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Twisting representation

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Introduction

In populism, the relationship between the leader and her followers is a complex one. It is based on conflicting features and mechanisms, which cause a twist of democratic representation. The word “twist” is particularly accurate in this case because it has a double meaning: It indicates a turn movement occasioning an unexpected change, but it equally signifies distortion or perversion. The populist twist expresses the complex processes involved in the way populist leaders build up their relationship with their followers.

Charismatic leadership is crucial for the symbolic construction of the political subject in populism. For this reason, populist leaders become catalysts for political mobilization. Populism needs a mobilized popular sector in order to be successful, but the movement created by the alliance of the leader and her followers is not autonomously organized (Di Tella 1997: 196). This becomes clear when the terms “popular” and “populist” are compared. As Marc Lits shows, the adjective “popular” describes the self-articulation of the people as a political actor. In contrast, the word “populism” focuses on the shift from self-articulation to the exploitation of people’s political passions (Lits 2009). In light of this distinction, movements like Las indignados in Spain or Occupy in the USA cannot be classified as populist; instead, they can be depicted as “popular” since they are self-organized. Populist movements thus, in most cases, require a charismatic leader who is “able to establish a personalized link between him and the led” (Di Tella 1997: 196) in order to remain cohesive. Recently, populist leaders have become increasingly important as they are effectively “able to exploit existing social conditions of anxiety and availability” (Pasquino 2008: 27). Otherwise, if the same social conditions exist, but there is no populist leader able to capitalize on the situation, no populist movement occurs. The crucial point here is: The relationship between populist leaders and their followers is complex, sometimes ambivalent, and sometimes contradictory, since it is based on the twist of democratic representation.

This chapter argues that this particular relationship twists democratic representation in the double sense of the term. Many scholars have studied the role of leaders in populist mobilization (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014; de la Torre 2013; Jansen 2011), yet surprisingly, the mechanisms responsible for twisting representation have been ignored. Thus, this chapter investigates the twisting mechanisms of populism and their consequences for democracy. It
argues that populist leaders deal with the tension between verticality and horizontality within democratic representation in a special way, and shows how they simultaneously relate to the democratic notion of equality between representatives and their constituencies on the one hand and to their own claim to guide the people on the other.

From this perspective, one salient feature of democracy comes into focus: the balance between accountability and authorization. In democracies, representatives have to maintain a balance between authorization and accountability, in order to (a) decide what is best for their constituents, and (b) remain committed to informing citizens about their activities and allowing the latter to supervise what they do. If authorization is a necessary component of representation, then holding representatives accountable to their constituents is the core element that makes representation democratic (Pitkin 1972; Urbinati and Warren 2008). There is an intrinsic tension between authorization and accountability, and yet this very tension is an essential condition for democratic representation, in which accountability and authorization are at the same time complementary and competitive features. This is the reason why democratic representatives must establish a balance between the two.

Populism has a very sophisticated method to cope with this tension. The relationship between the populist leader and the people is characterized by a twist that proceeds in two nearly concurrent steps. First, populist leaders radicalize the tension between verticality and horizontality by demanding more popular power (horizontality) and simultaneously promoting strong leadership (verticality). Second, populist leaders emphasize the ostensible similarity between the leader and the people, thus legitimizing unquestioned trust in the leader and obscuring any tension within her relationship to the people. Following the populist logic, if a leader and her followers have a mimetic relationship and the people trust the leader without question, why must the people exercise their right to sanction bad behavior or demand transparency and accountability? Upon examination, it is not difficult to find that in populism democratic accountability has been suppressed. This twist has several consequences for democratic representation and can be a threat for democracy. If populist leaders overemphasize the verticality of their relationship to the people, authorization is reinforced and accountability eclipsed. This dynamic can provide the ideal conditions for the emergence of authoritarian or totalitarian power.

In order to evaluate possible effects of the populist twisting on democracy, the chapter begins by defining the concepts of populism and leadership, pointing out the ambivalences within populism concerning democratic representation. By exploring the populist structure, it analyzes three important features responsible for these mechanisms: (1) the populist construction of “the people” as a unity, (2) the apparently unmediated relationship between the leader and the people, and (3) the anti-elite attitude. These features are well known in the literature on the topic. However, what is less studied are the components linked to them that are responsible for the populist twist: the symbolic construction of similarity between the leader and the people, and the identification with the leader. The chapter analyzes these components and concludes by discussing possible negative effects of populism on democracy.

