Antiestablishment and the substitution of the whole with one of its parts

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Antiestablishment and the substitution of the whole with one of its parts

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1. The part and the whole

The Oxford English Dictionary has two entries for populism, one for the noun and one for the adjective. As a noun, populism means “A political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups”; it is “a type of politics that claims to represent the opinions and wishes of ordinary people.” As an adjective, it entails “Relating to or characteristic of a political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups.”

Common to the noun and the adjective are the two actors of populism: ordinary people whose concerns are disregarded by established elite groups. People alone do not make populism, which is a polemical category derived from an antagonistic interpretation of the people. The insight coming from the OED is that the established elites are the basic externality against which populism’s people conceives itself. What makes populism is thus the following dynamic: some people (ordinary) claiming against some other people (established elite). The “claiming” is the action linking the two poles – a link by contrast, contraposition and even exclusion. While the populist interpretation of the people is interested in stressing the inclusion of the “ordinary” people, we cannot fail to notice that the populist process of inclusion is possible because it occurs through a parallel process of exclusion. The final stage of the OED’s analysis of the populist phenomenon pertains to the difference between the noun and the adjective: the former stresses the condition of the ordinary people who feel their concerns are disregarded – what they feel is the basic information or the fact that makes for populism; and the latter stresses the movement that the fact of that feeling initiates as the motivation of the making of a claim of power in favor of a part of the people. Whatever our interpretation of populism, we cannot fail to recognize that the following goal returns in all populist movements: getting rid of “the establishment” or what lies in between “us” (the people outside) and the state organization (the insiders as apparatus of decision-makers either elected or appointed).

Certainly, it appears in the propaganda of the quasi-centrist Five Star Movement (M5S) as well as in that of the more aggressively conservative “Make America Great Again” (MEGA).

In *Siamo in Guerra* (“We are at war”), Roberto Casaleggio and Beppe Grillo, the founders of the M5S, claim there is a war going on between the “old world” and the “new world.”
The old world stands for party democracy and political representation, the new one for free citizens connected horizontally through the Net, without intermediary organizations. “The Net does not want middlemen,” and political parties and traditional media are doomed to disappear. Established parties and accredited media are depicted as obstructions to democracy that citizens can get rid of thanks to the Net. What makes M5S’s claim so radical is not so much the reasonable desire of making the Net a means for deepening participation, but the argument of antiestabishment and the quest to remove partisan competition and political deliberation among parties. This is the argument that makes the M5S a “non-party party” (as its Charter claims), in agreement with populism’s dualism between “folk democracy” and “established democracy,” and in view of overcoming that distinction and reunifying the “inside” and the “outside” of the state (Casaleggio and Grillo 2011). Getting rid of “the establishment” or what lies in between “us” and the decision-makers was also the core theme of Donald Trump’s inaugural address, when he claimed:

For too long, a small group in our nation’s Capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished – but the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered – but the jobs left, and the factories closed. The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country. Their victories have not been your victories; their triumphs have not been your triumphs; and while they celebrated in our nation’s capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land.

How should we normatively evaluate this antiestabishment claim? And moreover, why, despite its appeal to the people, is populism’s membership in the democratic family problematic? Like established parties, populist “movements” compete for seats in Parliaments or Congress and seek majority; yet they are viewed as established parties neither by their critics nor by their supporters. What makes them different, given that in running for government they risk becoming establishment in their turn? These are the questions guiding my analysis of populism as a project by which means a part (of the people) tries to control the ruling power of the state against another part – antiestabishment is, I argue, the category that populism employs to justify this factional design.  

The classification of populist parties is often made according to the traditional divide of right-wing and left-wing that we adopt for established parties. This approach is deceptive, because it conceals what makes populist parties distinctive and different from all other parties, namely that they rely upon a conception of antiestabishment that breeds hostility not simply to the existing parties but more radically to partisan divisions and the party form of political representation.

The notion that “the people” are one; that divisions among them are not genuine conflicts of interests but are merely self-serving factions; and that the people will be best looked after by a single unpolitical leadership that will put their interest first – these ideas are antipolitical, but they are nevertheless essential elements in a political strategy that has often been used to gain power.

(Canovan 1981, 265)

In this quote by Margaret Canovan, we have the main ingredients of the conundrum of populism as a party that does not want merely to advocate some interests and claims but wants
moreover to mobilize social energies, unify a large number of citizens against (a minority of) others and achieve finally the majority and rule.

This conundrum may be rendered as follows: although a populist leader behaves like the leader of any other party, populism is hardly reducible to a party and in fact it resists being classified according to traditional partisanship lines precisely because it wants to promote one part only. Its trajectory speaks for this ambiguity: populism arises as oppositional and intense partisanship when it rallies against established parties and governments, but its inner ambition is toward incorporating the largest number and becoming the only-party-of-the-people, thus sweeping away the plethora of partisan affiliations. Peter Mair captured the meaning and implications of populism’s antiestablishment in contemporary democracies when he associated them with the post-party democracy trend, in relation to which he suggested we consider populism as “a means of linking an increasingly undifferentiated and depoliticized electorate with a largely neutral and non-partisan system of governance . . . populist democracy primarily tends towards partyless democracy” (Mair 2002, 84 and 89). Antiestablishment discloses a project that is radical – constructing a citizenry that is “undifferentiated,” “depoliticized” and “neutral” – and fits a public sphere of opinion that looks like an audience rather than an active citizenry siding with or against political visions and programs.

The crucial fact is that, in audience democracy, the channels of public communication . . . are for the most part politically neutral, that is, non-partisan . . . It would appear, then, that today the perception of public issues and subjects (as distinct, to repeat, from judgements made about them) is more homogeneous and less dependent on partisan preferences than was the case under party democracy. (Matić 1997, 228–229)³

Qualifying the populist project as “partyless democracy” is inspiring but imprecise. The explanation of the reason of that imprecision shall be the main contribution of this chapter to the analysis of populism. How are we to make sense of this project given that populism uses, even if instrumentally, the means of the party in its struggle against established parties, and moreover that it does not think of its party as identical to the whole people? This question suggests that populism’s oblique relation to constitutional democracy rests on the relationship between the parts and the whole, which the antiestablishment paradigm reveals.

