustration that it generated, they paved the way for their own decline and the intrusion of new political actors. In national contexts where this association of social-democratic parties with austerity proved indelible, they virtually disappeared (Greece, France) or seriously risked doing so (Italy, Spain) and saw the irruption of one or several populist insurgents (Syriza, Podemos, la France insoumise, Movimento Cinque Stelle).

Indeed, in a context that saw neoliberalism losing its material and symbolic credibility, such a discourse deepened the representative gap and fed virulent populist social movements (Aslanidis 2016) – as in the cases of *Nuit Debout* and the Yellow Vests in France, the *Anaktismenoi* in Greece, and the *Indignados* in Spain (Prentoulis & Thomassen 2013) – thus de facto reminding citizens of its own political nature. In other words, *dislocation*, without being tempered by established political actors, led to *reactivation* of political logics. Against the backdrop of technocratic confiscation of decision-making, perceived connivance between political elites, and radical depoliticization of economic decisions, it should come as no surprise that the political backlash took on populist traits. Against democratic denaturation, these actors opposed with the regaining of popular sovereignty (Gerbaudo & Screti 2017). Against the depoliticization of economic issues, they advocated their radical re-politicization: ‘*there is no alternative*’ was the assertion, ‘*si se puede*’ was the objection. They constructed ‘the people’ as a new subject by federating the frustrated popular demands and calling for the social and political inclusion of sectors which felt less and less represented by the actual institutions.

Yet while this heuristic of the crisis might well explain the success of populist claims, it does not offer an adequate explanation of the organisational form taken by contemporary populism (relying on a strong leader, weak or inexistent intermediary bodies, participatory or plebiscitarian practices, digital communication, etc.). To understand this, it is necessary to reposition the current crisis within the broader context of the slow erosion of party democracy across the Western world, for the Great Recession and the subsequent crumbling of party systems did not take place against the background of a triumphant representative democracy and prosperous political parties – far from it. This, in turn, would enable a stricter demarcation within the

populist phenomenon of what should be attributed to the conjunctural crisis of neoliberalism, on one hand, and to the structural, pervasive hollowing out of democracies, on the other.

The void as a backdrop

Contemporary populism, in many accounts, has obeyed a specific organisational logic. In particular, the literature on parties shows that populism is at odds with the classic party form of organisation of the twentieth century and thrives in a context of the decline of this model, in which the parties become increasingly “liquid” (Urbinati 2019). Populism would rely on a strong leader, weak party organisation and intermediary structures, direct or plebiscitarian participation, and thrive in a general context of disintermediation and mistrust against the traditional parties. It is blatant in Southern Europe, where the new populist challengers have clearly displayed a strong dependence on their leader, have been reluctant to consider themselves as parties in the traditional sense of the term, and have developed innovative forms of membership and participation (Gomez & Raviro 2019; Natale & Ballatore 2014).

Although such a diagnosis is hardly contestable, it is necessary to introduce two addenda before building on it. First, this form of organisation is not a *universal* trait of populist formations, historically and geographically speaking. The American People’s Party, for instance, relied on the development of strong cooperatives by a social basis that jealously guarded its influence over the leadership of the movement (Jäger 2020). Many of the post-war Latin American experiences of populism, for their part, looked pretty much like mass parties since they “constructed formidable party organisations to encapsulate and discipline adherents” (Roberts 2006: 127). Second, even when considering a weak, disintermediated form of organisation as a core characteristic of contemporary populist formations, it should never be considered as a *specific* defining criterion. By doing so, given the general weakening of party structures all over the Western world, one risks being unable to distinguish between populist and non-populist actors and ends up considering that populism is everywhere. In a context of disintermediation, any new political challenger – be it populist, neo-fascist, or technocrat – tends to opt for loose and vertical organisation, personalised leadership, and anti-establishment rhetoric³. Once again, keeping a thicker definition of populism here allows viewing it as an anti-oligarchic popular movement that, because of the structural environment in which it thrives, takes the same form as any other political challenger in an “unmediated democracy” era.