Defining populism and leadership

The most successful definition of populism today is the one that characterizes it as “thin ideology”. In this perspective, populism is a sort of mediating structure for other, “more consistent” ideologies that appeal to the idea of popular sovereignty (Canovan 2002: 31; Mudde 2004: 554). This definition has the advantage of explaining why populism can occur in different ideological versions. In a previous study, I adapted this definition to a more complex concept of populism, which considers populism as a political structure of actions,
discourses, and symbols, that influences political content but is sufficiently flexible to encompass different strong ideologies. Populism is defined as a specific kind of “political doing” that is observable on different levels such as communication style, ideological thinking, social organization of a movement or party, and politics (Diehl 2011). Populism follows a specific structure, which is composed of several core features: the belief that political power belongs to the people (this connects populism to democracy), the idealization of the people and their imagination as a homogeneous unity (Canovan 1999: 3–5; Taggart 2000: 92), anti-elite resentments, the construction of a privileged and intimate relationship between the people and the leader, and the rejection of institutional mediation (Taggart 2000: 98; Di Tella 1997: 196). In populism, elites are usually portrayed as corrupt, incompetent, and disconnected from the everyday lives of ordinary people (Mudde 2004: 543). Mediation, in this case, is regarded as a distortion of the people’s opinion and of the popular will. The people and the leader constitute a common block (Laclau 2005) against elites and established political parties, who are accused of abusing the trust of the people.

Yet, populism is never absolute since its intensity varies according to the political actor. As Ben Stanley points out, certain parties and movements “can be ‘more populist’ than others” (Stanley 2008: 108). The populist structure may be more or less prominent depending on the case. Therefore, populism cannot be considered as a clear category but is rather a phenomenon observable in varying degrees (Diehl 2011).

Orazio Petracca provides this chapter with a minimal definition of leadership. According to him, leaders are those who (a) act within a group, (b) hold a position of power that allows them to significantly influence all strategic decisions within this group, and (c) actively exercise power. Moreover, leadership is not unilateral; instead, it requires the action of followers. Leadership is thus also (d) connected to the expectations of the group that confer legitimacy on the leader, making the relationship between the leader and the led crucial. Petracca distinguished three types of leaders and their relationship with their followers: (1) In the first case, leaders are “seducers of the masses” and able to impose themselves on the masses. (2) In the second, leaders claim to be interpreters of the masses and are able to understand and give shape to the masses’ vague wishes. (3) The last type of leaders describes the representatives of the masses who express only widely known opinions and widely shared sentiments (Petracca 1983). In reality, these ideal-type categories often mix, and leaders can travel between the three forms. This minimal definition has two advantages: on the one hand, it stresses the authority and the verticality present in Max Weber’s definition of leadership; on the other, it can be applicable to different types of leadership.

Ambivalences

Populism has an ambivalent relationship to democracy. It invokes the most central democratic principles: those of popular sovereignty and of equality; it demands an increase of popular power and denounces the government’s lack of accountability to citizens, elites’ alienation from the people, and the government’s failure to represent the people and their interests. In populism, the people are sovereign, and the popular will has to be expressed by political representatives. This explains why populism can be located within democracy (Mény and Surel 2000: 32; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). Both left-wing populist leaders, such as the deceased Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez (United Socialist Party of Venezuela, PSUV), and right-wing populists, like Heinz-Christian Strache (Freedom Party of Austria, FPÖ) or Marine Le Pen (Le Front National), take up democratic discourses. For populists, the established political class and the elites appear illegitimate because their actions do not correspond to the interests of the people. Hence,
they cannot be recognized as “real” representatives of the people. Consequently, populists insist on putting the principle of popular power into effective practice. In that sense, populism does more than postulating popular sovereignty (Canovan 2005: 30); it further reinforces its importance.

From this perspective, populism can operate as a corrective to democracy by claiming the unrealized promise of popular power. Benjamin Arditi offers a useful metaphor to illustrate this situation. According to him, populism behaves like a drunken guest at a dinner party (Arditi 2005: 90). Populism breaks taboos, disrupts established rules of communication, and states unpleasant truths that, up to that point, had been successfully avoided. Calling attention to these suppressed truths may contribute to shaking things up within representative democracy and facilitate popular questioning of power (Mény and Surel 2000: 38–40). Therefore, populism carries the potential to mobilize citizens and to foster a critique of established procedures that can have a positive impact on democracy.

