

Populism as Democratization's Nemesis: The Politics of Regime Hybridization

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Abstract The global ascendancy that populism has gained in recent years resulted in two major developments: (a) the geographical spread of populism to an increasing number of countries, to the extent that in regions such as the Americas and Europe populism appears as the main contender of mainstream politics; (b) populism shifting from the margins to the center stage of politics, a development that resulted in the passage of populism as a movement to populism as government. A central hypothesis guiding this article is that populism in government is likely to promote a specific path to regime change: one consisting of the gradual hybridization of the structure of liberal democracy through the selective removal of some of the latter's defining features. The contemporary proliferation of populist administrations in Europe and the Americas should consequently not be taken lightly: they might be announcing political processes that can ultimately result in a drastic redefinition of the landscape of current democratic politics in an illiberal direction.

Keywords Populism · Democratization · Liberal democracy · Hybrid regimes · Regime change · Democratic theory

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1 Introduction

Geographically, populism is no longer confined to Latin America (the region that gave birth to modern form of populism), but it is increasingly becoming an important force in European politics and, most recently, in the USA. While the contemporary revival of populism started in Latin America as a result of the coming to power of a new generation of populist leaders in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Venezuela, the phenomenon rapidly expanded to other areas. In Europe, populist forces and parties have accessed government in Greece, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia. Additionally, populist parties or candidates are gaining electoral ascendance in the Netherlands, France, Spain and Italy (Betz 2017), not to mention the unexpected triumph of the *Brexit* vote in the UK (Goodwin and Heath 2017; Richard 2017). The arrival of Donald Trump to the presidency of the country that has historically served as the paradigm of liberal democracy signals a novel and worrisome momentum of populism, a period that, as the first months of Trump in office suggests, is likely to have significant consequences not only within the USA, but globally as well (Cramer 2017; Lowndes 2017). Lastly, in Southeast Asia there is growing concern about the surge of a new string of populist politicians in countries such as the Philippines, Thailand and even Japan (Case 2017; Murayama 2014). In brief, populism is rapidly becoming a contagious force that can threaten the continuity of old and new democracies alike. In fact, in the Americas and Europe it has already positioned itself as the main contender to liberal democracy.

The second development is populism attaining governmental status. Many relevant contemporary expressions of populism are no longer located on the fringes of the political system, but have successfully made their way into governmental power. The latter implies a significant shift in the nature of populism, one that can be described as a shift of populism from movement to government form (Urbinati 2014: 130, 2013). While such phenomenon might not represent a novelty for a region like Latin America, marked by the recurring presence of populist administrations in several of its countries throughout the second half of the twentieth century (Peruzzotti 2013), it is a surprising development for some European countries and for the USA. Populism in government places significant institutional and political resources in the hand of a leader, resources that can be put into use to promote institutional transformations that can eventually endanger the continuity of liberal democratic regimes.

A central hypothesis guiding this article is that populism in government is likely to promote a specific path to regime change, one consisting of the gradual hybridization of the structure of liberal democracy through the selective removal of some of the latter's defining features. Such pattern is a novelty with respect to what was the predominant paradigm of regime change of the twentieth century: that of democratic breakdown (Linz and Stepan 1978). Rather than the sudden collapse of democracy and its replacement by an authoritarian regime, hybridization entails a slow, yet steady process of transformation of the institutional landscape of democracy via the gradual dismantling of constitutive elements of liberal democratic regimes. Those processes are carried out by elected authorities, within

the boundaries of existing democratic regimes, and in the name of democratic deepening (Peruzzotti 2017). The end result of such processes is the establishment of a regime that is neither conventionally authoritarian nor conventionally democratic (Diamond 2002: 25; Levitsky and Way 2002). The contemporary proliferation of populist administrations in Europe and the Americas should consequently not be taken lightly: they might be announcing political processes that can ultimately result in a drastic redefinition of the landscape of current democratic politics in an illiberal direction.