Some decades ago, Raymond Polin and Norberto Bobbio introduced the term merecracy – the kratos of méros, or the “power of the part” – in order to explain (Bobbio) and criticize (Polin) the structural condition of representative democracy as party democracy (Polin 1977, 229–255; Bobbio 1987, 123).⁴ The myth of an organic unity of popular sovereignty not to be fragmented by parties lies at the core of the populist attack against established parties and of its project to construct a different kind of party. Populism represents a redirection of the notion of the people; it is a phenomenology of substitution of the whole with one of its parts, yet not a claim of universality. The success of its plan would entail replacing the people’s procedural meaning and thus the principled generality of the law (erga omnes) with a socially substantive one that is the expression of a part only (ad personam). In this process of solidification (ethnicization) of the juridico-political populus we can detect populism’s attempt to achieve an identification of “the people” with the part (méros) that a leader and her followers proclaim to incarnate. Within this plan, democracy comes to be identified with radical majoritarianism, or the kratos (the ruling power) of a specific majority that purports itself to be, and rules as, a “holistic party” – it rules as if it were the only good majority (or part) that elections reveal, and as if the opposition does not belong to the same “good” people.⁵
The examination of the conundrum of “the parts” and “the whole” that populism epitomizes will lead me to argue in what follows that populism epitomizes not so much the claim of “a part” representing “the whole” (pars pro toto) which is the synecdoche epitomizing political representation in general but, much more radically, the claim of embodying one part only, in fact the “authentic” or “good” part, which by this very reason is legitimate to rule for its own good, against the other or excluded one (pars pro toto). The key to this understanding is the category of antiestablishment, which is like the engine of the populist ideology. The chapter is thus organized as follows: first I clarify the “spirit” (in Montesquieu’s sense) of populism as party-cracy; I then analyze critically the two main interpretations of populism (the “thin” ideology of morality, and what I call the “thick” discursive construction of the collective subject); subsequently, I explore the antiestablishment as a democratic condition and show how the populist interpretation transforms it and makes it the foundation of party-cracy.

2. Pars pro parte, or back to factions

A reasonable question to be asked is whether populism’s phobia is against political parties themselves, or against certain parts. The suggestion I would like to convey in this chapter is that the opposite of politics of and by parties is not the reinstatement of the undivided whole (of the people) but the celebration of one of its parts instead. The idea that populism sponsors is that politics occurs in a political-historical context that is made of two groups fighting for their supremacy against each other, in fact for the seizing of the sovereign power of the state by one of them against the other. Hence, if successful, populism would entail going from “party politics” to “faction politics,” not merely from “party democracy” to “partyless democracy.” Populism in power is primed to entail the rehabilitation of factional politics, which is historically the denial of party politics (and constitutional democracy) whose legitimacy was achieved by proving not to be identifiable with factional politics.6

The populist reading of the people is itself the shadow of a part and not truly general and inclusive as it claims to be. Populism ascribes a factional nature to the existing parties, accusing them of putting the will of the people in the service of partial interests; yet it fully embraces the logic of “the part” when it pre-defines the antagonizing groups according to the position they occupy in relation to the state – the people “outside” (“pure”) and the few “inside” (“impure”) – a division which is more at home within a republican architecture of the polity than an isonomic one. As Andreas Schedler writes (1996, 293): populists “draw up a triangular symbolic space around three actors and their relationships: the people, the political class and themselves”; the first represents “the innocent victim,” the second “the malicious rogue” and the third “the redeeming hero.” This representation of the two parts composing the society occurs within an ex ante dualistic vision of the polity, in which there is no room for the fiction of the people as a whole upon which constitutional democracies are based. In claiming the hegemonic priority of the political over politics, populism proclaims the end of the juridical fiction of the people as the generality (the rules of the game) that holds for each and all as the not-available frame within which the political actors compete.

The paradox of the populist phobia of parties is that it leads toward a project of substitution of the sovereign (the whole) with one of its parts, the most numerous perhaps or the less directly involved in power, yet a part in all respects. Party-phobia transfigures thus into party-latria, the rejection of the parties in the worshipping of one part – this seems to be the phenomenology of populism from movement of opposition (one party antagonizing against other parties as in electoral democracies) to within-state or ruling power (one party unraveling the kratos of the
This movement does not merely consist in giving a part legitimacy by claiming it is the whole — it is not merely *pars pro toto* logic; it is instead *pars pro parte*.

Populists do not only include, but exclude; and they exclude first of all what they define *ex ante* as the establishment. Their part — the non-establishment part — declares to be entitled to rule against the other part; it seeks neither universal consent nor total inclusion. The whole people is thus not at the root of populism — and in this sense to associate it with Rousseau’s general will is really incorrect (Mudde 2004, 543) — but rather the masses that are outside the establishment. This dualistic scheme is the frame of mind that populism adopts in creating a party and competing for power. In this sense I say that populism replaces *erga omnes* with *ad personam* legality — it replaces the principle and the practice of the generality of the law with the entrenched power of some, no matter whether they are the most numerous part. In what follows, I would like to show how the category of the anti-establishment is the key to this transmutation of the whole into a part, which is the starting point of the transmutation of all the categories composing democracy, from the people and the majority to the party, representation and elections.

In order to dissect the ambiguities connected to the dialectics between the part/parts and the whole/the people, I will argue that the populist’s crowded constellations of *antis* (anti-elitism, anti-party, anti-partisanship, anti-intellectualism) are rooted in *anti-establishment*, the paradigm that better manifests populist politics’ dualistic scheme. This analysis will allow me to present populism as a political theology that metamorphoses the constitutionalized power of representative democracy into a new order which is truly *party-cratic* or the power of one part. The goal of this chapter on populism’s antiestablishment would be that of preparing the terrain for a broader study of populism’s phenomenology of the substitution of the whole with one of its parts.

Thus, although critical of party democracy, populists create parties; and although critical of representative democracy, populists do not want direct democracy but activate a new kind of representation, which I have proposed denoting as *direct representation* (Urbinati 2013, 2015). Populists use elections as a celebration of their people through the victory of its champion and use the support of the audience (which it orchestrates carefully and endlessly) to purify elections of their quantitative and formalistic character. In this sense, populism’s ambition to construct new forms of popular sovereignty that enhance democratic inclusiveness occurs at the expense of democracy as an open game of contestation of and competition for power, the two qualities of constitutional democracies that populism wants to amend. Certainly, these tradeoffs “are not inevitable” (Roberts 2012, 153); but their possibility is contained in the populist project I have just sketched.

### 3. At the root of the moral ideology of populism

The perspective of the analysis I pursue profits from, and at the very same time completes and amends, two important lines of interpretation that define contemporary scholarship on populism in social and political sciences, and can be rendered as “thin” and “thick” conceptions, respectively. The “thin” conception sees populism as an *ideology of morality*; it is made of a Manichean worldview dividing the social space into two opposing camps: the moral “people” and the corrupt establishment.

This means that populism is in essence a form of *moral* politics, as the distinction between “the elite” and “the people” is first and foremost moral (i.e. pure vs. corrupt), not situational (e.g. position of power), socio-cultural (e.g. ethnicity, religion), or socio-economic (e.g. class).
According to Cas Mudde (2004, 543), the early proponent of this “‘thin-centered’ ideology,” “the dualism between ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’ deems populism politics an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people.” Other interpreters note in addition that its “thin-centered” nature gives populism ideological elasticity and Protean potentials (Heinisch 2003; Ochoa 2017). Capable of straddling the left–right ideological divide, populist parties are thus defined by their insistence on a moral estimation of politics and vary widely, from the protectionist policies of Fidesz in Hungary to the neoliberal populism of Fujimori’s Peru to the nationalization policies of Hugo Chávez.