Nevertheless, populism’s relationship to democracy is ambivalent and bears several risks. The most important factors for these risks are the populist relationship between leader and people and the way leaders deal with the tension between verticality and horizontality within democratic representation.

**Tensions within democratic representation**

There are two intrinsic and interconnected tensions in democracy, which are particularly important to depict the populist twist. The first is the tension between horizontality and verticality that marks the relationship between representatives and constituents in representative democracies. Representatives must behave according to the democratic idea of political equality between the members of society (Urbinati and Warren 2008). Since they are citizens, they are in principle equal to their constituents. This sets up a horizontal relationship between all citizens, including representatives. But if constituents and representatives have a horizontal relationship in principle, this is counterbalanced by authorization. There is a “vertical relationship between the governed and the government” (Manin 1997: 170), since representation always involves authorization. Constituents authorize their representatives to make decisions and act in their place. They transfer their power to their representatives. Representative democracy implies a division of labor, as Sieyes has stated (Pasquino 1987: 221), that necessarily shifts decision-making power to the representatives and that hence constitutes a vertical relationship between those who represent and those who are represented. The free mandate allows representatives to make decisions according to their own conscience, even if they are doing it in place of their constituents. This necessarily reinforces the verticality of democratic representation in contrast with the horizontal principle of equality. The tension between vertical decision-making and horizontal equality inherent in democratic representation becomes clear: Democratic representatives have to effectively manage this tension, they must act in accordance with the principle of equality, but they also must be able to make decisions in the name of those whom they represent.

The same situation can be observed regarding the formal prerequisite for democratic representation. According to Hanna Pitkin, there are two preconditions for representation in democracy: authorization and accountability. Authorization is a formal condition that precedes the act of representation and enables representatives to act in place of their constituents (Pitkin 1972: chap. 3). It occurs in the trust that representatives will act on the constituents’ behalf and make decisions according to their interest. In order to be democratic, however,
authorization also needs to be limited. If representatives have no obligation to their constituents, the Hobbesian problem can easily occur: Representation becomes “a kind of ‘black box’ shaped by the initial giving of authority, within which the representative can do whatever he pleases” (Pitkin 1972: 39). This kind of representation is incompatible with democracy where sovereignty is located in the demos. In order to reduce this risk, representatives must be held accountable to their constituents.

For this reason, representatives’ acts should be overseen and checked by those who authorized them. Pitkin defines accountability as a post-representation mechanism of representation. However, after a closer look, one can identify several different mechanisms operating within accountability. Representatives have to inform the constituency directly or indirectly about their acts, they have to justify their decisions, and they are the object of sanctions if they do not behave as they should (Borowiak 2011). Constituents have many opportunities to influence representatives’ behavior since the former can demand information and justification for representatives’ acts during the political process. Even if sanctions can only operate after an act of representation, well-informed and active citizens are able to affect representatives’ behavior.

Guillermo O’Donnell distinguishes between two types of accountability: The first occurs when constituents can directly hold their representatives accountable. It presupposes a hierarchical difference between governed and governors that O’Donnell calls “vertical”. This is especially the case with elections. Since there is no mediation in this case, I would call it direct accountability. The second type describes the relationship between equals (“horizontal accountability”), where accountability “runs ... across a network of relatively autonomous powers (i.e. institutions)” (O’Donnell 1994: 61). From the popular sovereignty perspective, the second type is a mediated accountability. Using the terms direct and mediated to describe accountability will help provide clarity concerning the relationship between the leader and the people.

Authorization and representation are essential aspects of representative democracy and engender an intrinsic and fundamental tension within the representational relationship. Democratic representatives, and especially holders of executive offices, have been authorized by the people and are thus in a vertical position over their constituents, but representatives are at the same time equal in principle to other citizens and are accountable to their constituents. One consequence of this tension is that in representative democracies (as opposed to authoritarian regimes), leadership is embedded in judicial and political institutional mechanisms of control. The power of leaders is also limited by political parties, the “classic government-opposition dynamics”, which vary depending on the type of political system, public opinion, and political culture (Helms 2012: 10). Democratic institutions make political leadership possible while simultaneously helping to limit the scope of this leadership and reducing the tension within democratic representation. In practice, democratic representation involves actions enabling representatives both: making decisions in the name of the constituents, and remaining accountable to citizens. Transparency of decision-making, liability of the government vis-à-vis the governed, mechanisms for citizens to monitor their governors, and political messaging that makes clear that representatives are committed to citizens’ interests are vital features of accountability.