The article is divided as follows. Section I analyzes the reasons behind the contagious effects that populism has had in the Americas and Europe. The main argument of this section is that the diffusion of modern forms of populism is the corollary of democratizing waves that expand the geographical presence of liberal democracy. Modern populism emerges in already democratized contexts where openly dictatorial appeals are no longer a feasible option and consequently, political struggles shift from a struggle over alternative regime options to a definitional conflict over the meaning of democracy. In fact, contemporary conceptualizations of populism are framed as a theory of radical democracy. Section II critically reviews the main tenets of populism as a democratic theory through the discussion of the work of Ernesto Laclau. From his perspective, populism appears as a democratizing force that frees politics from the neutralizing role played by the representative arrangements that structure the political dynamics of liberal democratic regimes. Curiously enough, Laclau's theory has little to say about populism as government: its emphasis is on how populist movements might access power than on the actual exercise of governmental power by populist administrations. Section III argues about the need to shift the focus on populism from those strategies that outsiders use to access power to populism as a governmental exercise. Given the recent success exhibited by populist movements in acceding power in different national contexts, analyses of populism have to focus on the institutional blueprint that those administrations seek to establish. Populism as government must be understood as a particular strategy of regime transformation via the gradual elimination of key components of liberal democracy.

Regime hybridization by contemporary populist administrations is a process that takes place within liberal democracies, old and new. At this respect, contemporary efforts at regime hybridization differ from those that shaped classical expressions of populism. Unlike contemporary forms of populism, classical populism expressed a pattern political modernization whose point of departure was not liberal democracy but semi-democratic oligarchic rule or military authoritarianism.

2 Modern Populism as the Corollary of Democratizing Waves

The literature on populism has repeatedly highlighted the intimate relationship that exists between the former and liberal democracy (Arditi 2005; Canovan 2001; Taggard 2002). It is consequently not surprising that populism becomes politically relevant on those historical conjunctures characterized by the triumph and diffusion

of liberal representative regimes: in its modern incarnation, populism was born in the aftermath of the defeat of fascism. In a similar vein, the current clout enjoyed by populism nowadays is related to the impressive diffusion of liberal democracy that resulted from the collapse of communism and bureaucratic authoritarianism.

2.1 The Second Democratizing Wave and the Birth of Modern Populism

Modern populism emerges as a response to the major political shifts prompted by the defeat of Fascism and Nazism, which resulted in the inauguration of the second democratizing wave (Huntington 1991: 12). It is born out of the recognition that in the post-War World II order, there will be increasingly less ideological room for fascist or any other form of dictatorial regimes. It is thus a response to the deepening of the legitimacy problems that contemporary authoritarian regimes face in societies where democratic values have been internalized by significant sectors of the population (Huntington 1991: 13)

Peronism was the first political force to recognize the nature of the new environment that resulted from the defeat of European fascism: being the leader of a military government of fascist sympathizers, Peron renounced both the idea of dictatorship and violence to promote a transition from dictatorship to populist democracy (Finchelstein 2014). Peronism became the paradigmatic expression of populist democracy where elections played a key legitimating role (Peruzzotti 2013, 2008). Peron's pioneering response was followed by a string of Latin American leaders in other countries of the region, to the extent that populism as government became a widespread phenomenon in the second half of the twentieth century in the continent.¹ The inauguration of the Cold War, the Cuban Revolution and the problems derived from populist polarization created the conditions for a process of democratic reversal that resulted in the emergence of new forms of military authoritarianism (Huntington 1991: 12; ÓDonnell 1988; Collier and Collier 1981.). After the successful processes of democratic transition and consolidation, contemporary forms of populism reemerged in Latin America, as a critique of the shortcomings of existing liberal democratic regimes (Peruzzotti 2013).

2.2 Contemporary Populism as the Corollary of the Third Democratizing Wave

The defeat of communism, as had been previously the case with the defeat of fascism, provided an impetus to another global wave of democratization diffusion. The end of the Cold War was followed by an impressive diffusion of democratic rule all over the globe (Huntington 1991). The democratic wave began in the mid-1970s in Southern Europe, consolidating democracy in Greece, Spain and Portugal.

¹ If the emerging field of democratization studies in Latin America and Eastern and Central Europe sought inspiration in the experience of old democratizers to analyze the transitions from authoritarianism and subsequent efforts at democratic consolidation, it might be wise for the USA and Europe to engage in a similar exercise given the extensive experience that Latin America has had with a *political animal* to which European or North-Americans are not as familiar with.