Keeping this premise in mind, it is true that populism fills in a representative gap that predates the economic recession, and which has been widening throughout almost all Western democracies over the past forty years. Traditional political parties did not suddenly lose their stock of legitimacy and grip on society through the implementation of austerity measures between 2010 and 2013; rather, their social basis, electoral clientele, and model of representation, all began to crumble much earlier. The decline of the mass party model of organisation has been famously described by Peter Mair as a twofold process both of elite and popular disengagement, resulting in the creation of a representative *void* (Mair 2013). Both dynamics are well documented. The latter manifests itself in a large range of indicators about electoral participation, party membership, electoral volatility, party loyalties, opinions on democratic institutions and political parties, and many others. Elite withdrawal, on the other hand, started with parties turning into “catch-all” electoral machines – no longer rooted in a specific sociological segment of the population with its worldview – and increased with their “cartelisation”, that is, with the gradual fusion between the elites of parties and state institutions (Katz & Mair, 1995). Those dynamics have been accentuated by the European integration process, which deepened the representative gap by turning *nation states* into *member states* (Bickerton 2012), i.e. into entities characterized by executive empowerment, increased autonomy of party elites from their constituencies and their own party structures, and a decoupling of the realm of politics from the actual level of policy-making (Scharpf 1999).

Overall, the decline of traditional mass parties took down with it a whole model of representation – party democracy – in which those parties acted as agents of mediation between the citizens and the state. In this model, each party unified the claims of a specific constituency to which it was accountable, provided ideological coherence to those claims, and aimed at exercising power in the name of a perceived general interest. Their mediation role was two-directional: they translated the claims of their constituency to the state, on the one hand, and redistributed public resources according to their conception of general interest, on the other. Contrarily, at the beginning of the 2000s, it became clear that this model was almost obsolete and was giving way to the advent of a “leader democracy” (Calise 2016) – of which Berlusconi was the epitome. This new model was articulated around an increasingly direct relationship

between charismatic leaders and their atomised and de-aligned electorate, in which the old party structures were becoming superfluous.

Unsurprisingly, the changing organisation of power and structure of political conflict came with a drastic change in their ideological *substance*. The deep-rooted political cleavages around which politics had been articulated for decades (Lipset & Rokkan 1967) were losing their significance. Among these, the left-right cleavage was certainly the most essential, for it had structured the political life of Western democracies at least since the end of World War II. With an increasingly large amount of economic decisions being removed beyond the reach of electoral politics, and the parties being less and less entrenched in specific social groups, however, the political competition that revolved around the redistribution of wealth between capital and labour became amorphous. In such a context of diminishing cleavages, eroding party organisations, and blurring of decision-making responsibilities, political actors started turning to other sources of legitimacy: the twin logics of technocracy and populism.

Over the past decades, alongside the emergence and strengthening of a new radical right, we have witnessed the rise of new competing modes of organisation and legitimation among political actors. On one side, a proliferation of non-majoritarian, regulatory institutions is visible, whose legitimacy is centred around expertise and knowledge rather than delegation through popular rule (Majone 1999; Tucker 2019). On the other, a widening range of actors have reclaimed popular and/or national sovereignty and based their own legitimacy claims on their supposedly direct relation with the citizenry. Politicians seem to rely increasingly on these poles of legitimacy. While a “radical centre”, presenting itself as non-partisan and pragmatic (Mouffe 1998; L’Hôte 2010), has lately monopolised the political foreground in many national contexts – ‘New Labour’, Renzi’s launching of *Italia viva*, La République en Marche, Ciudadanos, etc. – it has generally faced the competition of either a radical right or a populist challenger. Interestingly, both technocrats and populists often explicitly claim to be beyond left and right (think of Emmanuel Macron, Beppe Grillo, Pablo Iglesias at the outset of Podemos, etc.) and *ratify and recognise each other as their true political opponents*.