Political accountability is central to preventing and redressing abuses of power, but it does not eliminate power. There are two important dimensions of accountability that influence political practice: answerability, impelling representatives “to inform about and to explain what they are doing”, and “enforcement”, that is “the use of sanctions” in case of bad behavior (Schedler 1999: 14–16). While answerability demands information and justification.
regarding representatives’ acts, enforcement enables constituents to “eventually punish” representatives in cases of improper conduct. Transparency, obligation to justifying acts, and sanction are crucial for holding representatives accountable. These elements become instruments of democratic representation when they are connected to the demos. Democratic accountability presupposes first that the people are the source of sovereignty; second, that the constituents should exert control over their representatives; and third, that formal governmental institutions realize democratic accountability. Institutionalized mechanisms of monitoring and sanction are instruments to render representatives accountable and to limit authorization, thus balancing the verticality and horizontality inherent in democratic representation (Schedler 1999: 16).

The populist twist

The populist twist is a particular way to cope with these tensions. First, the populist twist invokes people’s powerlessness in the face of bad representation by established politicians, parties, and elites. Like the drunken guest at the dinner party, populism reveals the shortcomings of popular power, including lack of accountability. Populist leaders promise their followers that this situation can be changed and that power can be conferred to the people. In doing so, they stress popular sovereignty and build a horizontal relationship to the people, demanding more accountability from established politicians and parties. But populist leaders simultaneously insist on their own leadership role and stress the verticality of their relationship to the people (Panizza 2005: 22). In doing so, they neglect their original demand for greater popular power and democratic accountability. It is easy to identify the first radicalization of the tension between the horizontality implicit in the principle of equality and the idea of popular belonging on the one hand, and the verticality inherent to the appeal for strong leadership on the other. The twist here consists in the rapid eclipse of this tension. It is only possible because populist leaders present themselves as “one of the people”. Similarity with the people is used to legitimize the leader’s power and to establish personal trust, suggesting that she can act without being bound by any procedure, institution, group, or person. Since the leader is “one of us”, she is the only one that can speak as the voice of the people.

Sometimes, populist leaders even promote this conception of leadership. Juan Domingo Perón is probably one of the most eloquent of them. For him, “to lead is not to command. To command is to force. To lead is to persuade”. For Perón, the leader should foster, conceptualize, and ultimately enact the will of the people. “The political leader is the one who does what the people want”.¹ This description stresses the horizontality between leader and people. But by parsing more carefully this description, a problem for democracy becomes visible: the current will of the people should not simply be expressed by the populist leader; instead, the leader should persuade, “foster”/“promote” (promover), “conceive” (concebir), and “launch” (lanzar) the people’s will. The leader becomes more than the voice of the people; rather she shapes and defines their will.

Three central features in populism are preconditions for twisting representation: (1) the idealization of the people as a homogeneous unity; (2) the apparently direct and unmediated relationship to the leader; (3) the anti-institutional and anti-elite attitude of populism. These features are embedded in the narrative of the “betrayal of the people” used by populist movements. They shape the specific relationship between the populist leader and the people and contain artifices that simultaneously exacerbate and sidestep the tension between verticality and horizontality, enabling the populist twist.
1) The populist construction of the people

Populism is people-centered. Populist leaders claim to represent the people and to realize popular self-determination. They construct an image of the people as a political subject – a process that is also necessary for democracy, but done here in a very specific way. The people of populism are idealized as harmonious and upright, they are presented as the source of society’s morality and virtuosity, “the good common people”, and they are the basis of the community (Kazin 1995: 3; Panizza 2005: 27; Mény and Surel 2000: 181–185). Populists imagine the people as belonging to an idealized and highly emotional place, the “heartland” that embodies “the positive aspects of everyday life . . . Heartlands owe their power to the heart, to the evocation of sentiments that may not be necessarily either rationalized or rationalizable” (Taggart 2000: 95). In order to construct the people as a unity, populists ignore any particularity or diversity in society. Their vision of the people is “identified with the majority” (Canovan 2002: 37). Because of this idealization, the people are held up as the moral source of legitimacy.

