Populism, migration, and xenophobia in Europe

Carlo Ruzza

Introduction

In recent years, politics and politicians have had to endure a great deal of negative press in several European countries. Corruption scandals, misappropriation of public funds, and illicit party financing have figured prominently in the news media of several countries, such as France, the UK, and Italy. In this climate, allegations that ‘the voters’, or more sweepingly ‘the people’, have been betrayed have abounded, raising the spectre of mounting populism. ‘Populism’, a word previously often associated with Latin American autocracies, has thus gained prominence, indicating a concern also connected to extreme right activism, racism, and mounting anti-immigrant sentiments. Extremist anti-political parties and movements have thrived, among them the English Defence League and the British National Party, which has made advances at local level in the UK, and several Eurosceptic parties throughout Europe. In southern Europe the financial crisis of 2007 and its aftermaths have lent support to right-wing extremist groups such as Golden Dawn in Greece. Similarly successful have been ethno-nationalist right-wing parties such as the Vlaams Belang and the Italian League promoting an anti-migrant platform. In the UK, the successful performance of forces focused on leaving the European Union in June 2016 has been related to their distinctive mix of anti-elitist and populist discourse and sweeping anti-migrant sentiments. The conjunction of anti-system and xenophobic tenets is therefore distinctive of recent European radical right parties and movements. While until recently xenophobic framings remained at the margin of politics, in recent years populist radical right parties have made significant inroads in mainstream politics; and in countries such as Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Switzerland, they have even taken the reins of government (Bröning, 2016). However, populism and xenophobia are not synonyms and the question needs to be asked as to why they seem to occur together so frequently. We will describe these two aspects of recent politics and examine their interconnections in the European context. We will point to a set of elements that distinctly connect these two constructs in the European context and we will specifically emphasize how widespread processes of disintermediation have eroded traditional state–society linkages and provoked the emergence of new forms of political participation, such as exclusionary associations. Thus, we argue that to understand the success of populist parties in contexts of crises of political representation, researchers should specifically focus on the role of associations.
Analysts have often attempted to disarticulate the often all-encompassing concept of populism. As a concept, its historical antecedents are not European. Scholars connect it to Northern American, Latin American, and Russian movements and parties and not to advanced industrial and post-industrial economies. Populism is therefore not a modern phenomenon, nor is it a typically European one. The concept of populism has been used in a wide variety of contexts, notably in South America – particularly in regard to authoritarian regimes – and in North America (Conniff, 1981; Drake, 1978; McMath and Foner, 1993). Its origins are frequently connected to farmer movements with radical economic agendas, such as the US People’s Party of the late 19th century. Given this diversity of contexts, explanations of populism have tended to cite a heterogeneous list of causes. Considered here are only the factors most relevant to contemporary European societies.

In recent decades, a distinctive European type of populism has emerged. It has mainly been positioned on the right of the political spectrum, whilst its non-European versions have often espoused a left-wing ideology. However, in recent years, left-wing populisms and populisms that reject any right-left characterization are becoming more prominent. The main feature of populism has generally been identified in its anti-elitist character (Taggart, 2000). However, other features have been added as distinctive features thereby producing definitions of populism of different breadth and specificity. It would not be possible here to review all the various uses of this concept, but a few references to its relevance in the literature are useful. In recent years, the rediscovery of the salience of populism is often dated to Populism, a seminal book by Margaret Canovan (Canovan, 1981) which draws up a typology of populisms whose main types are agrarian and political. Canovan’s discussion of political populism is of particular importance in the European context. It points to the ideologically asserted unity of ‘the people’ and to the uses of populism by the right, which can use its anti-elitism and the notion of common sense politics to foster reactionary politics. The notion of populism, however, remains underspecified. This is partly because, as has been frequently pointed out, unlike other ideologies, populism is not an ideological identity which its proponents espouse. Populism is instead largely a concept analytically used by critics and scholars to explain features of often very different political contexts. It therefore lacks the extended elaboration and the additional coherence that other ideologies have often achieved over time through the scrutiny of their intellectuals.