Two critical observations can be made that anticipate what I am going to say below: first, given that direct democracy is not among populism’s goals, the dualism between the people and the elite does not consistently meet the request of instituting the general will with no mediation between the inside and the outside of the state (even if this is the populists’ claim); and second, focusing on this “thin” ideology obscures other components of populism that are instead crucial. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser do not, for instance, think that populist parties necessarily require charismatic leadership: “an elective affinity between populism and strong leader seems to exist. However, the former can exist without the latter” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012, 382). The distinction I propose between populism as a movement of protest (which can be horizontal and headless) and populism as a ruling power (which cannot exist without a leader) proves that Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser’s position holds in the relation to the former, not the latter. Populism as thin-centered ideology does not explain what makes populism a ruling power and its transformation of democratic institutions. The thin-centered moral orientation is surely an important gain, as it provides a minimal criterion to order the empirical analysis of various populist experiences; however, it seems to be too broad and unpolitical to capture the form of representation that qualifies populism and its relation to democracy.

We have thus to take the ideological “thin” argument down to its political roots, which are only apparently “moral.” “Anti-party-ism and anti-elitism,” Mudde and Karlwasser write, “are derivative of populism’s three value-concepts: the people, the people’s purity, and its sovereign will” (Ibid.). One could ask: what are, for populism, the obstacles to the actualization of these three value-concepts? The immediate answer seems to be the following: the most serious obstacle is party democracy; the reason is that, when and if it deals with “parts” and divided interests, politics fragments the popular will and makes it necessary to resort to compromise in order to construct the unitary will of decision; this would fatally open the door to “impurity” and elites’ manipulation, bargaining and pluralism. This obstacle seems to suggest quite clearly that populism’s first cry is not so much against elites in general, but against the political elite. Thus morality per se is not the issue; the issue is a kind of morality (or immorality) that is associated with the exercise (or the non-exercise) of political power. This is also demonstrated by the fact that populist leaders need not be themselves populares to claim their purity; yet they must come from outside the established political elite, because this makes their claim of ordinariness believable. Billionaires are a role model in modern society, and moreover their power does not translate into imposing their will and interests on all through the coercive system of the state. Thus millionaires like Silvio Berlusconi, Ross Perot, and Donald Trump fit populist anti-elite moral argument and rhetoric; they “can be considered more authentic representatives of the people than leaders with a more common socio-economic status” (Mudde 2017, 28). Populism’s antiestablishment does not refer to socio-economic elites and is neither class-based nor money-based. In conclusion, the dualism between “pure” people and “inauthentic” few is radical because the few are not deemed to be part of the people as they rule. This makes the people a part, an entity with a social and
substantive meaning that is inclusive only of the ordinary, not all the people, and certainly not
the political establishment. Clearly, only one is “the part” – the ruling few – that is expunged
from the ordinary and authentic many, which is a de facto part that is, in the populist mind,
the negation of the other part. The practical function of this kind of opposition and radical
dualism is that of justifying calls for forcing out of power the existing political class, a task that
populists attain through a representative process that relies upon a strong leader, who is as
“pure” of political power as “his” people. The dualism between “impure” establishment and
“pure” people is only apparently moral – in fact, it takes us straight to anti-partisanship as the
anti-political idea that power corrupts (those who hold it). In Paul Taggart’s words, “populism
has its roots in a primal anti-political reaction of the ruled against the rulers,” with the implied
assumption that ruling corrupts (2002, 74).

4. At the roots of the discursive strategy

The other interpretation of populism – which I call “thick” – stresses instead the role of
discourse in the construction of the people. This interpretation is inspired by the work of
Ernesto Laclau, a cornerstone in the political theory of populism, as it posits the creative
power of the binary ideology of the many versus the few. In Carlos de la Torre’s words,
populism is “a rhetoric that constructs politics as the moral and ethical struggle between el
pueblo and the oligarchy” (de la Torre 2000). Whereas the “thin” approach moralizes the
ideological structure of populism, this one politicizes it all the way down, so much so that at
the end it conflates politics and democracy as such with populism. All politics is populist
politics.

The “populist reason” consists in a radical claim for renewal of partisan politics. It reacts
against and wants to overturn the trend in liberal democratic societies of downplaying political
antagonism in order, discourse populism claims, to establish a sort of pactum ad excludendum
among all the leading classes and keep “underdogs” of all sorts (the radically excluded, from
the socially poor and destitute to the political radicals) out of political competition. Populism,
as this argument goes, is the movement that can give voice and power to the many that are
left out; it is a project of political awakening of the commoners against the politics of apathy
induced by the establishment occupying the political space. The goal is here clearly that of
substituting the elites in power with another leading force, and doing so in a quick and
destructive way. Populism is given the determinant force that belongs originally to democracy
itself as a politics of emancipation against entrenched elites that dress in liberal and constitu-
tional clothes in order to perpetuate their exclusionary politics (Panizza 2005). Whereas the
“thin” ideological conception categorizes parties with a simple binary logic – populist or not –
this discursive approach allows for a more nuanced scale. Political parties (both leftist and
conservative) can have populist tendencies, or be intensely populist, depending on a certain
discursive logic to appeal to their base and a certain leader capable of unifying many claims
and embodying them.

This “thick” reading seems to disprove my argument. Indeed, how are we to make sense
of anti-partisanship (as anti-party-ism) given the strong antagonistic impetus of the discursive
conception of populism? Yet the argument of antiestablishment I adopt is primed to show that
the driving logic of populism’s antagonism against the ruling elite is sustained by the
construction of a holistic people that can hardly preserve antagonism (although it might
profit from antagonism while in the opposition) and thus will certainly be in the interest of
the disempowered, and not simply a new elite ruling with an undivided consent. Laclau’s
theoretical efforts to marry populism with an idea of the people as made of the excluded part
in the demos (in the tradition of Jacques Rancière) is commendable and sincerely interested in reversing the transformation of representative government into an elected oligarchy. The question is that, in the political struggle that should bring about a populist transformation of democratic societies, the identity of “the populist ‘us’ remains conveniently vague,” because populism’s goal is to be as inclusive as possible in order to win a large majority and silence existing partisan divisions and established parties.

The implication of the strategic vagueness of Laclau’s discursive populism is fatally open to holism; or, to put it better, it is not sufficiently immune to reductionism to be able to halt the holistic logic contained in its project of constructing a hegemonic people in order to overcome conflicting groups and established elites (Arditi 2007, 65). Populist politics offers no guarantee that the incorporation of the largest people will translate into a deepening of political autonomy and will not generate instead a more centralized power, potentially authoritarian and intolerant of institutional checks and dissenting opinions. The sources of this structural vagueness (and strategic ambiguity) are easily detectable in the antiestablishment that populism unfurls.