It continued in Latin America soon after and until the mid-1980s, resulting in successful transitions from military authoritarianism to liberal democratic regimes.² Simultaneously, the Asian region also witnessed the democratization of South Korea and the Philippines. Finally, the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in democratic consolidation throughout the former Soviet republics of Central and Eastern Europe (Huntington 1991; Mainwaring et al. 2002; ÓDonnell et al. 1986). For almost three decades, democracy steadily expanded worldwide to come to a halt in 2006 (Diamond 2015: 142). Throughout such period (1974–2005), the number of electoral democracies rose from 46 to 114/119 (Diamond 2015:141–142).

While the third wave of democratization was a global trend, it accomplished its most impressive results in the Americas and in Eastern Europe (Moller and Skaaning 2013: 101–2), institutionalizing the two most extensive democratic blocks in contemporary history. By 1990, every country in Latin America (with the exception of Cuba) had an elected government. In Europe, the democratic states of Europe expanded significantly, and a significant proportion of the 30 countries that made transitions from 1974 to 1990 were located in either one of those two regions.

Such an impressive process of democratic diffusion was heralded as the ultimate triumph of liberal democracy over its main contenders, fascism, communism and regimes such as bureaucratic authoritarianism. In a widely known essay, Francis Fukuyama raised the Hegelian question of whether humanity was finally entering a post-historical period. He wondered if the dramatic events that prompted a democratizing wave of unknown dimensions were not signaling just the end of a specific historical period, but of history itself:

“What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. This is not to say that there will no longer be events to fill the pages of *Foreign Affairs*’ yearly summaries of international relations, for the victory of liberalism has occurred primarily in the realm of ideas or consciousness and is as yet incomplete in the real or material world. But there are powerful reasons for believing that it is the ideal that will govern the material world in the long run. To understand how this is so, we must first consider some theoretical issues concerning the nature of historical change” (Fukuyama 2006).

As the paragraph illustrates, Fukuyama saw the expansion of democracy (and eventually of market consumerism) as part of a more fundamental trend toward the universalization of the Western model of liberal democracy. The third

² In Latin America, democratization was the outcome of the twin defeat of revolutionary movements and of bureaucratic authoritarianism. The transitions from authoritarianism in Latin America inaugurated a new democratic era that resulted in the continent-wide consolidation of liberal democracy (with the exceptions of Cuba as well as the rise of competitive authoritarianism during the presidency of Alberto Fujimori and in post-1995 Haiti) (Levitsky and Way 2002: 52). It is in the latter context that populism makes a comeback as a critique of the shortcoming of existing liberal democratic regimes (Peruzzotti 2013).

democratizing wave certainly contributed to the global diffusion of liberal democracy, yet there are still numerous countries untouched by such a process. Fukuyama was hopeful that with the ideological triumph of the Western liberal democratic tradition over its adversaries, the completion of the process of democratic diffusion to the rest of the globe was going to be only a matter of time. The final triumph of Western liberal democracy would eventually inaugurate a new era in which political struggles as we know them today would come to an end.

The optimism of Fukuyama's diagnosis is being questioned by recent political developments. Not only is the West losing ideological clout in other regions, but liberal democratic regimes are facing significant challenges in Western societies to the extent that some authors are announcing "the unraveling of the post-1989 order" that inspired Fukuyama's end of history prediction (Krastev 2016). In many Western countries, liberal democracy is under siege due to the growing clout enjoyed by anti-democratic movements and parties. The recent growth of extreme right parties in countries such as Belgium, France and Hungary indicates that anti-democratic and nativist forces continue to have an unavoidable ideological presence in democratic systems (Pappas 2016).