Major doubts have been raised in the literature as to whether populism is an outright ideology, or whether it is mainly a political style without sufficient coherence to qualify as a full-fledged ideology. If it were an ideology, there is no doubt that its most distinctive feature would be its anti-elitism and a related, generally implicit, belief that the people have been betrayed by corrupt and self-serving elites. Another key feature would be its reliance on charismatic interpreters of the will of the people. As a political style, analysts often focus on populism’s symbolic rejection of social and political elites. These would include, for instance, a symbolic violation of the rules on appropriate political communication, such as the use of unusual language registers or refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the institutions of democratic politics. However, as a political style, populism’s actual manifestations of such symbolic violations are extremely variable. The literature on populism as a style describes it as a form of political communication which symbolically rejects representative democracy as generating chains of untrustworthy intermediaries (Mastropaolo, 2005; Norris, 2005). In its anti-elitism, populism often eschews the right/left axis, even asserting its irrelevance, because the political class is, by definition, corrupt in its entirety.
To be noted is that whilst groups and parties characterize themselves by means of a variable mix of ideological elements, some of these are more central than others, and more recurrent. One can thus, following Freeden, characterize an ideology as constituted by a core consisting of the most frequent ideological elements and a conceptual periphery which includes a varying set of elements which change in association with other more coherent and developed ideologies (Freeden, 1996). The peripheral elements will emerge and disappear in different geographical and historical contexts, whilst the core persists largely unchanged. In this sense, the core element of populism is its anti-elitism, and hence its glorification of ‘the people’ as a morally superior and undifferentiated category. This conceptual approach to populism has been used in the literature, as it allows one to explain the multifarious political framings with which the moral superiority of the people is associated (Mudde, 2004). It is then referred to as a ‘weak ideology’.

Although applied to both left and right-wing parties, in Europe populism is a concept more often used to characterize radical right formations. In this context, populists are characterized as typically viewing society as hierarchically ordered and threatened by corrupt self-serving ruling elites that have ‘betrayed’ their people. Populists glorify the ‘common people’ as the honest bearers of positive moral values, and they seek to have the ‘popular will’ reflected in decision-making processes. This is often accomplished through the action of a charismatic leader who alone expresses their concerns and values and directly represents them, thus bypassing social hierarchies. Useful recent definitions include that by Mudde:

an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous groups and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people.

(Mudde 2004)

It has also been noted that the relation between the leader and his/her people is often problematic. The leader sometimes embodies the traits to which the people should aspire. In other cases, the leader reflects the language, culture and stylistic traits that the people typically manifest (Ruzza and Fella, 2009).

Regardless of the specific populist ideology and style adopted, populists often claim to promote the inclusion of ordinary citizens in the decision-making processes of social and political institutions, such as the judiciary, and/or through citizens’ participatory and deliberative input to policy making, particularly at local level. Nevertheless, as Mudde notes, populist movements tend to be hostile to the institutions of liberal or constitutional democracy. They instead rely on charismatic leaders who can instinctively interpret and represent the will of the populist heartland (Mudde, 2004: 561).

Besides insisting on a key contraposition between corrupt elites and a virtuous ‘people’, studies of populism have come to distinguish several subcategories of the phenomenon, which include, for instance, populism emerging in institutionalized party systems of Western Europe or in emerging East-European democracies, inclusionary and exclusionary types of populism, and deliberative or charismatic types. Several single-country studies have attempted to disentangle this complex set of variables by considering their interaction in delimited contexts. Comparative studies have focused on one or a few variables and attempted to utilize more systematic research designs.

**Causes of populism**

As said, a factor frequently also emphasized by the literature on Western political systems is the impact of perceptions of corruption and of politics as generally biased in favour of big
corporate power, economically oppressive and insensitive to the traditional moral values of the ‘common people’. Populist reactions may thus be demands for more participatory democracy, particularly by left-wing populist movements, or by movements that reject a characterization on the left–right axis and merge aspects of each. An example from Italy would be the Five Stars Movement – a set of anti-political groups created by the maverick entertainer, blogger, and stand-up political comedian Beppe Grillo (Mosca, 2014).

The right, however, tends to remain distinctive because it emphasizes reactionary law-and-order values, anti-elitism, and an emphasis on charismatic leadership. The anti-political component has emerged through a media-driven distrust of elected representatives, together with distrust in, and professed indifference towards, conventional political cleavages such as the right/left divide. The search for a charismatic figure able to bridge these divides characterizes much recent populist politics. Anti-political values are a pervasive feature of populists in all Western democracies (Rydgren, 2005). However, on the basis on survey findings, some authors reject or qualify sweeping theories of a crisis of politics (Norris, 2002, 2005).

Secondly, the emergence of populism has been related to a crisis of the main ideologies of modernization (Betz, 1994). These ideologies have inspired European politics on the basis of various utopias, but they have all undergone a crisis. Keynesian liberalism, moderate republicanism, and social democracy have not well withstood the challenge of globalization. Populism has therefore arisen mainly as a reaction against a political system typically conceived by populists as marked by a set of ideologies in crisis. From this perspective, therefore, populism is mainly a differentiated reaction against different types of politics dominant in different places. It is for this reason that populism is an ideology with a small core of common anti-modern ideological elements (where by ‘modernity’ is meant an ideological construct which, of course, allows for the emergence of different visions of modernity) and a large periphery, which varies and is shaped by a specific reaction against different versions of political modernity.

