

3

Politics against Democracy: Party Withdrawal and Populist Breakthrough

Alfio Mastropalo

Two questions

Strange things have been happening in Western Europe. In fact, they have been happening to such an extent that to term them 'strange' is perhaps inaccurate. They have even been happening in the continent's oldest democracy where, as the local elections of May 2006 reminded us, there exists a party, the British National Party (BNP), which promotes racial hatred, demands draconian punishments for crime and loudly condemns the misdeeds of the political class. Of course, as Stefano Fella's chapter in this volume explains, the British electoral system makes it extremely difficult for the BNP to win seats in parliament. However, this does not mean that sooner or later a more conventional party in search of extra votes is not going to borrow from the rhetoric and themes which have clearly helped the BNP. In fact, if we look at the 2005 general election campaigns of both Labour and the Conservatives, we can see that this has already happened to some degree as regards issues like immigration and security. Moreover, at the 2004 European Parliament elections, the fiercely anti-European, welfare chauvinist and anti-Establishment UK Independence Party (UKIP) obtained a stunning result, gaining 16.1 per cent and 12 seats.

No less surprising is what has been happening in Italy over the last fifteen years, where three highly unconventional parties account for approximately half of the vote. There can be little room for doubt about classifying a racist, ethno-regionalist and openly anti-political party such as the *Legga Nord* in this manner. Nor should we underestimate the credentials of *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN). Notwithstanding its public declarations of respect for the rules and standards of liberal democracy, the party remains the legitimate political descendant of the post-Fascist *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI) whose old symbol – the tricolour flame burning on Mussolini's coffin – sits proudly at the centre of the AN logo. Furthermore, on sensitive topics like

immigration and security, the new party proposes measures which are incongruent with democratic norms. More complex is the case of *Forza Italia* (FI) which is a member of the European People's Party and which, in a careful division of labour, tends to leave racist rhetoric to its two above-mentioned junior partners. Nonetheless, in addition to its ambiguous position on Europe and marked anti-Islamic stance, FI also viscerally opposes what it condemns as old, professional politics and is highly intolerant of liberal democratic principles and rules.

To what species do parties like these belong? And to what species do the Norwegian Progress Party, the Danish People's Party, the Belgian *Vlaams Blok* (now *Vlaams Belang*), and the *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* in Holland belong? How should we view those heirs of Fascism which have emerged from complex recycling processes such as the *Front National* in France, the *Republikaner* in Germany, and the BNP in Britain? And what should we make of those movements such as the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) or the Swiss People's Party (SVP/UDC) which at earlier points in their histories were far more moderate? It is particularly difficult to catalogue these parties within a single political family and, consequently, there has been much disagreement on which label should be used to describe them. In particular, what we have lacked is a convincing theory explaining their success. This chapter will seek to tackle these two questions. In doing so, it will put forward two theses. First, it will argue that what these parties have in common is that they embody the divorce of democracy from politics. Second, it will show that what stand out among the reasons behind their success are the profound changes which have occurred in democratic theory and practice.

In the next two sections, we will discuss the terms currently used to catalogue these parties. Labels are not neutral and each reflects a theory on the actors to which it is applied. The remainder of the chapter will examine the factors which have allowed populist parties to take root and will call into question the explanations most frequently offered. As we will see, while these tend to focus on social, economic and cultural transformations, they overlook the transformations in political theory and practice which have affected advanced democracies.

Labels

There are three main labels used to classify these parties. The first is that of 'extreme right' which has been adopted by various scholars (Ignazi, 2003; Eatwell and Mudde, 2004; Carter, 2005). The use of 'extreme right' in these cases, however, seems to be straining a category invented to designate parties which embraced violence, a hierarchical conception of society and the idea that all spheres of collective and individual life should be subordinate to the state. A less coloured label is that of 'radical right' (Kitschelt and McGann, 1995), which is often combined with others to create cocktails

such as 'radical right-wing populist' (Betz, 1994). This brings us to the third label, which is that of 'populist' (Mény and Surel, 2000; Taggart, 2000; Panizza, 2005), a label which seeks to capture the ambiguous nature of these actors. This relates first of all to their political discourses which are often racist, intolerant, anti-political and delivered in violent and vulgar tones. Second, it highlights the exaltation in these discourses of the people as a single, united entity, with any internal divisions characterized as artificial and false. Third, although it acknowledges the paradoxical use they make of democracy and their clear aversion to official politics – demonstrated by their self-promotion as champions of the people against the Establishment.

While, as the editors of this volume explain in the introduction, 'populism' has often been used, and misused, in vague ways (see also Collovald, 2004) and as a receptacle for new phenomena which are difficult to classify, the inflationary spiral affecting the term does not exclude a more sober use (for example, Canovan, 1981). Aside from its application to cases in Russia and the United States in the nineteenth century, until recently when we spoke of populism, we tended to think first of all of South America and the vast range of movements there which disdained class warfare, but acted in the name of the people and advocated the social and political integration of the poorest members of society (Germani, 1978). Still today, populism reappears in South America from time to time, most recently in Venezuela with Hugo Chávez and in Bolivia with Evo Morales. Characterized by the Pentagon as 'radical' populists, dangerous for democracy and comparable to Fidel Castro, these leaders have relaunched some of the themes and aspects of the political styles which were the hallmarks of Juan Perón and Getúlio Vargas such as personalized leadership, the absence of ideology, plebiscitary ceremonies, visceral opposition to elites (also at international level), redistributive paternalism and so on.