There are two serious political implications for democratic representation here. Populist idealization first suppresses the heterogeneity of civil society and, second, blurs the difference between the people as an ideal of democracy (peuple idéal) and as a social reality (fait social) – the sum of all citizens, who manifest themselves in majority preferences. Pierre Rosanvallon calls attention to the fundamental and constitutive difference between these two dimensions and demonstrates that in democracy the two cannot be reconciled: the ideal people is necessary to maintain the principle of popular sovereignty; the consideration of the social reality of the people is crucial for political practice and manifests itself especially in elections (Rosanvallon 2000, 2006). If the volonté générale resides with the ideal people, the people as a social reality always express the instantaneous volonté de tous. Populism equates these two dimensions and dissolves the distinction between general will and majority. It presents the will of the majority as identical to the general will and ignores plurality within society.

Populist leaders draw on a permanent outward demarcation of the popular identity (“we”) vis-à-vis those who are not the people, typically society’s elites and, in the case of right-wing populism, also foreigners and other minorities. They claim to descriptively represent the people as an idealized majority (Mény and Surel 2000: 76–80) and promote a concealment (Verdrängung, Sigmund Freud) of diversity by presupposing a picture of a homogeneous society. This can be a threat to democratic representation: if heterogeneity in a plural society is banished in favor of a homogenous vision of unity, society can turn anti-democratic.

The construction of the people as an idealized unity and the equation of the general will with the will of the majority constitute further conditions for a radicalization of the tension between the verticality implicit in leadership and the horizontality inherent to equality.

2) The apparently unmediated relationship to the leader

The crucial question here is: how do the people come to know their will? Precisely at this point, one important populist artifice creeps in. Even though the people allegedly know the truth, they are unable to properly articulate their will. They need a voice to speak as one and borrow it from the leader. This requires a direct and unmediated relationship to the leader. The problem is: Populist leaders do not simply give a voice to the people, they “shape” the popular will, which they are claiming to just be giving a voice for. In addition, populist leaders do not perceive themselves merely as a medium for expressing the popular will; they rather claim to be the ones who decide what the people want in the first place. Despite the horizontal rhetoric of popular power, populist leaders pursue a strongly vertical relationship.
with their followers. The twist movement consists here in presenting the leader’s formation of the popular will as a simple practice of popular expression, thereby eclipsing procedures of direct accountability.

Beppe Grillo, the leader of the Italian “Movimento 5 Stelle”, follows exactly this path. Addressing their followers, he presents himself merely as their voice and does not claim to influence or to shape the people’s message: “Folks, it works like this: You let me know, and I play the amplifier” (see Vignati 2013: 43). But, in practice, Grillo is a very centralist and vertical decision-maker who uses his power to expel members of the Five Star Movement when they express disagreement with the leader. In reality, he controls his followers by establishing a centralistic and authoritarian power structure within the movement. With good reason, the participants of the Five Star Movement call themselves “grillini” (the followers of Grillo). Grillo is certainly the most complicated case of centralist leadership, and becomes even more complex if one takes into consideration that he refuses to run for any office. However, what is important here is that the populist focus on the leader can become authoritarian or even totalitarian.

3) The anti-elite and anti-institutional attitudes of populism

The apparently unmediated relationship with the leader is closely linked to its next feature: the anti-elite and anti-institutional attitude. Populist rhetoric reproaches the elite for ignoring the people and, even worse, avoiding them. From the populist perspective, political institutions are the elite’s instrument to impede the people from using their own power, while established parties and politicians are equated or associated with the elite. This makes them incapable of legitimately representing the people (Canovan 2002: 32). Populist leaders reject mediated accountability provided by institutions, and procedures while simultaneously demanding more direct accountability.

In their critique of the establishment, populists generally reinforce popular power (Mény and Surel 2000: 74). Venezuela’s former president, Hugo Chávez, used to accuse capitalists of corrupting the representative system and dominating the economy and politics, and advocated returning power to the people. The leader of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), Heinz-Christian Strache, also presents himself as handing power back to the people. His speech on May 1, 2012 started with the slogan “Dem Volk sein Recht!” (“Give the people their right!”). With this pronouncement, Strache blamed the “arrogance of those in power” and the political class who would “govern against the interests of the population”. For him, established parties, “the red and black bunch of slobs”, are “self-enriching stooges of the economic and European elites”.2

The anti-elite and anti-institutional attitude of populism has further consequences for the relationship between the leader and the people. First, leadership becomes completely decoupled from the elite, which can indeed be interpreted as an increase in popular power and underlines the horizontality of the people–leader relationship. Second, populist discourse constructs an antagonism between the leader and the elite. It divides society in two camps: on the one side the elite and the consolidated power structure, and on the other the block constituted by the populist leader and the people (Laclau 2005: 83–86). Following this logic, the leader claims to be an outsider or a maverick (Barr 2009). This presumptively guarantees his or her incorruptibility.