Thirdly, populism has also been related to the changing role of the state in an age of economic globalization and erosion of authority in favour of subnational and supranational levels of government. A weaker state allows, and may even need, links between citizens and decision-making processes that are complementary or even alternative to those taking place within the institutions of representative democracy. One of these potential links – but just one of several – is an unmediated connection between a populist leader and his/her electorate. This is often marked symbolically by the use of linguistic codes that pertain to the spoken and informal register of a language. A different link, one which is frequent in right-wing populism, consists in idealization of the role of the market, which replaces certain functions of the state, or – more frequently within the left – a strengthening and redefinition of the role of civil society, whether organized or unorganized. Even mythologized references to civil society can imply a redefinition and even a restriction of democratic channels of representation (Mastropaolo, 2005). One can often identify populist undertones in the now recurrent calls for greater public deliberation at local levels, and other forms of political participation by non-state actors, such as promoting referenda, which incorporate the actors of protest politics, foster participation by social movements in decision-making, enhance the political dimension of third-sector activities, or increase and legitimize internet-mediated forms of decision-making.

These approaches are more or less viable according to the context in which their adoption is attempted. They are, however, connected to solutions that attempt to integrate, or less frequently to substitute, representative democracy. Idealized references to ‘the people’ and derogatory references to the political class often appear together, but their connection varies and, as said, the concept of populism as defined in the literature includes other features as well, such as a frequent reliance on charismatic leadership.
Fourthly, populism can be seen as a consequence of a mounting exclusionary ethos due to loss of identification with the welfare state as a fair system of redistribution. As a weak ideology – in the sense previously discussed – populism acquires meaning in relation to other more completely formed ideologies of the right, particularly the exclusionary right. Vague appeals to ‘the people’ by populists often hide more exclusionary visions typical of the right (Mastropaolo, 2005).

Finally, among the causes of the resurgence of populism in Europe mention should be made of the special impact of the media. The role of the media and political communication has been particularly connected to populism by several studies (Mazzoleni, 2008; Mcguigan, 1992). Recent works view populism as a response to changes in the media and the key role of the social media (Engesser et al., 2017; Ernst et al., 2017). Populism as a strategy can be connected to a redefinition of the political space engendered by a new type of political communication. This consists, in the world of communication, of marginalization of political news in favour of the politicized reporting of social issues such as crime and immigration. These changes accompany a weakening of party loyalty and of issue-centred politics. A less politically aligned media system has led to demystification of political office, with more and more citizens claiming to have a good understanding of what politicians do and thinking that they can do it better (Mudde, 2004). At the same time, these changes in the structure of public communication are understood by politicians, who attempt to relate to the media in similar terms. Rather than to parliaments, leaders appeal directly to their electorates. Instead of relying on their parties and their channels of communication, they rely on the general media. The role of the media must therefore be considered in relation to the personalization of politics, which has sometimes been labelled ‘soft populism’.

In an age of the accelerated circulation of ideas through global media, and therefore of a globalization of political ideas, the adopters of populism as an ideology and as a form of politics can draw on an increasingly wide repertoire. They can seek to outbid each other in the adoption of ideological elements perceived as electorally rewarding, or by appealing to their activist rank and file. In so doing, they partially redefine the conceptual core and periphery of populism in such a way that one can identify different conceptions of populism responding not only to political logics but also to societal cultures: that is, to the mix of country-specific assumptions on who one’s friends and enemies are, who is part of ‘the people’ and who is not. Country-specific conceptions of populism articulate which policy areas are problematic in terms of key controversial themes such as the betrayal of the people’s will and abuses of its trust. The core conception of the elites’ betrayal of the people’s will may well re-emerge in similar terms, but the proponents of these variants of a ‘politics of the enemy’ will differ – they will be Europe and faceless bureaucrats in some contexts, or the Roma community, or more generally migrants and refugees, in other contexts.

**Political representation and the success of populist formations**

As the previous excursus on the causes of populism indicates, hosts of variables concur to make populist solutions relevant in contemporary Europe. While the macro-level historical developments discussed so far provide an explanation of the reasons why populist forces are gaining support in contemporary societies, they do not identify the contexts in which a populist voting bloc is more likely to emerge and the characteristics of voters likely to support populist parties. In effects, the history of each individual European country is typically so unique that populism as an anti-system and anti-elite reaction is equally likely to acquire distinctive features. The main feature that one finds with equal centrality in all European
populisms is Euroscepticism. It constitutes a reaction against an elite-driven process increasingly rejected by the sectors of the population resenting the increased migration flows generated by European integration.