However, what do these manifestations of populism have in common with those such as the *Front National*, the *Legia Nord* and the Danish People's Party which have appeared in recent decades in established Western European democracies? If we leave to one side the rhetoric about 'the people', what else does the label 'populism' indicate? In fact, if we look at the trajectory of populist parties in Western Europe, we find few similarities with their purported South American relatives. They have different histories and different types of public. Even if both speak of 'the people', they do not do so in the same manner. Indeed, when the new populist vanguard appeared in Scandinavia at the end of the 1960s, the main issue it raised – in the name of the people – was that of welfare waste in order to attract the attention of the middle classes. It was a type of protest in many ways symmetrical with that of the movements of the New Left in the late 1960s which, rather than focusing on 'the people', preferred to juxtapose the authoritarian and oppressive paternalism of institutions – the state, parties, trade unions, the

family, the Church and so on – with the virtuous and democratic spontaneity of civil society.

The symmetry between the two phenomena, however distant they may seem, should not be discounted. Both fiercely attacked the post-war consensus which linked parties of Left and Right and both helped thicken the atmosphere of mistrust surrounding politics which continues to afflict Western democracies. As far as populist parties are concerned, the *petite bourgeoisie* would remain their target audience until the 1980s and the advent of two important newcomers of neo-Fascist extraction: the *Front National* and the *Vlaams Blok*. What is evident is that the common denominator of these parties is not integration – as was the case, albeit in quite idiosyncratic ways, of South American populism – but exclusion. Moreover, since they do not express protest through the use of physical violence as Fascist-inspired movements traditionally did, but through verbal violence (occasionally tempered in electoral programmes), they are thus able to claim that they formally respect democratic procedures.

Antipolitics and identitarian democracy

It is perhaps this aspect of the relationship to democracy which, more than any other, the label 'populist' seeks to capture. Rather than elements which are not shared by all populists such as racism, nationalist fervour, or zero tolerance crime policies – albeit common to those of the radical Right – what links these actors is their paradoxical relationship with democracy. Populist parties are, in fact, not at all 'anti-system' in the sense of the term intended by Giovanni Sartori (1976: 132–133). They do not promote values which are extraneous to the system (and, as a result, they are sometimes suspected of paying mere lip service to the rules). What populists propose to establish is not a new political or economic order. On the contrary, they present themselves as parties which will restore an order that, in their discourse at least, existed in the past and which the errors and misdeeds of the political class, trade unions, public bureaucrats, big business and high finance have disrupted. To this end, they respect democratic rules and principles while, at the same time, reinterpreting and distorting them. There are three elements of democracy which they find particularly intolerable:

- (1) basic individual rights;
- (2) minority rights;
- (3) politics in general, which in Western culture is synonymous with the defence of pluralism.

In opposition to these elements, populists put forward an all-absorbing and organic idea of the people which renders the principle of majority rule sacrosanct and absolute.

We can see the scant regard of populists for the rules of democracy first of all in their anti-political discourses. Although it boasts ancient ancestors, anti-politics is one of the most peculiar phenomena of contemporary politics, along with being an inexhaustible source of confusion both in public discourse and academic studies. If we try to disentangle its various strands, we can distinguish at least two principal variants: anti-politics 'from below' and 'from above' (Metz, 2005). We can ascribe to the first group the vast and differentiated range of belief and actions which are indifferent to, critical of, or protesting against politics. These extend from the lack of public confidence highlighted by numerous surveys, electoral abstentionism and volatility, to the rise in the vote for non-conventional parties and support for various types of movements such as those grouped together under the umbrella headings of no-global, pacifist and environmentalist.

Within the second group of anti-politics 'from above', we can place actors from a wide array of backgrounds including those outside the political system, those eager to enter it and even those who are inside the system, but who wish to rejuvenate grey public images and/or denigrate their rivals. There are many variants of anti-political discourse, but in recent years three have been most prominent. The first is the animately and deliberately contentious one of populist parties, which only superficially resembles that employed by collective movements. While both conceive of official politics as ill for populists it is intrinsically so. Hence they claim that it produces useless divisions and should therefore be taken away from its traditional protagonists – the parties – and given back to the sovereign people and their leader. For the movements, free from the type of anti-pluralist outlook common to populists, politics only needs to be renewed by removing it from the grip of its self-referential official leaders and by stimulating activism by citizens and civil society. There is also a third, very frequent, variant which is close to neoliberal orthodoxy and which holds that it is the partisan aspect to politics that is overblown and inefficient and needs therefore to be scaled down in favour of a greater role for markets, independent agencies and experts (Schedler, 1997).

While there are many anti-political discourses in circulation, some of which are shared by conventional political actors, the specificity of populist parties lies in their paradoxical democratic fundamentalism. They scorn not only official politics and its institutions – parties, parliament, trade unions and public bureaucracies – but also social and political pluralism itself. Populism aims to foster and exploit anti-political feelings and actions. Indeed, having rejected the notion of politics as an encounter and contest between ideas, interests and parties and instead imagined a national community unified around its leader, populism thus rediscovers and stretches two essential dimensions of politics (Schmitt, 1976): the opposition between friend and foe (whether internal or external) and the leader's sovereignty to decide – whether in charge of the party or the country.

Born in general as protest parties, populist parties are culturally rather crude and often display fierce anti-intellectualism. Nonetheless, this does not mean that we cannot find works of political theory in harmony with populist discourses and their democratic and anti-pluralist fundamentalism. I refer here to the reinterpretation of democracy during the Weimar era in Germany by the prestigious right-wing intellectual Carl Schmitt.