5. The insufferable few

What makes the political elite so special and unbearable is the inescapable nature of its power. Corporate rule does not have the same fatal power as state rule – despotic as it might be (“a forgotten topic in democratic theory,” Ferrara and Landemore 2016, 53). Corporate domination is not all-inclusive but circumscribed to those who work for or operate in a corporate firm. While we can escape a corporate C.E.O.’s will or a super-wealthy individual’s domineering behavior, we cannot escape the state’s officers, whether elected or appointed. State power does not leave us any choice but to obey, as it impinges on all the subjects that live under its territorial jurisdiction. The democratic principle of universal (each and all) inclusion is intended so as to confer legitimacy on the state principle that all must be equally subjected to the law. Yet the tension between the democratic sovereign and the organization of the state – “the citizen” and “the subject,” to paraphrase Rousseau’s classical distinction – is never resolved, although regulated by and monitored through a constitution, periodic renewals of political personnel, and an open and pluralistic public sphere of opinion that inspects and criticizes. Institutional and procedural strategies are meant to impede the consolidation of the power of “the few” and to keep the tension between the rulers and their fellow citizens alive and robust. These several checks do not, however, change the nature of state power, nor are they completely intended for that aim (constitutional democracy presumes that conflict is the permanent condition of political liberty and participation, not an accident).

In addition, the exercise of power has been and is traditionally associated with pleasure, and a long and honorable crowd of critical theorists have depicted political elites as holding power with no other purpose than exercising it, for the pleasure of ruling. From Plato to Foucault, philosophers and social theorists have associated the idea of “controlling” and “manipulating” bodies and behavior – in whatever position of the chain of command an officer is positioned – with erotic pleasure that feeds itself with the experience of provoking and witnessing the distress caused by ruling in the subjected persons (Lukes 2005). The reputational factor and esprit de corps add to the self-perception of might in the political elite, whether elected or appointed. Even in governments based on the consent of the included, in which “the corporate will proper to the government should be very subordinate,” the relationship between citizens and their magistrates is stained with an unavoidable perception of arbitrariness because state “agents” develop unfailingly a sense of privilege as being “badly confused with the sovereign” of which they are instead “simply minister[s]” (Rousseau 1987, bk. 3, chap. 1). Finally, established politicians (even when voted on in free elections) earn their living...
by extracting resources from taxes without producing anything that can be truly accountable and materially quantifiable, an ambiguity that always leaves the represented with a suspect of arbitrariness. In their critique against party-cracy (partitocrazia in Italian and partidocracia in Spanish), populists of all wings stress the condition of privilege that a minority enjoys over and by pillaging the vast majority of the population. The accusation of representative democracy and the entire institutional and judiciary system of being a government by “powerful majorities” finds here its most radical source (Conaghan 2005, 30).

Particularly in times of economic and social duress, this anti-elite argument can blur traditional distinctions between left-wing and right-wing and easily unify laborists and neo-liberals under the capacious umbrella of populism. Productive Americans in the late nineteenth century and Reagan-inspired libertarians in the late twentieth century both legitimized anti-tax politics and rebellion against those who did not belong to the people and yet lived off of the people’s sweat and tears, “forces comprising most elected officials, public employers,” and their allies (Kazin 1995, 263). The early public blow of the Lega Nord against the Italian establishment in the 1980s materialized in a very popular (and populist) campaign for “tax disobedience” as a justified reaction against the caste in power (Tarchi 2002). The Mexican presidential campaign of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (or AMLO) in 2006 had its central theme in the opposition between corrupt state elites and the victimized and honest people:

What we have to therefore do is unite the people, this is the struggle of the whole people of Mexico to defend its interests, against a band that has perpetuated itself in power and has carried our country to ruin.

(Bruhn 2012, 92)

Power within political institutions (from local up to national) is the target of populism because it is the domain in which elites are experienced as inescapable and unwarranted; “ordinary citizens” have no choice but abiding (although contesting).

Two additional conditions add to the revulsion against the establishment. On the one hand, elites in power are susceptible to a mental disposition which is shared by the co-opted members of the higher strata of society and makes all of them appear as characterized by “blunted moral insensibility” (Mills 1956, 343). On the other hand, they do not seem to be adventurous or imaginative, but simply “mindless” and privileged instead (J.S. Mill invented the epithet pedantocracy to denote the class of state mandarins). The political establishment is made up of people that are more prone to mainstream strategies, since their main preoccupation is protecting their “status” and prolonging their permanence in power as much as possible (Ibid., 354). Co-optation of the social types to which common values lead propagates the formation of circles similar in kind, all of them united by tacit mutual support as “tie-ins.” “The power elite … also rests upon the similarity of its personnel, and their personal and official relations with one another, upon their social basis of the power elite’s unity,” define a clique, “not an aristocracy,” because they share not heredity or traditions but instead a common educational routine (they study in the same colleges, as Thomas Piketty has recorded recently in describing the new global wealthy oligarchy) and belong to closed circles (Mills 1956, 278). Elites combine – in Italy the populist catchword for them is “la casta,” a word that began to be used in the very years in which ideological partisanship started fading and political parties appeared to be all the same, sharing a preoccupation with positioning themselves in the mainstream to catch votes.

The populist accusation of the immorality of the few becomes alluring with both the decline of credibility in the intermediary associations and the dysfunction of checks and
balances at the social and institutional level. The former case pertains to the transformation of political parties, which Mair has characterized as a case of “cartel party democracy.” In Mair’s diagnosis, the crisis of trust in party democracy is not provoked but revealed and exploited by populism and points to the insider mentality which makes parties’ personnel projected toward mainstream platforms and policies for obvious reasons of electoral convenience. Party democracy replaced by “cartel party democracy” is in fact the early form of anti-partisanship and anti-party-ism, a “senile disease” of stable democracies that starts from within as a claim made in the interests of the general public (Revelli 2017). In this, party cartels are generative of populism, which completes the anti-partisan argument by ascribing to parties as such the main cause of violation of the general interest.

As to the dysfunction of the checks and balances at the institutional level, the liberal answer to the populist objection reveals itself to be meagre and ineffective when it insists on the formalistic trend that the ideology of a powerful elite is nonsense or simply the remnant of the tirannophobia which had accompanied the anti-aristocratic struggle in the age of constitutional revolutions. As the liberal argument goes, is it not the case that electoral lawmakers and appointed bureaucrats are “servants” of the state, that they do not “hold” power but exercise functions according to the will of the electors? Yet as we shall see below, consent makes electoral democracy but also makes the people never forget that the division between the rulers and the ruled is simply conventional and functional, not natural and never fully justified. The “virtually exclusive emphasis on the rule of law in public discourse” and the tendency of parties to dismiss the partisan habit by making political choices truly meaningless or indifferent is, Jan-Werner Müller writes, a bad defense of democracy (Müller 2016, 58–60).

The dysfunctional performance of the power-deflating strategies that modern democracy was able to activate proves once again that “immorality” is not what makes the elites a target of criticism. Indeed, although elites always existed, they started provoking antiestablishment arguments only when political institutions started to be given legitimacy by elections. Representative government itself was born of the claim that the people were the only force of political legitimacy and control. Today, the populist attack goes back to the “purity” of the people and opposes it to both the representative claim of the elected and the constitutional claim of the containing power of checks and balances (Papadopoulos 2002, 54–55). When elites merge, containing their power becomes difficult.