This brings us back to the people’s apparently unmediated relationship with the leader. Populist leaders do not trust the establishment; they prefer direct contact with the people. The presentation of the leader as one of the people implies the rejection of any mediation between them (Taggart 2000: 71–79). This is why populists nourish an anti-institutional attitude (Taggart 2000: 96–98; Pasquino 2008: 28). In that sense, one could presume an
increase in popular power and an emphasis on the equality between the leader and the people. But here, then, the populist twist operates behind the demand for more popular power: in rejecting institutions, populists also reject mediated accountability, which is an important instrument to delimit the power of the leader (O’Donnell 1994: 61). And by opting for acclamation, populism circumvents deliberation (Urbinati 1998: 119). Populists are not interested in participation per se; they rather privilege pseudo-participation while mobilizing their followers.

As long as the demand for popular participation prevails, populism can have revitalizing effects on democracy. But as soon as populist leaders present acclamatory and pseudo-participative procedures as an accomplishment of participation claims, democratic representation can be distorted or even destroyed. The more deliberation and accountability disappear, the greater the verticality of the relationship between people and leader.

The features described would not be so powerful if they were not imbricated in a narrative capable of persuasively integrating them into a comprehensive explanation (Diehl 2011: 281). It is the story of the people that has been betrayed by the elites and cheated by the established politicians (Taguieff 2007: 28). In this story, the people is the “silent majority” (Taggart 2000: 93) that goes through a process of collective self-awareness, self-organization, and popular mobilization. Following this narrative, together with the leader’s help the people are able to fight for the reconstitution of popular sovereignty and to “find” its collective identity. Similar to a fairy-tale, in populism the hero is the charismatic politician who aims to liberate the people from the power of the elites. The leader is portrayed as emerging from the people and, at the same time, she is surrounded by an aura of extraordinariness which predestines her to lead the people toward emancipation. Hugo Chávez provides an especially paradigmatic example of this mechanism. Drawing on Latin America’s cultural background, Chávez ascribed the personal qualities of the continent’s liberator Simon Bolívar to himself, identifying himself with this popular myth (Ellner 2012: 151). With this tool Chávez constructed his image as the new liberator of Latin America and strengthened an almost organic unity with the people.

The relationship between the leader and the people

The narrative of the betrayed people enables three interconnected mechanisms within the relationship between the leader and the people: (1) the people’s identification with the leader, (2) the legitimation of leadership by presupposing similarity between both, and (3) a strong emotional bond that provides unquestioned trust in the leader. These mechanisms are necessary to provoke the populist twist democratic representation.

1) Identification

The populist leader is the ideal figure for the projection of different wishes. As Laclau has pointed out, the populist leader works as an “empty signifier” (Laclau 2005: 161–162). When identifying with a leader, followers can project different meanings onto her. Two crucial levels of identification can be found in this process. The first is political: Followers recognize the leader as the people’s voice, the one who confers a political identity on them by engaging her followers in the process of “naming”, that is the establishment of an “empty signifier” able to unify the heterogeneity among the people. At this point, the populist discourse establishes the enemies of the people and, consequently, the people itself (Laclau 2005; Stavrakakis 2005). The leader serves as the interpreter of the people’s will and is the medium for establishing the people’s identity as one political subject. “If
Populism can be redefined as a process of naming that retroactively determines what is the name of ‘the people’, the name that best fills the symbolic void through which identification takes place is that of the leader himself” (Panizza 2005: 19). Hence, leading the people subtly shifts to “inventing” the people.

Populist identification is more complicated than it initially appears since the one who invents the people is, paradoxically, supposed to be one of the people. This supposition places the leader in a double perspective in the eyes of the people: leaders exist in both a vertical relation (as a leader) and a horizontal relation (as one of the people) to their followers. In order to prove that the leader is one of the people, she must establish and maintain a deep personal and emotional connection with them. This is symbolically well expressed by physical contact between the leader and the people and has performative effects even if most followers only watch such scenes on TV. Pictures of the leader touching common citizens, eating their food, or appreciating their music are important vehicles for establishing this direct connection (Diehl 2017). For democratic representation this kind of immediacy is deeply ambivalent. Although it is a sign of the leader’s contact with the people, it performs representation without actually representing (Arditi 2005: 82–83).