The starting point for Schmitt (1985) was the crisis of liberal parliamentarism at the beginning of the twentieth century. He attributed this to the emergence of mass-based parties, whose fault it was that parliament had ceased to be a place where deputies took decisions based on arguments aimed at encouraging reciprocal persuasion and which had equal chances of being accepted. In Schmitt's view, deputies had become little more than delegates for parties, which imposed their wishes upon them according to the particular economic and class interests they were obliged to protect. Parliamentary decision-making thus became little more than the fruit of negotiations between opposing powers and this invalidated not only the process of discussion, but the very sovereignty of the state.

Of course, whether liberal parliamentarism ever really functioned according to the mythologized principles of Schmitt is highly dubious. What is more important is that the remedy he prescribed contained a strongly anti-pluralist bias and cultivated the idea of an 'identitarian' democracy (Schmitt, 1928). This was founded on the establishment of an organic link between the people and a directly elected Head of State who, acclaimed by the public and holder of its trust, would be able to act without having to consider partisan concerns (Schmitt, 1931). The collegial authority of parliament would be substituted by a monocratic one, which would also designate supreme authority to the supposed will of the people (understood as a whole that was far more than the sum of its parts), as expressed by the electoral majority. This would occur at the expense of, amongst others, all other arms of the state and minority groups.

The liberal democratic tradition is entirely different, of course. In order to prevent undemocratic uses of democracy, the principle of the rule of the majority is accompanied by those concerning individual and civil rights and social and political pluralism. These are bolstered by robust measures designed to defend the rights of minorities, along with the co-existence of, and equilibrium between, elected and non-elected institutions.

It would be an exaggeration to say that new populist parties are proposing the exact model of identitarian democracy as imagined by Schmitt. However, their programmes, policies and actions do resonate with many of his ideas. They evoke a democracy which is in the firm grip of the people, nourished by elections and referendum, and thus no longer adulterated by the machinations, pedantry, corruption, clientelism and pluralism typical of official politics. Similarly, they promote personalized leadership and community-based actions – designed to restrain social pluralism, as to seek to eliminate

it entirely would be unrealistic. Moreover, they tend to label as enemies all those who are different from the party and the people such as political opponents, dissenting voices, immigrants, homosexuals, Muslims, unmarried mothers, drug addicts, the long-term unemployed and so on.

Why is populism successful?

When discussing populism, the most difficult issue, however, is not the appropriateness of the term, but explaining the phenomenon which it denotes. How can we account for the fact that, almost everywhere in Western Europe, populists have been able to challenge and gain ground on conventional parties, which are not only armed with long-standing traditions, considerable political know-how, and massive financial resources, but which are often also protected by norms discouraging new entries into the political system? What changes in the political landscape have facilitated the emergence and success of new populist parties? The usual starting point when answering such questions is to look at the electoral following of these parties. It is believed that if we know which voters are attracted to populists, then it should not be too difficult to identify the conditions which have favoured populist growth. Unfortunately, as we might expect, given that votes for populists are often cast in protest, the evidence offered by electoral analyses is far from conclusive. What we do know is that males, the older generation, the unemployed, young people in search of work, manual labourers, artisans, small businessmen and farm workers are over-represented among voters for populist parties. We also know that the best indicator for populist support seems to be that of educational level. It is more likely that the less well-educated sectors of the population will vote for populist parties, although recently Kai Arzheimer and Elisabeth Carter (2006) have found that, in the case of extreme Right parties (some of which are among the parties discussed as 'populist' in this volume), it is those with intermediate levels of education who appear most favourably-inclined.

While the idea that the working classes have abandoned the parties of the Left to vote in large numbers for populists, generally of the Right, may be politically attractive for some, the fact that some manual labourers support populists does not allow us to draw any definitive conclusions. First of all, parties of the Right have always had a significant foothold within the working class. Second, in many areas, those from the working class and *petite bourgeoisie* live and vote side-by-side. Third, the category of 'working-class' has become extremely nebulous. After all, how comparable are post-Fordist workers – subject to conditions of high flexibility and perhaps working both for others and for themselves – with Fordist workers who were in stable long-term employment with the same company and usually highly unionized? Finally, while populist parties do attract votes from the working classes, it is certainly debatable whether we can infer loyalty to these parties from voting

behaviour which is perhaps unstable and simply reflective of a form of 'exit' from a system that precludes 'voice' and in which the conventional parties have become much more distant from these sections of the population.

A more credible conclusion is that the electoral following of non-conventional parties reflects an overall condition of unease within western electorates, as a series of studies looking at developments in recent decades has revealed (Norris, 1999; Pharr and Putnam, 2000). This can also be seen both in the frequency with which voters support different parties (albeit generally within the same broad political area) from one election to the next and in the continuing decline in turnouts witnessed in almost all established democracies (see Lehingue, 2003). What is of interest to us here, however, is not just the fact that there is discontent with how democracies are governed and function, but the link between this phenomenon and populism. The thesis that the success of populism is simply due to the presence of (inevitable) crises is not particularly convincing. First of all, there are said to be in crisis. Above all, globalization and the end of the Fordist model, along with the decline of major public and private enterprises in the services sector, are held to have created an extremely difficult employment climate, characterized by low job security and increased flows of migrants in search of work. This, in turn, is pinpointed as the source of widespread anxieties and fears, which are exacerbated by:

- (a) immigration which is alleged to threaten cultural identities;
- (b) crime that is said to be growing everywhere; and
- (c) the considerable deterioration of western democracies which have not only proved impotent when it comes to regulating the economy – which has escaped national borders and controls – but which have also been discredited by an endless series of corruption scandals.