Yet populists do not question the distinction between the ruling class and the people, and thus do not in this sense, at least, repeat the democratic critique. What they contest is the structure of electoral representation because it prevents the embodiment of the ordinary many under a representative leader, like a tribune, who can speak for them and only for them, and use the strength of their support to achieve power and overturn the few. Their criticism of the immorality of the establishment is thus a criticism that points directly to the heart of representative democracy as responsible not simply, as the democratic critique would have it, for keeping power from circulating and consolidating the separation between the many and the few, but for structuring the people as a plurality of conflicting interests that blocks their merging into a unity against the opposite unity, the few.

6. Populism’s antiestablishment

To show in a snapshot what political elites are and do, in his classic book on The Power Elite, C. Wright Mills went back to Jacob Burckhardt: “They are all that we are not” because they have power that “we” don’t have (Mills 1956, 3). It is what they “can” do
more than even what they actually “do” that gives the establishment an impure status or makes them seem “immoral.” In fact, according to Mills, political elites are marked as immoral because their closeness to power exposes them naturally to corruption. Mills proved this character attribution of potential for corruption in reverse, by describing the strategy the elite and their entourage employ to defend themselves from the popular criticism of their immorality: they claim they are rather “impotent” because “scattered” and lacking “any coherence.” In order to shield themselves from the accusation of immorality they claim a division in their midst – which means that precisely their power as a political group is the object of criticism, more than what they actually do. The elites may have different party affiliations, yet all of them operate within the institutions and share the same desire of preserving their role. Divisions within the establishment seems to be only apparent, and even the institutional checks they refer to are not entirely capable of containing their power. The “thin” ideology of morality ascribed to populism conceals a “thick” ideology that goes to the fonts of power.

If the antagonism against the few looks like a moral issue, it is because populism does not claim the political priority of the will of the people over and against the will of the elites – it does not claim that it is direct democracy or the elimination of the division between “inside” and “outside.” Rather, populism claims the moral priority of the people over and against some of its parts and wants the people as the large majority to be the only source of the representative claim, because the only legitimate part. This claim does not fit the kind of competition for power that mobilizes traditional parties because it denotes a fight for power that requires a new kind of party and a new kind of representation, which must not be fragmented in order to be strong enough to oppose the clique of the established elite. The representative, Laclau writes, must be an active agent who gives words and credibility to the represented unity, who is the actor of the homogenizing process that puts an end to the divisions of the electorate (Laclau 2005, 157–158). Populism’s antiestablishment amounts to a call for substitution of the wrong people (“inauthentic” as the “few” are) with the right people (the only “authentic” people, in fact) and this can be done only if representation changes into an act of faith and emotional identification with no question of accountability, which would dilacerate the body politics with conflicting requests and claims. Clearly, this is not a revolutionary call or a call for sovereignty (or a new form of government), and is not even a call for direct rule by the moral people (or non-representative government). It is a call for a change of the elite in power and a new form of representation as embodiment.

In what sense does the populist division prefigure an ideology of “morality”? How can morality be given the power of a political argument against a vertical political division between the “few” and the “many”? In fact, if ordinary people are “pure,” is it because they possess an endogenous quality of purity, or because they do not hold what could ruin them (as it could ruin anyone), namely political power? The answer I propose is that if “morality” or “purity” is so radical it is because it comes from an exceptionally radical political argument – the assumption that purity follows from the lack of political power. Since the people are pure because they do not exercise political power directly, the populist criticism of the establishment is radical and irredeemable because is made from a point of view that is external (to power), and based on this externality it construes its adversary.

We encounter here another source of populism’s ambiguous relationship to democracy. Indeed, democracy does not claim that power corrupts, but that if the citizens exercise and control it, power can be the condition for personal and political liberty and non-subjection. The democratic people claims kratos, and this claim can be strengthened by keeping the gates to the exercise of power always open, making power circulate, preventing its entrenchment.
anywhere. These are the normative conditions that make for a democratic community, not a pre-defined dualism between those who preserve themselves pure of corruption because they do not hold power directly and those who are impure because they hold power and become corrupt. This dualism reveals once again the oblique relationship of populism to democracy.

The representative system facilitates, of course, both the dualism between inside and outside, and the populist cry against it. As said, elections seem to construct power holders as an homogenous group (Mills 1956, 18–19). The articulation of the representative assembly through parties and partisan affiliations — the pluralization of leaders, as we shall soon show — is meant precisely to break that institutional homogeneity and activate the kind of pluralism of opinions and disagreement that exist in society. Not by chance does the attack of populism against political representation converge on an attack against multiparty-ism and the partisan divisions in the lawmaking institution that elections generate. The construction of the populist party and the transformation of elections into a kind of plebiscite that celebrates the victory of the true people through its leader are populism’s answer to this problem: “A vision of ‘the people’ as a united body implies impatience with party strife, and can encourage support for strong leadership where a charismatic individual is available to personify the interests of the nation” (Canovan 1999, 5).

Some additional observations are needed to complete the illustration of the populist argument of antiestablishment. “The unity of the power elite” and its opposite (the unity of the people in power) is the spirit of the populist antiestablishment; this trope seems to take us back to Marx’s dialectics, according to which the unification of the two classes that capitalism creates simplifies the struggle and makes it easier for the anti-capitalist class to recognize its enemy and give a revolutionary twist to its struggle. But although structurally similar, the analogy between class struggle and populist struggle is implausible, because to Marx the power springing from the dualism between “the haves” and the “have-nots” derives from the economic structure of society, which is not politically and ideologically constructed. Unlike the socialists’ critique, the populists’ assault on the elites does not grow on the terrain of classes and economic relations but on the terrain of politics, in relation to which, however, populists do not follow the democrats either, as they do not base their critique on the norm of openness, but on a structural dualism between those who rule and those who are ruled, or the establishment and all the others.

The “thin” ideology of morality exposes populism to an unavoidable tension that it cannot itself explain, because it is too oblivious of the way in which populism thinks of and ultimately uses institutions and procedures. Moreover, while it can make sense of populism as a movement of opposition, it cannot explain how populism can avoid becoming itself subjected to the critique of immorality when and if in power. The “thin” ideology argument cannot help us understand the fatal temptations awaiting populist leaders in their effort not to fall into the trap of impurity like any other established elites.

The temptations that populist leaders face are twofold; the first more benign than the second. On the one hand, the leader may try to be and remain in permanent electoral campaign while in power, so as to reaffirm his identification with the people by making the audience believe he is waging a titanica battle against the entrenched establishment in order to preserve his purity (“Chávez spent more than 1,500 hours denouncing capitalism on Alo Presidente, his own TV show”; Berlusconi was for years a daily attraction on both state and his private national television stations; Trump is on Twitter night and day). On the other hand, the leader may want to change the rules and the existing constitution in order to strengthen his decision-making power by weakening institutional checks and humiliating the opposition, when recalcitrant and not tamed. The construction of a more inclusive sovereign
and the injection of more mobilization from below, which the former two strategies import, are not necessarily democracy-friendly and in fact can come at the expense of democracy (Roberts 2012, 153).