Nonetheless, while acknowledging differences of intensity in different contexts, the literature has attempted to classify variables predicting a populist vote by classifying them in three main types. There are attitudinal changes of a population aggrieved by the loss of economic status and security. This has been called the syndrome of the ‘losers of globalization’. The literature points to the fact that the social groups affected by this ‘syndrome’ are not generally the poorest sectors of the population. They are often skilled workers whose financial wellbeing has been negatively impacted by processes of delocalization, industrial automation, and competition with migrants in a set of labour market segments. These social groups are often the groups that for decades supported the process of European integration and that in many instances have now come to identify it with policies that have not improved their standards of living.

Secondly, there are cultural explanations for the increase in the populist vote. In this case, populist sentiments have been related to increasing feelings of cultural homelessness rooted in reactions to globalization-related migratory flows. This concerns several aspects of the process of EU integration and related policies that have increased the social and cultural heterogeneity of European member states, ranging from Schengen agreements to rules governing the settlement of refugees, which by embedding the respect for human rights in European legal systems have fostered population movements from war-ridden areas of the world.

Thirdly, in order to account for populist preferences, scholars also consider supply-side explanations; that is, they look at factors pertaining to the availability of populist movements and parties in the electoral market, their strategies and the contextual political factors that strengthen them. Scholars working on these variables concentrate on the role of political entrepreneurs able to exploit emerging political opportunities to capitalize on mounting economic and cultural discontent.

Often these three kinds of explanations co-occur, and it is often difficult to disentangle them. For instance, in explaining the outcome of the Brexit referendum, that is the decision to leave the European Union (EU), scholars have pointed to the interaction of multiple causes. These include the role of populist formations, such as the UKIP party, as well as to the coexistence of economic considerations and cultural reactions to migration in the British population (Inglehart and Norris, 2016).

Each of these classes of explanations can be related to developments in EU politics and to strategies to counteract them, but also to impasses in the process of European integration. The ‘losers of globalization syndrome’ is seen as being generated or at least worsened by EU austerity measures, and there is a large body of literature exploring this connection. In this regard, there is a clear left/right split among political actors, but it has also engendered tensions between northern and southern European countries, which are often related to different approaches to the appropriateness of these measures. The cultural dimension is likewise interpreted in different ways by different EU political groups, and it has affected views on migration policy, which have also split northern and southern countries. The result is a resurgence of nation-state nationalism, which has connected a ‘sovraniist’ ethos with anti-elitist populism. Of course, the process of European integration provides political opportunities for these forces to collaborate, which they do for instance within the European Parliament, where they are grouped together, and in coordinated political protest events such as those staged by leaders of nationalist populist parties in Koblenz in early 2017.

Nonetheless, while the ‘losers of globalization syndrome’ well explains the general availability of large sectors of the population to any type of anti-system parties, cultural explanations are better in
explaining the frequent success of right-wing formations in Europe, since these are the ones that provide a stronger sense of common belonging in the current European contexts. They promise an imagined ethnically based alternative to the ‘homelessness’ that reactions to globalization have made more relevant and which was explored in the previous section. It is at the level of supply-side explanations of populism that, in the current European context, a broad array of right-wing political organizations and intermediary associations have emerged.

Whilst in the West many voluntary organizations have become bureaucratized organizations, with little interaction among members, and whilst mainstream parties have transformed into cartel parties to become state-supported and self-serving, the right has often re-established successful territorial bases (Skocpol, 2004; Katz and Mair, 1995). In this sense, they express a different vision of state-society relations, which is fundamentally opposed to the cosmopolitanism often embraced by the centre-left. This is often perceived as unacceptable by several constituencies in Europe and particularly by the ‘losers of globalization’, who have arguably not been served well by developments embedded for instance in the European project as it has been pursued in recent decades and particularly since the economic crisis of 2007. A political programme of localism, economic protectionism, and territorially or ethnically based identities is better interpreted by the populist radical right parties, and it is often pursued through their network of intermediate bodies, but also ideologically proclaimed. This alternative state-society vision is pursued not only for economic reasons but also because it embeds a different vision of political representation that is increasingly relevant to the aggrieved constituencies of the losers of globalization.

These constituencies consider the globalized world of European nation-states as embedded in what they perceive to be the remote political dynamics of European Union politics. For them, the chain of political representation extending from mainstream politics up to the chain of governance and finally to the EU level is too long and too opaque. They often do not feel politically represented in this process and prefer the vision of the populist right, which promises to halt this process.

Whilst one approach to redefining political representation is through localism and local intermediary bodies, there are, however, other ways, and some are better expressed by the populist right. A second approach is through glorification of political deliberation. In the European context, this is typical of left-wing populist parties but also typical of parties that claim to position themselves beyond the left/right distinction.