Those characteristics shed an interesting light on the *ambiguous* relation between technocracy and populism, which seem as much complementary as they are oppositional (Bickerton & Accetti, 2017). Technocrats advocate the withdrawal of a wide range of policies from public

pressure to elude electioneering temptation and short-termism, considered as collateral *excesses* of democracy (Goulard & Monti 2012; Rancière 2005). They often overtly target populism (a category in which they obviously include the radical right) as the main contemporary threat to democratic stability and, in this sense, represent a form of *anti-populism* (Stavrakakis & al. 2018; Moffitt 2018; Ostiguy 2017). Many populist actors, on the other hand, deploy a strongly anti-technocratic discourse based on the necessity to regain popular control over decision-making processes. The rise of this new political divide occurs performatively, too: the more political actors define themselves along this political line, the more they effectively tend to downplay the relevance of a left-right cleavage. This, in turn, reveals a paradoxical and uncomfortable *complementarity* between technocracy and populism as “perfect enemies”: they both arise out of the ruins of previous modes of representation/mediation and share a common interest in marginalising this old model (Bickerton & Accetti 2017). Some authors even argue that, far from being incompatible, these two modes of legitimation may coexist within the same political movement – as in the Five Star Movement (Bickerton & Accetti 2018) – and, together, substitute for the old ideological and sociological registers of legitimation.

The economic crisis has brutally accelerated the decline of the previous model of representation and the rise of these new, ambiguously related, political logics. Nowhere has it been as blatant as in the Southern part of the EU – due to the harshness of austerity measures, the position of these countries within the Euro area and, in some cases (Italy), the already extremely volatile political landscape. Unsurprisingly then, the post-crisis years in those countries (including France) have been marked by experienced technocratic or “radical centre” governments (Monti, Macron, Papademos) and the upsurge of populist social movements and parties. However, the advent of this new era and structure of conflict might be more fragile than it seems at first sight. Rather than a cleavage in the traditional sense of the term – a political opposition rooted in specific social groups and competing ideologies – the opposition between technocracy and populism has volatility and disaffiliation as both its structural conditions of possibility and as its main weaknesses. Without recreating the intermediary bodies and the solid social bonds that characterized the previous model, the contemporary contenders might well fall into the void of a politics of marketing divorced from any structural and ideological tradition and, as such, become extremely vulnerable to sudden collapses.

Conclusion: populist wave, populist paradigm, or what?

Are we, then, experiencing a “populist wave” in our post-crisis years? Beside the extremely questionable connotation of the metaphor – that of a natural, irresistible, and undifferentiated phenomenon – it does not entirely capture the nature of the current situation. To stay within the same metaphorical realm, one should look at the “sea” rather than at the “wave”. For beyond the current multiplication and strengthening of populist movements lies a matter of deeper concern: the slow crumbling of the Western structures of political representation.

However, we must not necessarily choose between the characterization of populism as a wave (the product of a short-term economic crisis) or as a new paradigm (the result of a long-lasting socio-political crisis). Instead, the most urgent task for analysts should be to understand the proportion of the explanation that falls to each of these factors, as well as to capture the exact nature of the relation between them. The populism of the twenty-first century, just as its contemporaneous challengers, technocracy and the radical right, displays a specific organisational form particularly well adapted to the new era of disintermediation. Those formal characteristics represent a permanent feature of the politics of our time since they respond to structural preconditions that did not appear with the Great Recession and will not disappear with the (relative) economic recovery. As a specific political project, on the other hand, the populist upsurge is inseparable from the context of economic crisis whose management, particularly in the South of Europe, was perceived as an oligarchic takeover of democracy and described by populist challengers as such. Arguably, this political conjuncture, consisting of high polarization, sudden reconfiguration of the political space, and irruption of new actors wishing to fill the representative gap, is now practically over in many countries. Spain is the perfect example of this: after the spectacular irruption of populist (Podemos) and technocrat (Ciudadanos) players, the party system is now turning to a stable confrontation between two blocs responding to a left-right logic. Hence, the sudden upsurge of new forces, or the capacity of these new actors to depose the old ones, is now very unlikely, although the system is now more fragmented than ever. In some cases (France and Italy), fragmentation and volatility prevail, since the traditional political actors (*Parti socialiste*, *Les républicains*, *Partito Democratico*, *Forza Italia*, etc.) are particularly moribund. The result is a political configuration extremely complexified,

where unpredictability is the rule and where populism, technocracy, and the radical right are the only games left in town.