Although the outcomes of these temptations of the populist leader in power are different, they both show a grave disfigurement of democratic procedures. Valuing democratic procedures, it implies understanding them neither as optional rules to be possessed by the winner nor as “merely” formal stipulations. Take, for instance, elections – they are a procedure that makes the players while it regulates their game, in the sense that groups and the citizens that participate in the game of elections conceive and structure both their language and their behavior so that they always respect their adversaries, both when they compete and once everybody knows and accepts the outcome of the competition; this behavior is paramount and makes us understand in what sense elections are co-essential to democracy, not a mere formality (Bobbio 1987, 65–67). The same can be said of the conclusion of an electoral campaign – the end of the campaign can of course be procrastinated ad libitum because the winner can use the permanent mobilization of propaganda and the media to daily reinforce his support by the audience; although this endless campaigning does not violate the electoral term, it induces the majority to think (and make all people think) that its numerical victory is not strong or legitimizing enough; thus it entails quite explicitly that the actors play the democratic game while not truly accepting it. The populist ideology of antiestablishment, although framed as a “thin” moral distinction between the corrupt few and the moral people, is capable of injecting or promoting a series of actions and shaping public behavior and language in such a way that its impact on democratic institutions can be far from innocuous; what seems to be “thin” turns out to be very “thick.”

7. Antiestablishment is democratic

Criticism of elites is a consistent manifestation of the egalitarian spirit of democracy. In his *The Power Elite*, Mills argued that elites’ “structural immorality” is not simply a matter of denoting some corrupt men of power, but a feature connecting rich and powerful people to the state’s powers. The political elite has the power to connect the various social elites: this is what makes the democratic people feel excluded and subjected to the insufferable burden of the few. Criticism of the elites was at the very origin of the transformations of representative government throughout its history – as shown by Bernard Manin, party democracy was also born out of an antiestablishment cry against liberal parliamentarianism and its government by notables. Clearly, the interpretation of democracy is key to understanding the place of antiestablishment in democracy (and populism). The issue is that not all democratic arguments (and theories) are equally equipped to deal with the populist claim of antiestablishment. This is a serious problem and shows how populism compels us to reflect critically upon the interpretation of democracy we refer to when we want to answer the populist challenge effectively. Let us clarify briefly the main normative arguments that democratic theory offers against the establishment, two in particular which are represented by Robert Dahl and Hans Kelsen.

Robert Dahl started the famous chapter 8 of his *Democracy and Its Critics* (1989) with this quote from Aristotle: “In democratic states, ‘the people’ is sovereign; in oligarchies, on the other hand, the few have the position.” From Aristotle’s definition Dahl derived “the assumptions” of the democratic ideal: effective participation, voting equality at the decisive stage, enlightened understanding, control of the agenda. At the bottom of these “ideal
assumptions” he put equal political opportunity by citizens to participate and act in the public domain: this is the radical antiestablishment clause contained in the democratic ideal. Recollecting Mills’ sociological analysis, it is possible to say that to Dahl, it is not the elites per se that are the problem of democracy, but their links to those who hold political power and consolidate and expand the separation between the “inside” and the “outside” of state institutions so as to construct two peoples. The fact is that, however, the radical leaderless assumption of Dahl’s ideal democracy can hardly match democracy’s practice, which cannot avoid leaders. Because of its divide between the level of “assumptions” and the level of “practice,” Dahl’s approach seems to be weak in facing populism, which is itself structurally based on a dualist frame.

As Margaret Canovan clarified some years ago, the populist project of bringing politics to the people and the people to politics is meant precisely so as to overcome the dualism between “ideal” and “real” democracy and in this way “purify politics” of the politicians who exercise it (Canovan 2002). The divide between ideal and real in democratic theory is, as we can see, like oxygen to populism. Hence, Dahl’s dualism – “the assumptions” of democracy and “the reality” of polyarchy – does not offer a sufficiently robust safety net against populism, which can insinuate itself in between those two halves and claim that what is portrayed as “ideal theory” is in fact an ideology covering “the fact” that power is in the hands of an elite. I argue that Hans Kelsen’s theory offers us a better argument in this respect, as it shows how the antiestablishment is ingrained in the very “practice” of democracy; yet to make this claim strong Kelsen had to question the dualism between ideal and real.

At first, Kelsen acknowledged that leadership “has no place in ideal democracy,” but then he went straight to the question of “how the leader is chosen,” which is the issue to which Kelsen suggested we should turn if we want to discover “the reality’s own significance and regulative principles” of democracy (Kelsen 2013, 88). Thus, rather than starting with the assumption of a dualism of ideal and real, Kelsen proposes we seek the principles within the practice and the process that democracy provokes. It is this radical immanent conception of political procedures that can better assist us in resisting the populist reason of antiestablishment.

The process that the democratic practice promotes is not that of not making a place for leadership but that of fragmenting leadership – this is the condition that makes vote counting and majority rule co-essentials to democracy; this is also the condition that makes representation a politics of pluralism and the lawmaking assembly a non-unanimity assembly.

This means that the creation of many leaders becomes the central problem for real democracy, which – in contrast to its ideology [the ideal theory as separated from reality] – is not a leaderless society. It is not the lack, but the abundance of leaders that in reality differentiates democracy from autocracy. Thus, a special method for the selection of leaders from the community of subjects becomes essential to the very nature of real democracy. This method is election.

(Kelsen 2013, 91)

We cannot here analyze the issue of elections as the site of a radical difference between democracy and populism; suffice it to observe that in Kelsen’s reading, the unification of all the people and the citizenry under one leader is external to democracy’s spirit even if the method to reach that unification (plebiscite) may be democratic. This means, in addition, that representation alone – or representation that does not pass through the pluralizing method of elections but claims to achieve legitimacy by the audience directly – is not a sufficient condition for democracy, and in fact can also be used by autocratic leaders, as history also shows.
What cannot be used by an autocratic leader are two things: (a) the logic of election (more than elections per se), which presumes that all political decisions are always revocable and no winner is a special kind of leader, but simply the leader who has received more votes; and (b) the fact that lawmaking is “many-headed” and the political area pluralistic. One might say that fragmentation of leadership is the most peculiar character of democracy, which is a process of power diffusion even in the moment it makes possible the selection of the decision-makers.

Of course the idea of leadership becomes obscured by the fact that the executive must be thought of as subordinate to a parliament with several hundred members; the power to rule shifts from a single leader to a multitude of persons, among whom the function of leadership, that is, of the creation of the ruling will, is divided. (Ibid., 91)

Keeping the political space open to the circulation of leadership, and fragmenting and diffusing power, are the answers that democracy (in theory and in practice) offers to the threat of elitism. Moreover, they are the answers to the populist strategy of splitting the citizenry into two structurally pre-defined entities: the establishment inside and the people outside. Against this “static power relation” that presumes an ex ante division between the rulers few and the ruled many (common to both autocracy and populism) but also against the split between “real” and “ideal,” democracy is “marked by a constant upward flow that moves from the community of subjects to the leadership positions” in state functions (Ibid., 93–94). The openness and the horizontal and vertical communicative current between civil and political society are the better arguments to prove that antiestablishment is democratic as is incorporated in the very practice (not only theory) of democracy.