Left-wing and right-wing populism have been seen as sharing a core ideology of anti-elitism, rejection of liberal democracy and plebiscitarianism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). There are also other aspects that characterize left-wing populism. As obviously expected, on the basis of text analyses of electoral manifestos and other party materials of such different countries as the UK and Greece, left-wing populists are more inclusionary and also appear more focused on socio-economic issues (March, 2017; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014).

A similar emphasis on anti-austerity platform is often espoused by other anti-system parties of the left and of the right. However, this focus is interpreted with reference to deliberative and participatory practices by newer political formations that claim to be beyond the left/right split. This is for instance the case of formations such as the Italian Five Stars Movement, but also the Spanish Podemos and Ciudadanos (Müller, 2014; Teruel and Barrio, 2015; Mosca, 2014). These formations constitute an innovation in European politics because they connect the glorification of the people with a de-centred decision-making process – at least as it is stated as an ideological tenet. They also often reject the principled inclusionary stance of the left, and on issues such as migrant policy they are distinct from left-wing anti-system parties.

An alternative approach to political representation, which characterizes the populist radical right, is its reliance on charismatic leadership, rather than on extended forms of political
participation. Thus for instance the Italian League’s current leader states, at least on occasion, his opposition to mechanisms such as ‘primaries’ which involve a participatory stance (Sacchi, 2016). Radical right formations prefer to be represented by charismatic figures, who are beyond the corrupt meddling of regular politics, are admired, and self-define in two typical ways. They present themselves either as ‘one of the people’ – that is, as representatives of the disenfranchised constituencies of the losers of globalization defined in ethnic or territorial terms. Alternatively, they may promote a model of charismatic leadership as again above corrupt political meddling, but not because they are ‘one of the people’ but rather because they are models to be admired. In both cases, these charismatic figures often extensively use communication strategies to build legitimacy for their representative claims (Saward, 2010). The success of the radical right therefore often stems from the means at the disposal of its leaders to articulate such claims, and from the historical legitimacy of reliance on single individuals, which is a tenet of the ideologies of the right.

Thus, for instance, substantial discontent with current democratic arrangements has been voiced by several political figures widely seen as populists, such as Pauline Hanson in Australia, Jörg Haider and more recently Heinz-Christian Strache in Austria, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Jean-Marie Le Pen, and more recently Marine and Marion Maréchal Le Pen in France, Umberto Bossi and more recently Matteo Salvini in Italy, Pim Fortuyn and more recently Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and Frauke Petry in Germany. Accusations of populism have also been levelled against mainstream party leaders such as Silvio Berlusconi and more recently Matteo Renzi in Italy, and Sarkozy in France, for whom the concept of ‘soft populism’ has been employed (Musso, 2008).

To sum up, the frequent emergence of charismatic leadership in relation to populist leaders and their parties illustrates how the relation between a ‘people’ and the political system is discredited, and how it is therefore often mediated by an individual acting as a direct channel of popular representation, which bypasses discredited representative institutions. Thus, the populist model of representation consists of a charismatic leader and parliamentarians as his/her spokespeople through whom the leader talks directly to ‘the people’. It consequently embodies the unmediated connection between a leader and his/her people which bypasses democratic representation and characterizes populism – particularly right-wing populism.

**Populism, democracy, and xenophobia**

If one feature shared by all populist actors is their anti-elitist rhetoric, as mentioned, an equally important and connected feature of European populism is its rejection of some of the aspects and institutions of representative democracy. Whilst the extreme right rejects liberal parliamentary democracy outright, the populist radical right retains a formal allegiance to the checks and balances of democracy but radically questions its workings. It often advocates the need to listen to ‘the people’ ignored by politics and politicians – whence derives the frequently used label of ‘populism’ in association with ‘anti-politics’.

Radical right leaders often argue that at present European democracy is dysfunctional because it is a form of politics uprooted from the social bases of European populations. Its elitist character is made possible by a dispersion of power along long chains of governance culminating in the self-serving political class of Europe neglectful of any effective political representation of the ‘European people’. The frequently employed concept of a ‘European people’ is typically qualified in terms conducive to a ‘politics of the enemy’ frame, particularly by defining the enemy in ethnic and religious terms, which in current times above all focus on the idealization of a Christian Europe set against a Muslim menace (Shryock, 2010). This
Political frame usefully generates a sense of cohesion among very different radical right parties, and it chimes with the feelings of homelessness in a still recent multicultural society in a Europe of defensive nation-states. Thus, the battle against Islam has become the defining element of a wide set of European radical right parties (Betz and Meret, 2009). It reinforces and seemingly self-evidently supports the view of a homogenous European people against an enemy that is intrinsically and radically different.