Distinguishing between moments of politicization and structural transformation in the range of populism's driving factors is not a purely analytical exercise. Populism's dual nature – both as a tool for repoliticization in times of crisis, and as a vertical and disintermediated form of politics in its contemporary manifestations – also sheds a new light on its ambiguous relation (Canovan 1999; Rovira Kaltwasser 2012) to democracy.

On the one hand, populism can indeed offer a powerful vehicle for (re)democratization. Against the oligarchizing tendencies of modern democracies and the representative gap that has grown over the past decades, populist actors politicize new issues (the M5S and environment in Italy, Podemos and feminism in Spain, LFI and the presidential regime in France, for instance) and mobilize new subjects (as a quick look at the socio-demographic composition of Podemos' parliamentary group confirms). Moreover, populism can certainly not be taken as responsible for the factors that have permitted its upsurge (the crisis of representative democracy and the management of the economic crisis). Consequently, liberal elite hysteria about populism is particularly misplaced (not to say hypocritical or schizophrenic), given its own enormous responsibility in creating the current situation.

On the other hand, populists might, in the long run, represent more of a *symptom* than a solution to the structural problem of disintermediation in our societies. Although they can achieve quick and remarkable electoral successes, mainly thanks to their communicational abilities and vertical structure, these movements usually sputter when they try to build durable party structures – be it for ideological reasons (M5S, Yellow Vests) or for a mixture of contextual and internal impediments (Podemos, LFI). Not only might this hamper their ability to survive in the long run (and to outlive their charismatic leaders); by the same token, it could also seriously undermine their transformative potential, as a credible counter-hegemonic program requires a patient process of popular education, culture war, and executive training alongside electoral activity.

To conclude, the nexus between the Euro crisis and disintermediation may well explain why populism gained its foothold on the European continent in its Southern region. However, the

crumbling of the previous model of representation is not circumscribed to that geographic area, but rather reaches Western democracies at large, albeit with variable intensity and speed. By pointing the finger at the populist wave, the defenders of democracy might divert attention away from the sea: the erosion of party democracy which swipes away traditional political actors and increasingly reduces politics to a three-player game between technocrats, populists, and new rightists. There is no reason to believe that the former two players will always prevail in Southern Europe, as the rise of la *Lega* and *Vox* have recently shown. There is even less reason to believe so in other national contexts, where the issue of immigration has taken on a disproportionate role and provided fertile ground for the rise of nationalist, xenophobic, and authoritarian modalities of politics. To be sure, any intellectual and political resistance to the radical-right “wave”, rather than focusing on its alleged populist nature, should start with a careful assessment of the “sea” from which it arose.

Notes

1] For many Latin-Americanists, focusing on populism and crisis reflects a pervasive European bias in populism studies and deflects the attention away from populism as a specific institution-building phenomenon and as the political “normality” in certain contexts (Aboy Carlés 2010; Cadahia & al. 2020; Aslanidis 2017).

2] Radicalizing this definitional move, we could go as far as to provocatively claim that *there is no such thing as a populist right*. Radical-right movements tend to frame the crises in a significantly different way than that of populism (threat to cultural homogeneity, territorial integrity, etc.). In this perspective, the seemingly ‘populist’ rhetoric of contemporary radical-right actors would fall under the “democratization of the oligarchic temptation” (Savidan 2015) – i.e. the desire to keep one’s privileges against subaltern categories (women, migrants, minorities, etc.) – rather than under an authentic egalitarian, anti-oligarchic impulse.

3] For this reason, several authors define even Macron as populist (Fougère & Barthold, 2020) which, in our view, is paradoxical (to say the least). How can an elitist, liberal technocrat who continuously shows his contempt for the common man be a populist? Or: what is the added value of a concept that does not distinguish between two phenomena as opposed as Macron’s *En Marche* and the Yellow Vests?

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Biography

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