(see Betz, 1994)

There is something a little bit too obvious about this account for it to be convincing, however. The 'crisis' is said to have unearthed a new, electorally significant cleavage between the winners and losers of globalization and shattered previous party loyalties. It is not clear, though, whether those who support populists are the losers – in need of reassurance and eager to punish those who are even lower down the social scale than them – or the winners, whose success has rendered them more traditionalist and belligerent (Kitschelt and McGann, 1995). In any case, it is argued that the extraneousness of populist parties to official politics, whose vices they have long condemned, gives credibility to their promises to restore the people's sovereignty and dignity by defending threatened national cultures, fighting crime, protecting the national economy, reducing taxation, halting the decline in public services and virtuously managing the state.

While this vision of populism reduces it to an inevitable side-effect of a supposed crisis, there is another hypothesis which merits consideration. Put simply: given that the world is constantly changing, is it possible that the problem lies rather in the way in which Western European democracies, their leaderships and their intellectuals have reacted to change? There are three particularly visible changes which have occurred over the last half century in these democracies and are relevant here:

- (1) the decline in electoral turnouts;
- (2) the evolution in the technology of the mass party;
- (3) the reduced role of the state in providing services.

If, during the thirty years after the end of the Second World War, western societies benefited from politics and the state protected them from the market (and perhaps also protected the market from itself), it is also true that the parties and trade unions protected them. In that case, should we not then also count the withdrawal of the protection which democracy promised society amongst the factors that have favoured the emergence and success of populist parties?

The transformation of the parties

Once upon a time there was 'organized' capitalism (Lash and Urry, 1998), in the sense that it was regulated by the state and by social partnership involving confederations of employers and trade unions. But, no less important, once upon a time there was also 'organized' democracy, based on parties which not only took on the responsibility of governing, but which were also committed to bringing citizens into (and guiding them through) the labyrinth of universal suffrage and representative democracy. Moreover, they endeavoured to regulate pluralism and conflict, both within society and political life.

It was probably Max Weber (1980) who first underlined this capacity of the parties to regulate and organize democracy, warding off the much-feared plebiscitary democracy. The most polished theorist of the role of the parties, however, was Hans Kelsen. While Schmitt blamed parties for the end of the liberal regime, Kelsen (1929) viewed them not only as essential in enabling citizens to make their voices heard by linking them together, but as the *sine qua non* of democracy. Put simply, thanks to the compromise between parties, democracy could organize and recompose social and political pluralism.

In the years between the two World Wars, Kelsen's views went largely ignored. The tragedy of Fascism, which suffocated pluralism in the name of the state and its sole party, would be decisive, however, in rehabilitating the parties. As a result, in post-war Germany and Italy, their role was constitutionally enshrined and, with it, the legitimacy of pluralism. Everywhere in

Western Europe, parties of mass integration (Neumann, 1956) were recognized as the protagonists of democratic life, whose calling it was to select and train new political leaders and a new body of representatives.

In these conditions, parties were not only encouraged to grow and organize, reaching mass dimensions, but were moved to aim to become one with society which, rather than suffocating, they vowed to promote politically. Of course, the society with which conservative parties were in dialogue was different from that of the confessional and socialist parties. Nonetheless, in representations of democracy, society was depicted as legitimately organized by the parties which (albeit with different levels of intensity) co-ordinated nearly every other form of association such as trade unions, co-operatives, sporting clubs, women's organizations, youth associations, etc. Indeed, this reached the point where, in many countries, the only forms of group activity which remained beyond the parties were the churches and religious associations (although these, of course, often maintained solid links with the confessional parties) and confederations of employers, whose links to the parties were usually more intermittent and weaker (Duverger, 1954).

This golden era of the parties came to an end when they performed a radical transformation, as best described by Otto Kirchheimer (1966). Having established that economic growth and the Welfare State were smoothing out old cleavages and dissolving class identities by scaling down the redistributive claims of the working classes, Kirchheimer argued that electoral competition had undergone a decisive change. With the entry of socialist parties into government, the goal of social integration had become secondary for parties which now set winning elections as their primary objective. As a result, they focused less on protecting their core constituencies and more on widening their potential basin of votes by reformulating more 'catch-all' programmes and thus abandoning issues which would divide the electorate in favour of those which would allow them to attract wider support.

Having downgraded ideology and collective mobilization, 'catch-all' parties freed themselves from the shackles of their wider organizations of activists and members. Citizens willing to involve themselves in political life increasingly became those who were simply interested in a political career. At the same time, the importance of candidates and party members serving in parliament and in government increased and these were the actors who would determine the fundamental positions of the party. Moreover, they would be answerable for their success or failure not to the party so much as to the electorate as a whole, which would be ultimately responsible for judging their ability to govern. This, of course, does not mean that parties came to resemble each other indistinguishably, as their constituencies and policy orientations did remain different. However, it is the case that their styles began to converge and that relations between competing parties became more relaxed. Parties sought to broaden their constituencies, but most of all

they tried to avoid taking on heavy commitments which would tie them down if in government. They also increasingly began to promote, and rely on, the images of their respective leaders.