**Manifestations of populism: ‘enemy politics’ as a populist alternative to democratic representation**

If anti-political sentiments spur populist alternatives to current representative politics, the emerging manifestations of populism are multifarious. As said, they include the personalization of politics by all parties, the relocation of power from parliament to the popular press, and political support for populist parties and for populist leaders. Another important manifestation, which is less explored, is the role of community networks as means to anchor politics to a collective sense of purpose, to ground political values in shared concepts, to recreate a sense of agency in a social context that increasingly deprives the ‘losers of globalization’ from the perception of pursuing a common vision. This role used to be played by a set of intermediary institutions, which included mass parties but also trade unions, workers’ associations, recreational associations and churches. A process generally known in social science as ‘disintermediation’ has weakened these ties to local communities. Religious identities have been hit by processes of secularization; workers’ associations have suffered from the individualization of work and its delocalization; trade union membership has generally collapsed in Europe following fundamental changes in the organization of work. In this context, only small parties are successfully attempting to recreate a sense of community among their associates. Among these parties, radical right parties are among those that seek to provide a sense of community conceptually, as mentioned, through the symbolic boundaries created as by-products of defining and fighting enemies. In terms of action forms, this also implies the sense of community that emerges from participating in common action repertoires, which small radical right parties often encourage. They may include participation in vigilante groups, or demonstration. In addition, several radical right parties also create networks of associations. These similarly provide a sense of shared identity, which in several respects is no different from the sense of shared belonging generated by the new movements of the 1980s.

Associations as forms of political participation are intended to support, and sometimes to replace, some of the discredited and individualizing mechanisms of democratic representation. There are a number of civil society associations informed by populist ideologies and communication styles which seek to perform a political role.

Right-wing associations of different kinds are often a legacy of the Fascist period in Europe, as in France, Italy, and Flanders. However, rich networks of associations, voluntary groups and informal activist networks have sometimes developed at different times. This is for instance the case of France, where the nationalist subculture expanded after and during colonialism. A similar expansion took place in Sweden and Norway, where small groups expanded during the 1970s and 1980s in connection with the expansion of ‘white music’ and related skinhead groups. During the 1960s and 1970s, these networks of organizations often adopted other issues. Art argues that this was done in order to recruit new members from nationalist subcultures (Art, 2011: 53, 40–41). These subcultures were often the background from which parties emerged. This was, for instance, the case of the Swedish Democrats that formed from pre-existing activist networks (Art, 2011: 88). These associations have often
expanded in recent years, and in several contexts, the literature has shown their importance, as in France and Italy (Veugelers et al., 2015; Ruzza, 2010). In these two countries, but also elsewhere, these associations include sporting organizations, such as football clubs that are well known for insulting black players at football games, vigilante groups that supposedly patrol streets at night to protect citizens but that in fact regularly hassle members of minority groups, and those that provide recreational activities such as certain music groups. They also include groups that span the divide between cultural groups and social movements, such as Bloc Identitaire and their Youth wing ‘Generation Identitaire’, who in addition to protesting and being accused of perpetrating acts of violence, are involved in various cultural activities to celebrate and protect their French and European roots and their heritage. A June 2017 newspaper article noted that the number of far-right groups is difficult to establish, but as an indication, it reported that ‘Génération Identitaire has held demonstrations in France that drew around 500 people, while its Facebook page has 122,662 likes. Its Austrian counterpart, Identitäre Bewegung Österreich, has 37,628 likes on Facebook’ (Townsend, 2017).

Nonetheless, it should be noted that xenophobic associations are essentially examples of bonding social capital and not bridging social capital, and as such, they do not promote the kind of solidarity and social integration that other types of associations promote. As the literature argues, participation in civil society associations promote social solidarity because they promote interpersonal trust. The role of associations as tools for social inclusion has been generally established and is particularly relevant to the inclusion of marginalized groups of the population, such as migrants (Morales and Giugni, 2011). However, this positive role cannot be attributed to all kinds of associations, regardless of how they relate to society at large. Associations that only relate to likeminded individuals are not instruments of generation of trust (Uslaner, 2003; Putnam et al., 1993). They are in principle not different from the system of rules that govern law-social-capital, inward-looking societies based on familistic orientations and can easily become exclusionary. A distinction has then often been made between bridging and bonding social capital and trust-producing associations tend to abound in progressive inclusive societies (Wallace and Pichler, 2007). In this context, associations of the radical right are typically exclusionary and not likely to promote social capital (Ruzza, 2009).