Yet, the most pressing challenge that liberal democracy faces today does not come from openly anti-democratic political forces, but from populism (Pappas 2016). It is the latter that is the *real specter* haunting the stability of liberal democracy today (and in the case of Europe, of the EU project). Unlike extreme right or left anti-democratic forces, populism's defiance of liberal democracy is more troublesome for it is a challenge that comes from within, one that is made in the name of democracy (Peruzzotti forthcoming Pappas 2016). Most of the contemporary expressions of populism in Europe and the Americas occur in already democratized societies, a fact that differentiates this wave of populism from other contexts in which populism acts as an ambiguous, yet effective form of political modernization of pre-democratic orders (Germani 1979). The most relevant examples of today's populism, instead, have emerged within the framework of consolidated liberal democracies.

What does such phenomenon say about Fukuyama's diagnosis? One could reformulate his insight in the following terms: the end of the Cold War period represents not so much the undisputed triumph of Western liberal democracy, but rather the defeat of openly anti-authoritarian ideologies. The latter does not mean that, as many examples attest to this, anti-democratic movements will completely vanish from the horizon of contemporary societies. However, it is unlikely that they could effectively provide a credible principle of legitimation in societies that had already been democratized. The triumph of democratic ideals does not express itself as the victory of one of its particular incarnations (Western liberal democracy), but by the fact that it is becoming increasingly difficult to legitimize a political order with reference to validity claims that are not drawn from the imaginary democratic.

The triumph of democracy does not automatically mean, as assumed by Fukuyama, that specific liberal democratic interpretation of those ideals has achieved uncontested supremacy. It should also not be interpreted as the inauguration of an era characterized by the twilight of political conflict. On the contrary, political conflict within democratic societies largely becomes a

definitional conflict of interpretations over the meaning of democracy: the framing of political disputes is no longer one that confronts a democratic versus an anti-democratic camp, but one among different conceptions of how democracy is to be understood. This is what explains the current salience of populism in democratic societies: it expresses the best political option to challenge the political status quo in societies where the principle of popular sovereignty has established itself as an uncontested one. The force of contemporary forms of populism is that challenges liberal democracy in the name of democracy; an appeal that openly authoritarian forces do not enjoy in democratic societies.

3 Populism as a Democratic Theory

Populism has not only become a central axis to structure the political conflict within democratic societies, but it has also attained conceptual salience within the political theory. In the past, populism was pigeonholed as a specific stage of political modernization of developing societies or as a specter that haunted liberal democracy in troubled political times. In either use, the term populism was always charged with ambiguity regarding its democratizing contribution if not openly associated with authoritarianism. Today, instead, the term has been bereaved of all ambiguity and is being presented as the epitome of democracy. The most prominent exponent of this position is the work of Ernesto Laclau.

In his book *On Populist Reason*, Laclau seeks to place populism as the central category of contemporary political and democratic theory. He rescues the concept from the marginal position it has traditionally enjoyed within social and political theory as a pathological or irrational phenomenon by dignifying it "...with the status of a full rationality" (Laclau 2005: 19). The pejorative adjectives usually attributed to populism (its logic of simplification, its ideological incoherence, the vagueness of its discourse), he argues, are to be understood as key features of its political rationale. They are the ingredients that ensure the success of the populist recipe.

In Laclau's rendering, populism is neither a mirror (Panizza 2005) nor an internal periphery of democratic politics (Arditi 2005), but the expression of democracy itself. For what is democracy, he wonders, but the process of constituting the people? Populism expresses the logic of what he considers is the paradigmatic operation of democratic politics: the construction of the people. For Laclau, the latter process requires lumping together fragmented and dislocated demands into a vague and antagonistic notion of the people. Vagueness and ambiguity are, in this rendering, key conditions for the symbolic efficacy of populist identification to work (Laclau 2005: 40). This is why it is frequently difficult to pigeonhole specific populist experiences into a right/left axis, as it is fruitless to search for ideological coherence into a process of identity construction where ambiguity and imprecision are essential elements of the empty signifiers that give life to the people. What matters in such construction is the intensity that such empty signifiers are able to generate not the specifics of their content. A process of populist identification is

successful only when it is capable of polarizing society into two camps: the people and its enemies.