The second level of identification is personal and more closely connected with what Sigmund Freud termed Identifizierung. For Freud, identifying with something primarily means desiring to become like the respective object of identification. It happens when the “ego has enriched itself with the properties of the object” (Freud 1922: 76). In that sense, the populist leader serves as an idealized object for the followers. Personal identification with the leader supplies his or her relationship to the people with sympathy and enables the followers to recognize themselves in the leader. When Chávez died in March 2013, a huge demonstration took place in Caracas. A reporter asked one of Chávez’s followers why he supported his leader. The answer was quite clear: “It could be that Chávez doesn’t solve the country’s problems, it could be that his people are stealing some of the money ... but he is like me.”3 Here, identification provides the ground for political legitimation of the leader by her supposed likeness with the people.

There is a further populist twist here: the tension between “being one of the people” (horizontality) and “leading the people” (verticality) is eclipsed by the identification with the leader; the distance between leader and followers is neglected, and, in its place, populist leaders suggest a unity between both. This represents a danger to democracy, since identification with the leader reduces the space of critique and accountability.

2) Similarity

Because identification is a necessary mechanism for populists to legitimize their leadership, it also renders acceptable the notion that their power is legitimate by virtue of their popular roots. Similarity between the leader and their followers is the product of political and personal identification. Politically, similarity legitimizes descriptive representation and is crucial for the representation of minorities. Yet, when similarity is used to link the representative to the people as a whole and to refer to the idea of popular power, the leader has to be “one of the people” – or at least has to be recognized as such – in order to interpret and shape the people’s will (Pasquino 2008: 27).

In order to produce identification, populist leaders mimic the people: they dress down and show their preference for popular taste. Their choice of words is simple and they often use colloquial language (Diehl 2017: 369–370). In the context of European right-wing populism, mimetic behavior is interpreted as folkish – both the former FPÖ Chef Jörg Haider and the actual Chef Heinz-Christian Strache often wear traditional costumes in order to exhibit their
closeness to the people. In the context of Latin American leftist populism, this closeness is illustrated by emphasizing the leader’s proletarian origin, by mimetic body language and clothes associated with the working class. Nonetheless, populists like Ollanta Humala (Gana – Peru) or Evo Morales (Movement for Socialism – Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples, Bolivia) are known to mix class codes with ethnic elements of the native people of their respective countries.

Here another movement of the populist twist becomes visible, since one important element of accountability is missing: justification. The leader doesn’t have to justify her decisions because her supposed similarity to the people suggests that both would naturally share the same point of view and would thus act in the same manner.

3) Emotionality and trust

Similarity and identification establish an emotional bond between leader and people and promote almost unquestioned trust. Endowed with this immense trust, populist leaders are able to circumvent the tension between verticality and horizontality and suppress demands for accountability.

Chávez’s speeches were always highly emotional and became more intense after his cancer diagnosis. At the peak of his last presidential campaign, in September 2012, Chávez invoked the possibility of his death. Thousands of supporters filled the streets of Caracas. Chávez described things he would do if he only could: travel his country, walk through the streets, feel the wind in his face . . . but he “couldn’t at the moment”, he said. At the end of his speech, he appealed to God to fulfill his dreams and to aid Venezuela on the path toward liberation. As often happened, the event ended with a popular song that Chávez joined in. The emotionality of this event peaked with the refrain of the song, “no voy a llorar” (I will not cry), which Chávez ended up doing. Populist leaders translate the emotional tie between them and the people into almost unquestioned trust.

Citizens’ trust in institutions and official procedures is an important democratic resource. It enables the maintenance of the political order, fosters future cooperation, and provides political institutions with a long-term perspective. Office-holders benefit from the public’s trust in the democratic institutions they represent. If they squander this trust, they damage the bond between the individual representative and the citizen without necessarily leading to a general loss of trust in the institution. However trust in institutions bears on the qualities of the office-holders (Pettit 1998: 296–299). Trust in representatives is important: it reduces the complexity of political life and makes politics possible (Luhmann 1979), but if trust becomes something unquestioned, it destroys accountability. Paired with the direct identification with the leader and with the legitimation of power through similarity, populist trust bears the risk that the representational tie turns into a “blank check” for the leader.

The followers of populist leaders put an exaggerated amount of faith in them and will often continue to believe that any and all improvements of their plight may only come from the action of a leader endowed with extraordinary qualities.