The literature has typically examined these kinds of networks under the general heading of ‘bad civil society’ (Chambers and Kopstein, 2001; Ruzza, 2012). However, the mainly bonding character of populist radical right associations does not prevent them from expanding from the national level to the supranational and international ones. Like other social movement communities, they combine identity elements and activism, and like other social movements and voluntary associations they have learned to use the internet to build online communities that at times solidify into friendship networks (Caiani and Parenti, 2013; Caiani et al., 2012). An example of these networks is provided by the activities of Golden Dawn in Greece. This is a movement-party, which like other movement parties of the left-liberal tradition combines a communal ethos, friendship networks, identity-building activism, and a presence in elected institutions (Kitschelt, 2006). Networks of Golden Dawn have been involved in voluntary work on behalf of poor Greek citizens, while at the same time excluding and attacking migrants (Ellinas, 2013). Their activities have included for instance ‘Greeks-only’ soup kitchens, thereby joining two political frames: the civil society frame and the xenophobic one.

Associations similar to the one described above exist in several other national contexts. They include centre-right recreational associations, ethno-nationalist associations, and xenophobic ones. These include for instance music groups in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries, and sports fans clubs in Italy and many other European contexts, often in football
(Love, 2016; Testa and Armstrong, 2013). Their prominence has been noted for decades and has sparked counter-movements specifically opposing them (Carver et al., 1995; Merkel and Tokarski, 1996). Here it is argued that they also reflect a desire for political activism and at the same time a rejection of the mechanisms of democratic representation and an attempt to build an exclusionary sense of belonging. They respond to a desire to establish a direct connection between individuals who conceive themselves as part of a homogenous concept of ‘the people’ and ‘the political’ as a separate institutional sphere. They clearly vary in terms of their tactics, the means used, and the boundaries between fully democratic means and groups that accept and practice violence. They differ from service-delivery associations, from social movements and from recreational associations, but they may have some of their features. They are now described with greater precision.

The expression ‘populist civil society associations’ refers to groups that assert a right to influence policy on the basis of an implicit theory of political representation in which influence on the policy process is justified in the name of an undifferentiated self-evident and self-justified category of ‘the people’. This theory defines the rivals of ‘the people’ in essentialist terms (that is, on the basis of a theory of racially or culturally unchangeable features of specific populations) and/or in ones which articulate the preferences of a charismatic leader said to express the preferences of ‘the people’. These associational features distinguish civil society from what can be termed ‘uncivil society’ (Ruzza, 2009); that is, associations which instead of producing bridging social capital strive to undermine it.

Considered now are two kinds of populist associations: those that conceptualize ‘the people’ in racial terms and those that do so in territorial terms.

**Populist-xenophobic associations**

The associations most clearly identifiable as uncivil are xenophobic groups, such as exclusionary extreme right associations. These will often claim to speak for an undifferentiated people whose only shared features are racially defined as ‘white’ posited against an often equally unspecified population of non-whites. They often situate themselves at the boundary between legal and semi-legal action or accept the costs of illegality with the organizational costs that this implies.

Xenophobic uncivil society is a broad category that denotes a distinctive feature of many uncivil society organizations in contemporary Europe. One may include in this category groups whose exclusionism is asserted at the individual level in racially essentialist, or at least in strong culturally essentialist, terms. Belonging to this category are neo-Nazi groups, which, according to Carter’s definition, are ‘radically xenophobic, adhere to classical racism and reject outright existing democracy systems’. Carter lists as also belonging to this category authoritarian xenophobic parties such as the Swiss Democrats (SD) and the French National Front (FN) which have a rich associational life (Carter, 2005: 50–51). Among the extremist right-wing parties, the populist label has also been extensively applied to the Austrian Freedom Party, which has a well-developed system of associations (Riedlsperger, 1998). A similarly extensive and articulated associational structure is exhibited by the Swedish Democratic Party, also frequently classified as populist.

The ideological extremism and marginal status of these groups tend to attract disaffected and violent youth and to produce a model of civil society close to the one explained by the ‘ills of globalization’ and the crisis of modernity model previously discussed. They are also present in sporting arenas such as football, where they have prominence in specific football clubs.
Nationalist civil society and territorial groups

The second category comprises groups whose main concern is territory, in that the protection, glorification, and alleged homogeneity of their territories of reference is a constitutive trait of most types of nationalism, including ethno-nationalism. Even when their territorial principles are at odds with the dominant ones, as in the case of radical ethno-nationalist movements opposed to centralized nation-states, their distinctive effort to establish a correspondence between state and nation is similar in all types of nationalism. Included among nationalist civil society groups are then all territorially protecting groups, ranging from the nationalisms focused on uniting nation-states which were more frequent in the past two centuries, to the more recent independentist, separatist and regionalist associations, which also include Eurosceptic groups.