How can a process that can assume very different ideological configurations be understood within the framework of a theory of democratization? Laclau's answer is that the democratizing element of populism lies in its de-institutionalizing potential, that is, in its capacity to free politics from the straightjacket of liberal democratic institutionalism. Populism is heralded as a politics of the extraordinary moments, of those exceptional situations where the creative power of politics comes to the surface thanks to the suspension of the conservative logic of institutions. However, such response is still inadequate because the theory has nothing to say regarding the likely political outcomes that such "creative" interventions might bring about. Laclau's theory of populism exclusively focuses on populism as a strategy to access power, but has not much to say about populism as a governmental exercise.³

Actually, the above-mentioned problem goes beyond Laclau's specific theory, but is present in other approaches to populism or to radical democracy. There is an extensive literature focusing on the discursive, symbolic and dramaturgical resources that populism employs to challenge power, but relatively little emphasis on the dynamics of populism as a governmental exercise. The hypothesis that will guide the following section is that populism expresses a particular path at regime transformation that, irrespective of context and of the manifold ideological appeals it might resort to, can be consistently analyzed as a strategy of regime hybridization. The populist strategy at regime hybridization selectively removes key features of representative government to ultimately replace one subtype of democracy (liberal representative polyarchy) for another (populist democracy).

4 Populism and the Hybridization of Liberal Democracy

Populism can no longer be reduced to a strategy of extraordinary times (De la Torre 2016), whereas certain discourses and performances are productively employed to exploit crisis situations to *access power*. In many national contexts, populism is being normalized into an *exercise of governmental power*. We consequently need to broaden the predominant conceptual emphasis on the ideological, discursive (De la Torre 2014; Kazin 1995; Hawkins 2010) and dramaturgical (Moffit 2016; Ostigy 2009) resources that populist leaders or movements mobilize to either denounce the status quo or to access power (Weyland 2001) to include the analysis of populism as a governmental exercise. While the former perspectives shed important light on the conditions that give birth to populism movements and the strategies they unfold to challenge the political order, the reality of populism as government requires the expansion of our conceptual and analytical toolbox to better understand the logic and outcomes that guide populism as an exercise of power. In particular, there is a need to focus on the consequences that populism as government has on the

³ In fact, when questioned about the authoritarian patterns of Chavez or Maduro, Laclau simply dismissed the issue by arguing that these were the inevitable price to pay in any process of political rupture (Laclau 2015).

institutional structure of liberal democracy as well as on the specifics of populism as a strategy of regime transformation. Populism might not simply be an episodic event that periodically comes to reenergize the political dynamics of representative democracy (Schmitter 2006), but in some instances might express a specific path to institutional change via regime hybridization.

The regime hybridization path contrasts with the traditional model of democratic breakdown that provided the paradigmatic example of the collapse of liberal democratic regimes in the twentieth century. The breakdown pattern referred to the downfall of democratic regimes precipitated by a state of exception to leads to the transfer of power from a democratically accountable leadership to a non-democratic sovereign (Linz and Stepan 1978: 54). A regime breakdown entails more than the replacement of an administration; it supposes a break with the rules regulating the democratic process. The specifics of such a process can vary according to context, yet in all cases supposes the displacement of democratically elected authorities by force or by illegal means (usually through a military or presidential coup) and the assumption of power of an authoritarian coalition (Linz and Stepan 1978). In any case, there is always a clear event that marks the moment of regime breakdown and authoritarian takeover (military coup, a revolution, presidential dissolution of the legislative assembly, etc.) that neatly establishes the end of democratic rule and the inauguration of the authoritarian period.

The pattern of regime hybridization, instead, is a subtler one for there is no undisputed moment of rupture, or an attempt to step completely outside of a democratic framework. It instead consists of an inconspicuous process of dismantling the key elements of liberal democracy that happens in a gradual manner, within the confines of the existing regime and without relinquishing electoral institutions, grounding the justification for the reforms. On the contrary, electoral success establishes the democratic credentials of populist regimes. Populism's reliance on electoral legitimacy prevents it from sliding into open authoritarianism: canceling electoral contexts or refusing to accept a negative electoral result will run contrary from what constitutes its main democratic validity claim.⁴

The process of institutional hybridization aims at aligning different institutional spheres with the popular will, which the president incarnates. Checks and balances, the principle of separation of powers, the role of the opposition, of a critical press, are viewed as hindrances that prevent the proper realization of popular aspirations, so they become the targets of reforms that are portrayed as part of an agenda of “democratic deepening”. Those reforms justify paving the way for the proper enforcement of the principle of popular sovereignty, which in this interpretation is understood as aligning all state institutions to the presidential will.