(Pasquino 2008: 28)

There is another twist here: By transferring their cognitive power to the leader and not exercising their capacity for questioning his acts, populist followers simply forget the initial reason why they joined the populist leader: the demand for more popular power. In this case, verticality eclipses the horizontal dimension of the relationship between leader and people, even if it only occurs implicitly.
The threat for democracy

There are many significant twist movements here that slightly shift the relationship between representative and constituents. This chapter detected four of them. (1) The leader’s shape of the popular will is presented as a simple practice of popular expression. (2) Deliberation and participation are circumvented while the followers are mobilized. (3) The distance and the difference of power between leader and people are neglected at the same time as the leader’s personal power is reinforced. And finally, (4) the people transfer their cognitive power to the leader and do not exercise their capacity to question his or her acts. For the populist twist to occur, identification, the leadership’s legitimation through similarity, and almost unquestioned trust are crucial. They all make it possible for the leader to eclipse the will of the followers with her own will. The populist twist negates the tension between the verticality of leadership and the horizontality of equality while suppressing, but not eliminating, accountability.

What is the risk for democratic representation in the populist relationship between the leader and the people? The steps described above lay the groundwork for an almost organic connection between the leader and the people. When political and personal identification are pushed to the extreme, the line between leader and people becomes blurred and representation is converted into embodiment. This is the case in totalitarianism, where the tension between verticality and horizontality is extinguished and sovereignty is transferred to the leader (Lefort 1986: chap. 9). If the leader becomes not only the object of identification but also the subject of popular identity and of the popular will, populism can be the first step toward totalitarianism. In this case, the leader appears to be more than just one of the people—and he does not mirror the people; rather, the people themselves mirror their leader. As Chávez supporters came together to mourn their leader after his death, they carried posters with the slogan: “Let’s be like Chávez”. Representation was inverted: the people became the mirror of Chávez.

This corresponds to what Freud has called “being in love”. “Being in love” is different from simple identification and describes the situation in which the object of love (the leader) substitutes the ego ideal (of the followers). In this case,

the ego becomes more and more unassuming and modest, and the object more and more sublime and precious, until at least it gets possession of the entire self-love of the ego . . .

The object, has, so to speak, consumed the ego.

(Freud 1922: 74–75)

The wishes and desires of the subject (the followers) are transformed in the desires of the object of love (the leader). Politically, this makes it possible for the leader to eliminate the will of the followers by installing her proper will. If “being in love” becomes the predominant emotional bond between the leader and the people, the risk of totalitarianism emerges. Should identification turn completely into “being in love”, the line between the leader and the people is blurred and representation is converted into embodiment. In other words, representation becomes a state of pure authorization without any accountability. The basic tension between verticality and horizontality is extinguished, and populism has paved the way for totalitarianism.

However, if totalitarianism is against democracy, populism is much more ambivalent. Contrary to totalitarianism, populism functions within fundamental democratic values, namely the principles of popular sovereignty, equality, and the idea that the people should participate in decision-making processes and have the right to question and monitor
their representatives. In totalitarianism, democratic horizontality between the leader and the people is eliminated. Accountability is completely effaced in order to empower the leader, and so there is no longer any tension between verticality and horizontality, authorization and accountability, leadership and equality. The problem populism poses is that leaders usually fall back on rhetoric that simultaneously radicalizes and negates the democratic tension, performing a twist on their representational relationship with their followers. The tension between verticality and horizontality apparently disappears since the leader’s will is presented as the people’s will, but it remains suppressed and is not eliminated as in totalitarianism. Another central distinction between populist and totalitarian leaders remains salient: populist leaders still insist on the idea that the people – and not the leader – are the actual sovereign.

Populism can be a revitalizing force for democracy, if the emotional bond to the leader helps to articulate social demands and reinforce popular sovereignty. But if identification with the leader flowers into the state of “being in love”, the possibility for totalitarian power is opened. Democracy is endangered if personal identification, legitimacy by likeness, and unquestioned trust entirely displace accountability. In this case, the representational tie degenerates into mere authorization, accountability disappears, and the road is paved for totalitarian leadership.

Notes
* This chapter is a shorter and slightly modified version of “The Populist Twist”; in: Johannes Pollak/ Dario Castiglione (eds.): Making Present: Theorizing the New Politics of Representation, University of Chicago Press, forthcoming in 2018.

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