In both uniting and dividing nationalisms, the populist central frame of a struggle of people against the elites emerges as frequently as the assertion of a common interest of the entire population, regardless of class or geographical differences. Similarly, a ‘politics of the enemy’ frame is also frequent, given that the construction of the nation is facilitated by identification of its enemies. Thus, ascriptive belonging can still be a fundamental axiom for these groupings, although territorial identification is more flexible than racial categorization. In other words, xenophobic associations tend to be biologically essentialist, whilst territorial ones can be culturally essentialist, but in both cases they often claim to speak for an idealized conception of ‘the people’.

Some specific examples concerning the Italian League will help to clarify this type of territorially-related populist associations. The League has created a host of civil society groups which are controlled by the party and give political voice to certain social categories. They also include a mix of cultural and professional groupings with varying degrees of political relevance. The League’s organizations include language schools, where revitalization of the local dialect – ideologically promoted to the status of a ‘language’ – acquires political meaning: it includes indistinctly the community of speakers and excludes all others. Similarly politically-charged linguistic policy is frequent in other high-identity European regions. A concept of ‘the people’ is symbolically created, specific cultural traits are attributed to it, and its enemies are identified.

Besides language protection groups, the League has set up a large number of associations representing social categories such as hunters and drivers. Again, this is a channel to influence the political realm outside representational democracy. There are also associations of mountain hikers, Padanian women, Padanian boy scouts, Padanian Catholics, Padanian welfare groups, etc. There are economic protection associations such as trade unions, and finally commercial organizations such as travel agencies, banks, etc. All these associations are described on the League’s official website, where, on entering the ‘associations’ initial page, the internet surfer is greeted with the motto ‘the people is like a tree – without roots it dies’. The people is then represented by its associations, rather than by the institutions of elected democracy. As in other populist movements, it is also represented by Matteo Salvini, a charismatic leader whose personal style and language embodies a populist ethos.

However, it should be pointed out that ethno-nationalist groups increasingly face a dilemma. They can remain regionalist parties and this option is viable for parties that come from a distinctive and politically very salient background, such as the Catalan or Scottish parties. However, alternatively, if this is not the case, they can establish alliances or mutate into radical right parties, such as the previously mentioned League, the Flaams Belang, or the Ticino League (Mazzoleni, 2017; Chari et al., 2004). In the presently marked European populist context, alliances with the populist and nationalist radical right enable them to exploit
a set of new political opportunities, which include electorally benefitting from emerging Eurosceptic sentiments and being more easily included in governing centre-right coalitions in subnational and national contexts. Ideologically, they can do so by combining a regionalist and a nationalist programme and by overcoming their signature region-state conflict by arguing that their region of reference can only flourish is their nation of reference also prospers. Additionally, they can claim that the distinctive cultural features of their region of reference is best served through the adoption of exclusionary right-wing policies. Clearly transformations such as these are often bound to appear unacceptable to uncompromising regionalist actors, and might well produce factious tensions within these parties, as it is the case in the Italian League (Huysseune, 2010).

Conclusions

To summarize, this chapter has argued that European populism is related to disenchantment with aspects of European politics and with the process of European integration in particular. It expresses a disillusionment with the dominant democratic model of political representation, often perceived as unjustifiably elitist in the face of recurrent corruption scandals involving politics and politicians. Among the manifestations of populism, it has been argued that a search for roots in organized civil society has emerged as a new form of political participation that is less elitist. Hence, support and participation in civil society can be used as crucial devices by populist parties and movements to link politics and society.

Political representation has traditionally taken place through elected institutions but also through intermediary bodies, such as trade unions and associations. It is argued that on the one hand widespread episodes of political corruption have undermined the credibility of electoral politics. As a previously marginalized component of European politics, radical right parties have remained relatively unscathed by these processes.

On the other hand, processes of disintermediation have undermined the representative character of intermediary bodies. In this context, the radical right offers charismatic mechanisms of political representation that not only bypass the corruption of parties. Secondly, they offer an alternative vision of state–society relations in which a re-grounding of politics at territorial level is pursued through mechanisms of ethnic bonding, which, while exclusionary to minorities, offer a sense of territorial belonging previously eroded by changes in the social structure. The vision of the radical right parties encompasses the creation of roots in society through their networks of associations that give voice to an idealized concept of a unified ‘people’. These organizations generate and represent a constituency that perceives itself as marginalized in electoral processes. These, however, are of a nativist and exclusionary kind. They create a sense of common belonging which is solidified through a ‘politics of the enemy’, which marginalizes migrants and refugees.

The radical right parties recreate a sense of community in a context of perceived competition with migrants for jobs and resources of the welfare state. It is noted that currently emerging are new and different types of populist formations, which are less characterized on the left/right axis, but also express some of the exclusionary characters of right-wing formations.

References


Carlo Ruzza


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