The implications of this anti-dualist model of democracy are enormous and apply also to representative government, which is another object of contestation by populists and among political theorists as well. Indeed, in what is today a widely accepted “realist” or “minimalist” conception, modern democracy is deemed to be not a form of democracy at all but a mixed regime instead – in this sense, as the American federalists (Federalist no. 10) argued early on, it is a republic and not a democracy, because it rests on a compromise between the common people and the elite, not on a unified polity of equals in power that rotate at the most or select some of them for short tenures. Rather than neutralizing the establishment, according to this interpretation, representative government seems to be a compromise between the establishment and the ruled, which elections seal and formalize but do not properly produce. As we can observe, these two parts are already defined as structural components of representative politics. This reading is utterly non-democratic, as it assumes a foundational dualism that will never be solved through political competition, which more than a competition is in fact a bargaining between the few and the many for containing and promoting each other’s claims. Competition seems to occur only among the few anyway, with the people playing the external role of assenting or refusing, precisely as in audience democracy (Urbinati 2014, chap. 4).

Populism can find itself wholly at home with this dualist model, which seems to be confirmation that representative democracy is at best an oxymoron, and at worst an ideological patina covering a reality that is exclusionary (elections as a method for expelling the people from power) and elitist (representation as the selection of those who are better equipped to rule). What is missing in this dualist model is the awareness that in a democracy (whether indirect or direct) the distinction between the many and the few rests on a
foundational lack of “natural power holders” and an artificiality that makes that division not only conventional but also never fully acceptable and stable (which proves its conventionality and the fact that it derives from a conception of political equality) (Näsström 2015, 2).

What interests us is here, however, is to observe that these dualistic models of democracy and representative government unwillingly serve the logic of populism. Indeed, all populists would be ready to concede that Dahl is right in defining the ideal “assumptions” of democracy, but then they would (like all Schumpeterians do) turn to Robert Michels or Carl Schmitt, the authors who advanced the most realistic perspective of politics as a struggle between polarized and homogenous entities, like the elites and the masses. This double track indicates that the debate over the meaning of populism is in effect a debate over the interpretation of democracy. The actors of democracy and democracy’s normative foundation are the individual citizens, neither the few nor the many, although this distinction is produced by the state organization of political power and although citizens organize and tend to create leaders when acting politically.

To be sure, the democratic process lives out of a permanent tension, because the elite tend to combine and “naturalize” themselves as not merely political; this makes the people “outside” feel and sometimes become a unity of “naturally” excluded. Yet it is the all-inclusive nature of democracy, the indeterminacy of its people and the potential for the formation of numerous leaders that make the elite in power always unbearable, but also always unstable and temporary – this is so because in a democracy, power is not “something” to be owned but is an activity that originates in a public space that is open to the participation and representation of and by free and equal citizens (Ochoa 2015). This means that the political elite is a scandal when and if it coalesces with social elites and together make the divide that opposes them to ordinary people a dense reality that obstructs that openness and makes the democratic rules void and a sophistry.

This also explains the reason why millionaires may not be a scandal to populism – indeed, it is not elites per se that trouble it, as we said above. What troubles populism (and democracy) is the elite that acquires the power to make laws and decisions that all must obey. This makes us understand also why populism is not classist and not even anti-capitalist, although it advocates for the inclusion of the socially weakest (this can actually be a political strategy for neo-liberal elites to attract consent from the lower strata of the population, as in the case of Berlusconi, Fujimori and Trump). Democracy and populism mistrust the power of the elite.

But differences soon arise because while populism shares with democracy the antiestablishment argument, it develops this argument from premises and in a direction that are structurally dualistic and not truly consistent with the all-inclusive norm and openness of democratic action. To repeat one last time, a dualist conception of democracy makes populism’s dualist argument plausible because it allows a vision of representative government as a “historical compromise between the common people and the elite” – in both cases, the establishment is a naturalized fact because the people do not rule themselves directly (Näsström 2015, 2). The paradox of a dualistic approach to democracy is that it sponsors an outcome that makes populism de facto the hegemon of the antiestablishment argument because a critique of the representative model, which is responsible for instituting “two peoples.” With the tale of the two peoples, populism ends up playing the democratic game of elites’ contestation and embodying political democratic action at its best.

The equation of populism with political action and the antiestablishment has found large support in recent years and months. Particularly after the referendum on Brexit (June 13th, 2016), politicians and opinion makers have tended to list as populist all movements of

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opposition, from xenophobic nationalists to critics of neo-liberal policies, as if populists were potentially all those who do not rule and oppose the rulers, regardless of the reasons why and in the name of which principles criticisms are made. The side effect of this approach is to make politics consist of either managing the institutions or populism, with the result of making populism essentially the name of a politics of opposition and democratic politics essentially an issue of governability. In a conception of representative democracy as a compromise between oligarchy and democracy, the populist argument is the only democratic game in town (Riker 1982).

8. Democracy’s diarchy

Populism pertains to the interpretation of modern democracy, which is a complex form of politics, institutional and extra-institutional together. Particularly in its representative form (within which populism emerges), it is a diarchy of decision-making and opinion-forming in which the practices of monitoring, contesting and changing decisions play a role that is no less essential than that of the procedures and institutions for making and implementing decisions. Democracy is the name of both an institutional order and the way citizens act politically or participate in a broad sense in the public life of their country. As structurally never accomplished, because a process through which free and diverse citizens pursue plans that can and predictably are different and even contrasting, democracy denotes political autonomy as liberty from subjection and of dissent. Even before autonomy came to be associated with fundamental rights, the argument supporting it was conceived as an argument that reclaimed equality in power and an equal consideration by the law; this claim can be used to justify acts of public resistance and opposition, verbal and at times even violent, against those who disrupted it from within. Since its ancient origins, democracy has been a call and a practice of liberty because and insofar it has been a claim of political equality and freedom of dissent (Ober 2017).

I have elsewhere demonstrated that the democratic diarchy of decision and judgment is particularly important in representative democracy, which pivots on a structural tension between actuated politics and actuating politics but never an entrenched dualism between the few ruling and the many ruled. The political conception of representation claims that in a government that derives its legitimacy from free and regular elections, the activation of a communicative current between civil and political society is essential and constitutive, not just unavoidable. The generality of the law and the standards of impartiality implied by citizenship (erga omnes criterion of legality) need not be achieved at the expense of the political visibility of “social” identities as distinct from, and opposed to, “political” identity (Urbinati 2006, chap. 1). The multiple sources of information and the varied forms of communication and influence that citizens activate through media, social movements and political parties set the tone of visibility by making the social political – which is what the process of representation does. These are the constitutive components of representative democracy, not accessories, although they do not have a direct translation into laws or decisions. Immediate physical presence (the right to vote) and a mediated idealized presence (the right to free speech and free association) are inextricably intertwined in a society that is itself a living confutation of the dualism between the “inside” and the “outside” since all presence is an artifact of performative speech and circulates through the entire society and the state.