As we know, the 'catch-all' party is not the political party's final and definitive incarnation. Since the 1970s, in fact, another mutation has occurred with the rise of what Richard Katz and Peter Mair (1994; 1995) term the 'cartel party', denoting the oligopolistic transformation of inter-party competition through which parties have established links of cooperation/collusion. Emboldened by their positions of strength *vis-à-vis* the state, they worked together to discourage new entrants into the political market and to ensure their own comfortable survival, independent of electoral competition. In short, the parties found safe haven within the state, on whose resources they largely depend and of which they can almost be viewed as expressions (Van Biezen, 2004). There are understandable reasons behind this development. With the assumption of power by actors such as the Social Democrats in Germany and the Socialists (and Communists) in France, nearly all traditional parties became potential candidates for government and, once their ideological idiosyncrasies had abated, it made sense for them to seek ways to regulate relations with their competitors.

This phenomenon has a paradoxical aspect to it: in an era of high-sounding rhetoric rehabilitating the 'invisible hand', the parties transformed the state into a structure at their service. The parties have also transformed: they have largely cast aside the newspapers and other propaganda channels previously used to speak to the voters and have discouraged membership (Katz and Mair, 1992; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Scarrow, 2000; Mair and Van Biezen, 2001). They have also reduced their self-financing capabilities and the voluntary work which derived from the membership body. In this way, they have suppressed their associational components and their potential for mass mobilization in order to transform themselves into streamlined agencies which can maximize vote shares by exploiting the financial resources available from the public purse and by using publicly funded television stations over which, in many countries, parties effectively have control or at least exert considerable influence.

Parties of course still employ full-time functionaries, but their key activities of managing electoral campaigns, drawing up programmes and promoting them along with the images of their leaders – who have become the brand icons making one party distinguishable from another – are now delegated to public relations experts and political marketing gurus, whose relationships with parties are of a strictly professional nature. This has radically changed the image of the party. Previously, they promised to change the world and to promote a more just and better society. In so doing, they recognized the capacity of politics to achieve such goals. Now, however, parties operate in a climate of permanent fire-fighting and the key expectation of them is that they remedy situations of immediate crisis such as inflation,

excessive public deficits, lack of economic competitiveness, rising unemployment and so on. In this context, the capacity of politics for action and innovation appears modest and offers of political leadership respond essentially to three main criteria: novelty, firmness and morality. The leader must seem able to devise new responses, but within an extremely limited spectrum. He/she must appear 'new' and extraneous to traditional political circles. He/she must project an authoritative and resolute image and must be able to offer guarantees of morality, while also usually disparaging such qualities in his/her competitors. Naturally, appearance takes precedence over substance as the supposed 'new men and women' are frequently consummate professionals whose image has been carefully restyled by marketing experts and supporters in the media.

In reality, however, the relationship between parties and their membership is more complex than it might appear at first sight from the discussion above. While it is true that for a period the membership was effectively ignored, at other times successful recruitment campaigns have taken place. For various reasons, particularly symbolic ones, parties have an interest in maintaining a certain number of members. Nonetheless, many branches and committees, both at grassroots and other levels, through which members were able to interact with one another and the wider electorate, have fallen by the wayside. The old parties were founded on the practices of representative democracy and delegation. Members in local branches elected representatives to district and constituency organizations. These, in turn, sent delegates to party conferences which discussed and voted on policy positions and elected a broad national committee which could be convened between conferences. This committee would nominate a party executive and a leader who, together, would run the party.

In more recent times, to compensate for their more hierarchical and oligarchic natures, parties have often embraced the system of the grassroots directly electing leaders, with the pretence of thus giving greater voice to the membership. The leader of the party is chosen by the members, in some cases by primaries, in others by party conferences, thus nullifying all intermediate structures. It is highly dubious, however, that this has achieved the declared goal of making parties more transparent and democratic. By contrast, what is certain is that pluralism within parties has been compressed. In the presence of a leader who controls all the levers of the party and influences candidate selection, internal factions and groups have far less voice than before and the room for discussion is severely reduced. Party divisions were often quite artificial and corresponded to different ambitions within the leadership, but they also often reflected important political, cultural and territorial differences.

Finally, if the above reflects what has happened in terms of input, the changes regarding output have been no less significant. Parties produce leadership rather than ideas and control over policies has been expropriated.

Among the beneficiaries of this has been the ever-growing number of policy analysts as politics has been transferred to more protected and selective sites. In any case, we should point out that while parties may share a similar *modus operandi* and may all have become vote-maximizing, office-seeking agencies, dependent on the state, it remains true that they continue to appeal more to some segments of the electorate than others and have different agendas. Similarly, while party identification among the public may have waned, it has not altogether disappeared. Finally, while party programmes may well be nearly all inspired by neoliberal orthodoxy, their interpretations of it vary – much in the same way as catch-all parties subscribed to the post-war consensus, but deduced different meanings from it.

Why have parties changed?

Let us summarize for a moment. The evolution of the parties followed a parallel route to that taken by organized production. Mass-based parties attracted support by integrating the electorate and organizing it according to the same type of hierarchical model also adopted both by the state and the Fordist factory. If the latter was labour-intensive, the parties were membership-intensive. In similarly parallel fashion, the parties of today have dismantled their old organizational structures and assigned crucial segments of their productive cycles to specialized agencies, while superficially enhancing the role of members and activists through primaries and direct elections. It is clear, however, that while their 'shareholders' may be present at assemblies, they do not threaten the monopoly of the management, which often controls the composition of the body of shareholders. The parties have not become less important. Indeed, they continue to post impressive gains in terms of public offices secured. However, they have become something else, something which has diminished their democratic nature. What we need to look at now, therefore, is the question: why have parties changed so radically?