⁴ This is a problem that can be seen in today's Venezuela after the refusal of president Nicolás Maduro to acknowledge the results of the past legislative election.

5 Modern Populism as a Regime

Populist democratic regimes emerge in the post-World War II scenario as a specific illiberal rendering of democratic ideals. In fact, modern populism represents a direct response to the second democratizing wave that the defeat of European fascism inaugurated.⁵ Its place of birth is Argentina, with *Peronism* representing the first incarnation of the modern democratic expression of populism. Juan Domingo Peron, a prominent political leader of a pro-fascist military dictatorship, was the first to realize the limitations that the post-war environment posed to openly dictatorial projects and set out to establish a populist democratic regime (Finchelstein 2014).

In contrast to fascism and other forms of modern authoritarianism, populism relinquishes the exercise of dictatorial power to validate its authority democratically. Electoral legitimation is consequently crucial for modern forms of populism (Peruzzotti 2013). Elections, however, are interpreted in a different manner than under liberal democracy. They are not merely viewed as a procedure to appoint a government; rather, they serve as confirmation of a previous fact that a specific personality embodies the people. Elections serve to ratify such conviction: this is why electoral contests under populism are frequently framed as an existential struggle between the people and its foes and electoral victories interpreted as a momentous occasion that confirms the authority of the leader.

Modern populism draws its legitimation from the principle of popular sovereignty, yet democracy is interpreted in an illiberal way. Under populism, elections serve the principle of identification, and not of representation. Alongside with referendums, mass mobilizations, acts of public acclamation, mass and social media, they are viewed as the channels that make such process of identification possible. The mediating structures of representative democracy are instead seen as a nuance that prevent populist identification to take place. Its target is not democracy per se, but its particular liberal interpretation of it.

Modern democratic populism seeks to replace political indirectness by unmediated identification. It proposes a simplified and unmediated form of “democratic” bond organized around a process of plebiscitarian identification that is ratified by elections (Peruzzotti 2008). Liberal democracy is considered a regime that is more interested in protecting the rights of minorities than in realizing the principle of popular sovereignty. Modern democratic populism seeks to redesign and simplify the institutional landscape of mass democracy, a redesign that largely consists of the elimination of the field of indirect politics and its replacement by presidential plebiscitarianism.

Defining dimensions of liberal democracy are consequently targeted, such as the principle of division of power, governmental checks and balances, the autonomy of the media, public sphere and civil society, for they are considered unwanted

⁵ Modern democratic populism as a regime does not refer to pre-modern expressions of the phenomenon such as the one that appears in the nineteenth century in the USA, in Tsarist Russia or the Napoleonic Empire in France where liberal democratic institutions had not yet been firmly anchored (Finchelstein 2014: 469). It is a phenomenon that emerges in the post-World War II as a direct response to a new political climate generated by the defeat of European authoritarian regimes and the ascendancy of liberal democracy.

interferences that conspire against the implementation of a simpler and direct form of democratic bond between the leader and people. Populism as a governmental exercise inevitably results in executive encroachments over specific institutional arenas, such as horizontal controls, the opposition, autonomous press or civil society. Those actions seek to undermine the field of mediated politics that provides the formal and informal sites for the exercise of democratic representation.

6 Concluding Remarks: Populism as Movement, as Government and as Regime

The present ascendancy of populism is intimately related with the global expansion of democratic ideals. In regions where democracy became the only game in town, political conflicts no longer entail choices about alternative non-democratic regimes, as it was the case with the previous historical crisis of liberal democracy in the 1920s and 1930s. Today, political struggles have largely become definitional struggles over the meaning of democracy. The latter helps understand the current salience of populism in democratic societies: it expresses a democratic option to channel the discontent with the dominant liberal format (format that became the blueprint of the third democratizing wave). Populism proposes an alternative reading of democracy, one that is less liberal and more “democratic”, that is, the source of its appeal and the appeal that openly authoritarian forces do not enjoy in many democratic societies.