It is interesting to observe that in the charter that historians consider to be the first document of the democracy of the moderns, The Agreement of the People (1649), the Puritans listed at the same time their democratic desiderata (individual suffrage and electoral representation) and their potential deviations and perversions, as if they wanted to alert their fellow
citizens to never think that having a government legitimated by their explicit and electoral consent guaranteed they enjoyed secure political liberty. That mistrust in power holders was not amended with written constitutions, which have been and are a confirmation of the fact that contestation of power holders and of their decisions is endogenous to democracy, not an accident and not even a sign of dysfunction. The non-coincidence between institutions (state) and democracy has been the most robust thread that has bound together the political history of democratization, so that it is not unreasonable to think of representative democracy as a political order that is based on a permanent disagreement between legitimacy and trust, decision and judgment.

Democracy thus includes the habit and thought of the antiestablishment and this reminds us of the fact that it is “government by public discussion, not simply enforcement of the will of the majority” (Holmes 1988, 233). Antiestablishment is ingrained in the democratic procedures that structure politics as contestation and discussion in view of decisions. Kelsen situated here the worth of the dialectic between majority and opposition, which, he explains, proves that democracy is not identifiable with unanimity because it presumes dissent and the coming to decisions in a process of deliberation that includes dissent, which is never expelled or repressed, even when citizens’ preferences converge on a different result or a majority decision. The central role that Kelsen accorded to compromise has its root here because the dissenters, when they accept to obey the decisions passed by majority, make the first and most fundamental compromise – suspension of their resistance and acceptance of compliance without feeling arbitrarily subjected – without which no political community of free and equal members in power would be possible (Kelsen 2013, chap. 6).

This entails that counting votes in order to achieve a majority decision presumes an antiestablishment habit of judgment on the part of the citizens, the idea that an opposition is possible and legitimate, that it exists and will permanently exist so as to remind the majority that its majority is temporary and never well-established. The permanence of any victories would erase the majority/minority dialectics and democracy itself. Thus antiestablishment is a constitutive quality of democracy, not a sign of crisis or weakness. A minority that would know ex ante that it would never have the chance to become the majority would not be a democratic opposition or minority; it would consist instead of the few subjected to or dominated by the rulers. The opposition needs to conceive itself and be conceived by the majority as a legitimate antiestablishment in order to be democratic and not a subjected victim or a subversive force of destabilization always ready to rebel. The opposition needs to have an attitude (and habit of the mind) toward acting in view of dethroning the majority – democracy would be inconceivable otherwise.

In sum, antiestablishment does not belong to populism but is a category populism shares with democracy itself. What makes the populist version of antiestablishment distinctive (and different from democracy’s) is the way in which it is constructed, namely the binary assumption that breaks politics and its actors into two, depending on the position they occupy in relation to state power. Whereas democracy derives antiestablishment from its permanent majority/minority dialectics, populism derives it from pre-defined polarized groupings and enmity.

Democracy and populism thus prefigure two conceptions of representative government, so that if the latter were to be actualized and it would put the democratic permanence of antiestablishment in jeopardy. The reason for that lies in the populist interpretation of authority as a synonym of “possession” (by a group against another or meretricity) and, as said at the beginning, of factional politics (merelatria or the worshipping of a part). Yet authority is the condition of power itself, and none of those who exercise its functions possesses it,
certainly not an elected majority and not even a leader whom a majority choose to be representative of the supposed “good” people against the supposed “bad” people. Authority derived from the people and owned by nobody is democracy’s combination of “two contradictory principles” that populism wants to sever in assuming ex ante their entrenched existence as identified with two antithetical groups. Yet modern democracy, Claude Lefort wrote, was “born from the collective shared discovery that power does not belong to anyone, that those who exercise it do not incarnate it, that they are only the temporary trustees of public authority” (Lefort 1999, 114).

9. Conclusion

The inspection of populism’s antiestablishment suggests two sets of arguments: (a) if anti-elitism makes populism an always growing possibility in democracy, it is because democracy is endogenously rooted in an antiestablishment spirit that keeps the political game between majority and opposition alive – this means that populism can hardly claim originality on the issue of antiestablishment; and yet (b) antiestablishment is the key that connects populism to a specific form of representation and proves that it does not exclude all elites but wants to institute a different kind of elite. Populism can hardly claim originality as to the antiestablishment argument; in fact, it does not propose solutions that are primed to overturn representative government altogether. Hence, the kind of antiestablishment it plans, and what makes it in theory capable of destabilizing democracy, is anti-party and anti-partisanship. Populism is a revolt against a pluralist structure of party-relations in the name not of no-party or a “partyless democracy,” but of the power of “the part” that populism declares to be superior or that deserves supremacy because it is the “good” part. This makes populism a form of factionalism that collides fatally with constitutional democracy, even if its main tenets are embedded in the democratic universe of meanings and language. Thus, although read as a “symptom” of political discontent in established democracies, populism can hardly be seen as a “cure,” because if successful it would inject transformations that could be fatal to democracy and the civil rights that are essential to democratic politics.

Notes

1 As I have argued elsewhere, to study populism, we have first of all to distinguish between populism as a movement (of protest and opposition) and populism as a ruling power, a distinction that still escapes many scholars today. These two forms have not always gone hand in hand: for instance, there are popular movements (like Occupy Wall Street or the Indignados) that were and wanted to remain movements of protest, but there are populist parties that organize themselves in view of conquering state power (Urbinati 2014, chap. 3).
2 Wolfram Nordsieck writes that populist parties are part of the right-wing political spectrum as “protest parties that appeal to the fears and frustrations of the public”; cited in Archibugi and Cellini (2017).
3 A synthesis and overview of the “anti-party system” mode is in Invernizzi Accetti and Bickerton (2016).
4 I thank David Ragazzoni for suggesting that I read the issue of anti-party-ism within the subtler category of “merocracy,” an English translation provided by Roger Griffin of Bobbio’s “merocrazia.”
6 The emancipation of political parties from pestilential factions is the object of a long story and the source of the construction of representative government; an overview of this complex trajectory can be found in Rosenblum (2008), and also in Gregorio (2013).
7 The adjectives “pure” and “impure,” connected to the “outside” and the “inside” of state power, have been explained by Mudde (2004).
8 In his last speech at the Convention on July 26, 1794, the day before his arrest and two days before his execution, Maximilien Robespierre spoke of the people, betrayed by its false friends, as the true
“faction” – “You, the people – our principles – are that faction! A faction to which I am devoted, and against which all the scoundrelism of the day is banded” (Robespierre 2017).
9 Meanwhile Chavez “attacked the Internet as ‘a battle trench’ that was bringing ‘a current of conspiracy’” (Morozov 2011, 113).
10 “corporate rich, as a capitalist stratum, deeply intertwined with the politics of the military state” (Mills 1956, 343).

References