First of all, we should note that transformation does not mean crisis, but rather adaptation to new circumstances. The parties may have given space, in the intermediation between state and society, to interest groups, lobbies, movements and the media, but they still continue to dominate the scene by structuring political competition (Offerlé, 2002). In response to the question of why they have changed, there are two answers most frequently cited. The first is that the parties have also suffered from social change. According to this view, the disintegration of old class cleavages and shifts in values and cultural models (with the end of ideologies) have overwhelmed the great collective identities and redefined the associational inclinations and political and electoral behaviour of citizens. The technology of the mass-based party has been rendered obsolete by post-materialistic values and the emergence of new and more articulated forms of participation (Inglehart, 1977).

The second answer points the finger at the media – accused of having made parties superfluous both for citizens and for the elites. Citizens no longer acquire information from parties, but from the media which have distorted the logic of political competition. Since the media focus on the spectacular, in addition to assuming an instinctively polemical stance towards official politics, they tend to give pride of place to demands (superficially characterized as more genuine) from so-called civil society, with the effect of exaggerating these demands out of all proportion. Finally, not only have the media dispossessed the parties of their agenda-setting role, but the leaderships of parties no longer have sufficient incentives to organize society. 'Parties as associations' required a lot of effort from party leaderships in terms of cultivating and involving the citizenry. However, this meant maintaining a burdensome apparatus which was rarely slow to assert itself and to seek to influence the leadership. Once politicians realized that collective action had become superfluous and that television allowed them to reach millions of voters at far less cost and more effectively (and that they could secure huge financial resources from the state with much less effort), they did not think twice about dispensing with both the 'party as association' and the apparatus which supported it.

There is more than a grain of truth in these answers, which have often been overlooked by those studying populism. Nonetheless, the transformation/adaptation of the parties is also due to other factors which run even deeper. For one thing, it is highly doubtful that class cleavages have disappeared. A more likely possibility is that politicians and intellectuals have stopped examining and describing society through that lens, with considerable social consequences. In fact, the question of why parties have changed merits another, less obvious, response based on the changes – which have constituted a genuine cultural revolution – endured by the democratic paradigm. The starting point for this view is the contention that the transformation of western societies, economies, customs and cultures – along with the oil crises of the 1970s – opened up a window of opportunity for those in political, intellectual and business circles who were sceptical about democracy and who therefore conducted a ruthless and key revision of it, calling into question its success.

A first obligatory reference here is to the report for the Trilateral Commission by Michel Crozier, Samuel Huntington and Joji Watanuki (1975), although it is also worth mentioning the work of Niklas Luhmann (1990). The Trilateral Commission constitutes an extraordinary example of a multinational, political lobby (enjoying strong links with the economically and financially powerful) which, like all political enterprises, invested in the political market in order to maximize its power. It did so at global level, putting forward a proposal that redefined what citizens were believed to want from democracy. According to the Trilateral Commission, democracy had involved citizens too much. It had made them too active. It had

overprotected them, but to their own detriment, since it had pushed them towards making excessive and particularistic demands which damaged the effectiveness of democracy. The remedy, therefore, for the good of democracy, lay in driving redundant pluralism back towards society and out of the political sphere. This solution did not profess to wish to suppress social pluralism or fundamental rights such as the freedom of thought or association. Rather, it claimed to desire to put things back in their proper place by restraining a political pluralism which had become counterproductive and by revising the mechanisms of representation. After all, it was argued, democracies were now mature, predicated on solid agreements regarding their foundations, while what citizens really needed most of all was good government and good policies, carried out by authoritative and competent leaders, so that they, the citizens, could devote themselves to their own affairs in peace and tranquillity.

To this end, the Trilateral specifically called for an about-turn in how parties functioned: from being selective carriers of social pluralism, they should become selective filters of political pluralism. This opened the floodgates for a series of prescriptions and remedies from the literature on 'overload', which urged a revision of constitutional architectures in order to enshrine the pre-eminence of the executive and non-elected authorities, and to depoliticize crucial sectors of policy-making. In this way, from the idea that democracy should function thanks to hospitable and welcoming parties, the prevailing logic – above all that of the Establishment – moved towards an idea that, since the defeat of Fascism, only the most obtuse and isolated conservatives had dared to profess: that democracy, democratic participation and politics itself are harmful, particularly when administered in large doses. A qualitative conception of democracy was thus juxtaposed with the previous quantitative one. This new conception promised to make democracy more benign, more transparent and to restore directly to the citizens the sovereignty of which they are the holders.

To achieve the above, it is not always necessary of course to make constitutional modifications, but simply to reinterpret them. This can be done, for example, by compelling political competition to take place along binary lines with two leadership alternatives and thus depressing effects on political pluralism (Poguntke and Webb, 2005). Whether of course voters really can reward those who have governed well – or promise to do so better – and sanction those who have governed badly may sound nice in theory, but is doubtful in practice. First of all, there are the distortions as regards information and evaluation created by the media, politicians and other actors. Second, rather than carefully weighing up the merits of competing forces, voters mainly identify with one side or the other of the political spectrum and generally tend only to switch to the parties nearest their previous choice. When the party they prefer has little chance of victory, they may resort to tactical voting and reluctantly select the least unpalatable candidate,

or abstain, or cast a protest vote. These considerations, however, have done little to damage the rhetoric surrounding the new democratic model which, in addition to ennobling the role of political entrepreneurs and strategic behaviour, expects that the competitive interaction of parties on the markets, or around the negotiation tables of 'governance', can resolve collective problems in a far more fruitful and democratic way.