The article sought to call attention to populism as a particular strategy of regime change, a phenomenon that—with the current arrival of populism to power in the Americas and Europe—might have consequences on the democratic landscape of both regions. Populism as a political strategy can serve different goals: it can serve an expressive purpose for outsiders to denounce the status quo, frame the actions of an electoral campaign of actors seeking to access power or refer to a particular way of exercising governmental power.

Populist rhetoric can play an *expressive role*, whereas social movement or political outsiders employ a Manichean language to expose the immorality of an existing status quo. The *Occupy Wall Street* movement is an example of elements of populist discourse (such as establishing an antagonistic frontier between the many and the few and the open contestation of representative institutions) that a movement that considers itself as the ultimate outsider resorts to criticize existing political dynamics and arrangements (Urbinati 2014: 130).

Populism can be also understood as a strategy to *access power*. In this second acceptance, populist rhetoric does not limit itself to playing a testimonial role, but is a strategy of electoral mobilization. Politicians might resort to the Manichean and antagonistic discourse of populism for it might be considered an effective electoral strategy, particularly if the electoral contest takes place against a crisis scenario. In this latter understanding, populism is a strategy that actors who seek to change their status from one of outsiders to that of insiders of the political system resort to (Urbinati 2014: 130). The use of a populist strategy to reach government, however, does not necessarily ensure that once in power the new incumbents will exercise

power in a populist way. Populist styles and rhetoric might be abandoned once the goal of accessing power has been reached and consequently the behavior of the new administration when in office might not significantly differ from established ways of doing politics. This is partly the case of some of the so-called cases of European left populism. Once in government, SYRIZA quickly shifted key political positions to adopt a more mainstream political discourse toward the EU and parliamentary democracy, most notably its acceptance to the terms of a third Memorandum (Marvorzacharakis et al. 2017). A similar shift seems to be taking place among the ranks of Spanish PODEMOS on whether they should continue resorting to a populist strategy of rejection and polarization or shift to one of cooperation with the Spanish Socialist Party (Riaño 2016).

Populism in government, however, can lead to a third type of use of populist strategies: a populist exercise of power where governmental resources are used to launch a more fundamental process of regime change. Populism as a strategy of regime change refers to a specific form of governmental exercise that seeks to alter and eventually replace core dimensions of the institutional structure of liberal democracy. Such processes have been taking place in countries like Venezuela and Hungary, where key features of liberal democracy have been threatened by the behaviors and measures adopted by presidents Maduro and Orban's administrations. While not inevitable, populism as government can trigger a particular pattern to regime change characterized by the gradual hybridization of the inherited structure of liberal democracy, whose final outcome is the establishment of a populist regime.

The current diffusion of populism in liberal democracies opens up the possibility of a process of institutional change in terms of the hybridization of existing regimes: a process that takes place within the confines of democracy and that cannot step outside democratic principles without affecting the legitimacy of the populist project. There are, however, significant problems with the "democratizing" path proposed by populism. Populism as a democratic theory exhibits serious conceptual and normative shortcomings due to its incapacity to provide a clear institutional blueprint for its project of radical democracy. Populism exhibits political shortcomings as well, for its critique of the shortcomings of liberal democracy usually serves as justification for a pattern of concentrated and personalized governmental power that is far from addressing the alleged accountability deficits of democracy, but it notoriously worsens them.

Populism will remain a significant contestant to liberal democracy as long as the perceived flaws of existing liberal regimes are not addressed. The present standoff between populist and liberal models of democracy poses a sterile either/or choice between two contrasting interpretations of the democratic ideal. Perhaps, the best way to avoid the present political and conceptual standoff would be to reorient the debate away from both alternatives, that is, to conceive processes of democratic innovation that could properly address the problems that gave support to populist critiques without eliminating those institutional components of liberal democracy that serve to guarantee political and civic freedoms. The latter might require expanding the field of indirect politics by adding new mediating mechanisms that would result in the establishment of more responsive post-liberal democratic regimes.

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