Evidence that this model has been less successful than originally envisaged is implicit in the efforts made to bolster it with new forms of citizen involvement in politics such as surveys, referendums and changes to local democracy. This new 'post-democratic' model not only marks a radical break with the past, but legitimizes the surmounting of old institutions such as the parties 'as associations' and their role in bringing citizens into the political process. Of course, it is a selective model as it does not remove the parties, but reforms them profoundly. Moreover, if parties were founded on the idea of mobilizing large swathes of voters and therefore had an incentive to meet the needs of the weakest sections of society, by removing much of the possibility for representation which these sections had, then that incentive for the parties is also removed – a situation which considerably redefines the very idea of representation.

Indeed, representation has by now become a link, just like the consensus required for political authority, which those who govern weave downwards, by promising as compensation for those who are governed the latest successful political buzzword 'accountability' (Manin, Przeworski and Stokes, 1999), or what we might call *ex post* auditing (Andeweg, 2003). In principle, it is sacrosanct that those who govern democratically should account for their actions and that elections should function as the fundamental auditing tool. However, the emphasis placed on 'accountability' in recent times raises the suspicion that it is merely an alibi that authorizes governments to disregard the wishes and interests of voters (while satisfying those of the most powerful and financially influential actors), by exerting their powers in whatever way they see fit or as most benefits their chances of re-election. In this scenario, democracy is only respected insofar as someone – perhaps working in a political rating agency – verifies the legality, morality and effectiveness of (real or presumed) government action and informs the citizens, who then must judge accordingly at election time.

The rhetoric surrounding the new democratic model is powerful and is clearly in tune with neoliberal orthodoxy. Authorized to abandon citizens to their destinies and to dismantle that costly and redundant linkage between rulers and ruled that was the old-style party, western political elites have enthusiastically embraced the new model. This is not least because it is consistent with the precepts of neoliberalism which demand less state involvement and that the partisan element of politics be reduced to a minimum. In conclusion, therefore, should we really be so surprised not only that public scepticism about politics has grown, but that large sections of

the electorate (often the most vulnerable), bereft of the integration, protection and guiding influence provided by the parties, have fallen under the spell of populists, even if only to show their displeasure and disquiet?

The fact that phenomena such as the redefinition of the democratic paradigm, the transformation of the parties, the slow retreat from welfare provision and the success of populism have all occurred contemporaneously leaves little room for doubt that they are interlinked. Democracy nowadays treats citizens with indifference, as mere consumers of its offers of leadership. Meanwhile, the influence of economic and financial powers and organized corporations has grown, particularly when they have autonomous access to the media, or even possess their own media channels.

It is well known that, on both quantitative and qualitative levels, turnout is conditioned by the degree of political competence and the specific contexts voters find themselves in. In previous times, the functions of socialization and education carried out by parties were complementary to, or even in place of, those of formal schooling. Moreover, since party identities and electoral behaviour are influenced by reference points in the circles which voters come into contact with, the parties were thus able to act as decisive reference points (Gaxie, 1978: 240–253). The function of socialization has, however, largely been delegated now to the media, which subordinates it to its own logics and need for spectacle. It is also well known that the least culturally equipped voters are those most easily swayed by crude and simplified propaganda, of which populist parties are the incontrovertible masters.

It should not surprise us at all, therefore, that populists have been able to offer a significant section of lower class voters an attractive opportunity (other than simply abstaining) to express their sense of detachment and dissatisfaction with conventional politics. Nor should it surprise us that populists have been able to garner support from parts of the middle classes, particularly the self-employed who receive little protection from the state and who fear losing the prosperity and status which they have accumulated. In the past, this section of society tended to look towards traditional conservative parties, which in turn protected them, albeit using different methods than those employed by socialist parties. However, now that the self-employed have also been abandoned to the influence of the media, should it really strike us as strange that they too have often turned to populist parties?

The ubiquity of populism

According to Sir Thomas Gresham's law, bad money drives good money out of circulation and, in much the same way, populist and anti-political styles and discourses have spread through the political arena, to the detriment of the worthy elements that were there before. Before concluding this chapter, however, there is a final hypothesis that we would like to put forward. This

can be summed up in the question: is it the case, in addition to having renounced their mission to protect citizens and having dismantled the old mass parties, that political leaderships have also facilitated the rise of populist challengers not only through the anti-political and anti-pluralist stances inherent in various organizational and institutional innovations, but also in their use of the discourses and attitudes encapsulated in Margaret Canovan's term 'politicians' populism' (Canovan, 1981)?

Populists have developed their ambiguous democratic fundamentalism by exploiting the failures of democracy. Likewise, for its part, the post-democratic model has been developed and applied by using the supposed failures of democracy as a motivating factor. There would thus appear to be a mutually reinforcing effect at work. If populists disdain the rights of the individual and those of minorities, it is also the case that more conventional actors also now, albeit in less dramatic ways, share the same intolerance of political pluralism and of the concept of politics as encounter, debate and discussion – and all the intricacies and slowness that this concept entails. Moreover, these actors do not shrink, again albeit in less bellicose terms, from resorting to the rhetoric of 'the people' and from using anti-political gestures aimed at replacing more genuine forms of citizen involvement (Mair, 2002: 81–98).

Three elements stand out above all others in this discussion. The first is the propensity to deny, or dilute, all political divisions. Official politics has discovered a non-partisan vocation which delegitimizes political pluralism and nourishes itself with appeals to the *rassemblement*, thus devaluing even the basic distinction between Right and Left. The second element consists of the repeated condemnations of the useless intrigues and disputes of politics, of its poor morality, and of its distance from citizens – both in a democratic sense (i.e. the charge that the people are no longer sovereign) and in terms of the deep and resolute negligence of the struggles faced by the common man. Obviously, those levelling such criticisms aim first and foremost to attract the attention of the media, only then to accuse them of aggravating political problems through spectacularization. The third and final element is that of the dramatization by politicians of their public presence, which begins with their private lives (to demonstrate that they too are 'of the people' and not of the Establishment) and extends to their often flaunted scorn of the official practices of politics, manifested in awkward attempts to fraternize with citizens and their emphasis of the non-professional nature of their political activity.

There are numerous potential examples of this, but one can suffice: that of Tony Blair who, having renamed his party 'New' Labour, was struck by an irrepressible intoxication with popular sovereignty. Thus, having broken the old link with the trade unions, the party adopted primaries. Moreover, Blair promotes an image of himself as a non-conventional politician, intent on making politics noble once more by restoring its morality and by placing

the people at the centre of a political discourse full of references to the community, but also with non-partisan policy preferences and goals. Of course, we should note that, in Blair's view, moral principles take precedence over the views of the people expressed in surveys or through public protests, as his reaction to the weight of feeling against British involvement in Iraq demonstrates (Mair, 2000).

It seems appropriate therefore to ask, in conclusion, whether it is not the case that conventional leaderships have in fact fomented the anti-political scepticism of citizens and played a crucial role in discrediting politics? This being so, might it also therefore be the case then that the spectacular and disingenuous manner in which conventional leaderships have portrayed both themselves and democracy has provoked that poisoning of the public view of democracy which, more than anything else, new populists take advantage of?

4

Populism and the Media

Gianpietro Mazzoleni

Populist landscapes

The European political landscape of the last decade has been home to numerous political figures that have stood out by virtue of their personality and their voicing of popular discontent. These include the likes of Jean-Marie Le Pen, Jörg Haider, Christoph Blocher, Pim Fortuyn and Silvio Berlusconi, all of whom are among the more recent manifestations of the populist political climate affecting much of contemporary Europe, as discussed in the introduction to this volume.

Independent of their ideology, the leaders of populist movements and parties often have features in common that clearly contribute to their popularity and political appeal: in most cases, they are charismatic figures and possess a great deal of media savvy. Furthermore, as Gianfranco Pasquino notes in his chapter, 'Populist leaders do not represent the people, rather they consider themselves – and succeed in being considered – an integral part of the people. They are of the people.'

These features usually combine to assure a lasting public notoriety and intense media visibility that leaders use as political capital in the pursuit of their goals in their domestic arenas. This has certainly been the case with Le Pen, who has succeeded in attracting (and deploying to his advantage) the criticism of the press, while Austria's Jörg Haider's personal glamour and controversial stances have brought him public attention both at home and abroad. A somewhat similar communications strategy was employed by Pim Fortuyn in striking sensitive chords of popular concern (for example, in relation to Muslim immigration) and exhibiting a glitzy outspokenness that assured him constant media interest. In fact, we can say that almost all populist leaders display flamboyant personalities and pursue highly contentious agendas that attract media scrutiny.

Personal charisma and media savvy have thus played a significant part in the origins and subsequent construction of populist movements. Surprisingly, most recent political science research has largely disregarded them both on

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'It is not always the case that the most recent book is a better book, but this is surely the case with this work. — Giovanni Sartori, Professor Emeritus, Columbia University in the City of New York, USA

'This is essential reading for students of political parties and political culture in Europe today.' — Peter Mair, Professor of Comparative Politics, European University Institute, Florence, Italy

'The analysis is brilliant, profound and deeply worrying.' — Sir Bernard Crick, Emeritus Professor of Birkbeck College, University of London, UK

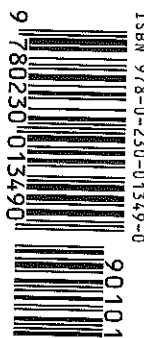
'It is a cornerstone in the construction of the phenomenology and theory of populism.' — Yves Meny, President of the European University Institute, Florence, Italy

Over the last decade, the main area of sustained populist growth has been Western Europe, with populist movements reaching new heights in countries such as France, Italy, Austria and Holland. *Twenty-First Century Populism* analyses this phenomenon by looking at the conditions facilitating the emergence and success of populism in specific national contexts and then examining why populism has flourished or floundered in those countries. The book also discusses the degree to which populism has affected mainstream politics in Western Europe and examines the inter-relationship between populism, political parties, the media and democracy. Containing chapters by a series of country experts and renowned political scientists from across the continent, this volume is the first to offer an in-depth account of the reasons behind the populist wave in twenty-first century Europe.

Daniele Albertazzi is Lecturer in European Media at the University of Birmingham, UK. His research focuses on political communication, as well as Italian and Swiss politics. He is co-editor (with Charlotte Ross and Clodagh Brook) of *Resisting the Tide: Cultures of Opposition during the Berlusconi Years* and (with Paul Cobley) *The Media: An Introduction*, third edition.

Duncan McDonnell is Dottorando di Ricerca in the Department of Political Studies, University of Turin, Italy, where he is conducting research on populism and the relationship between directly-elected local leaders and political parties.

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THE SPECTRE OF WESTERN EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY

