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On populism, presently and through Schumpeter's lens

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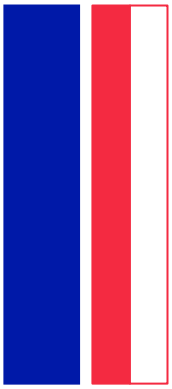

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On populism, presently and through Schumpeter’s lens

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Summary

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I hereby declare that this thesis/dissertation/report is of my authorship and has not been used previously in another course, degree, curricular unit or subject, at this or any other institution. References to other authors (statements, ideas, thoughts) scrupulously respect the rules of attribution and are duly indicated in the text and bibliographical references, in accordance with the rules of referencing. I am aware that the practice of plagiarism and self-plagiarism is an academic offence.

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Resumo

Em Capitalismo, Socialismo e Democracia, Joseph Schumpeter descreve um processo de racionalização que evolui gradualmente ao longo da existência humana e por meio do qual a influência de ideias coletivas "metafísicas" ou "mágicas" na sociedade é gradualmente diminuída. Esse processo é fortemente impulsionado pelo capitalismo, à medida que a necessidade económica reforça a importância da razão no comportamento quotidiano. Crenças tradicionais são cada vez mais questionadas, consideradas irracionais e, eventualmente, rejeitadas. Isso, por sua vez, diminui o papel de fontes externas de identidade e de propósito na existência social dos indivíduos. Gradualmente, algumas pessoas, incapazes de encontrar significado e propósito na autodeterminação individual, tornam-se alienadas da sociedade, incapazes de compreender o mundo e como ele evoluiu.

Nesta dissertação, apresentarei este fenómeno como a razão por de trás do crescimento do populismo de extrema-direita na sociedade atual. Para atingir esse objetivo, irei analisar as diferentes abordagens dentro dos estudos académicos do conceito de populismo e demonstrar como ele é, essencialmente, um movimento político que visa criar ressonância entre as pessoas que se sentem alienadas pela sociedade moderna devido aos efeitos do processo de racionalização.

Keywords: Populism, Racionalização, Capitalismo.

Abstract

In Capitalism Socialism and Democracy Joseph Schumpeter describes a rationalization process, that evolves gradually throughout human existence and through which the influence of “metaphysical” or “magical” collective ideas in society is gradually diminished. This process is heavily propelled by capitalism, as economic necessity reinforces the importance of reason in everyday behavior**,** hence a rationalistic frame of mind. Traditional beliefs are increasingly questioned, deemed irrational and eventually rejected. This in turn diminishes the role of external sources of identity and meaning in the individual’s social existence. Gradually, some people, unable to find meaning and purpose in individual self-determination, become alienated from society, incapable of understanding the world as it has evolved.

In this dissertation, I will present this phenomenon as the reason behind the growth of right-wing populism in current society. To achieve this, I will analyze different approaches inside the scholarly studies of the concept of populism and showcase how it is essentially a political movement which is designed to create resonance among the people who feel alienated by modern society due to the effects of the rationalization process.

Keywords: Populism, Rationalization, Capitalism.

Introduction

When one starts research on a topic so extensively discussed as populism, one is bound to question the usefulness of the effort. In the last ten years alone, how many papers and books have been written about populism? How many scholars have purported to explain the nature of the phenomenon, its growth, and its threat to liberal democracy, and presented proposals on how to deal with it?

And yet we stand in awe when, once again, some populist party with ludicrous, irrational claims grows in support and even wins an election. This perplexity suggests that, despite a plethora of studies, something elusive remains.

In this work, rather than presenting 'solutions', I propose an approach that seeks to clarify the roots of populist support. Instead of focusing on how the current, specific populist claims evolved, I will focus on the structures that created the frame of mind that renders people vulnerable to such claims. In my view, populist support cannot be reduced to a response, say, to economic grievances, or to immigration: this response reflects a larger problem, which is connected to a lack of resonance that certain groups experience in modern societies.

Joseph Schumpeter underscores that, as humanity evolves, a "rationalization process" gradually eliminates the influence of "metaphysical" or "magical" collective ideas in society. This process is heavily propelled by capitalism, as economic necessity reinforces the importance of reason in everyday behavior**,** hence a rationalistic frame of mind. Traditional beliefs are increasingly questioned, deemed irrational and eventually rejected. This in turn diminishes the role of external sources of identity and meaning in the individual's social existence. Gradually, some people, unable to find meaning and purpose in individual self-determination, become alienated from society, incapable of understanding the world as it has evolved. As the number of people experiencing this sense of loss increases, or so I argue, space is created for a populist movement to rise, proposing a different kind of politics that promises to restore people's identity, their connection to themselves and the world. In this sense, populism is a symptom, deeply connected to rationalization, to the roots of capitalism, and to liberal democracy.

Aiming to paint a clear picture of my argument and the many theoretical connections it entails; I have divided this work into four major sections which in turn are divided into smaller subsections.

In section 1, I focus on Schumpeter's work on the concept of rationalization.

In the first subsection I briefly overview Schumpeter´s economic thesis, to understand the intrinsically transformative nature of the capitalist process, including the thesis of the obsolescence of the entrepreneurial function.

In the next subsection, with the understanding of capitalism's tendency to continually destroy social structures, not only pre-capitalist but also capitalism's own, I present entrepreneurial obsolescence as a particular instance of a larger process of rationalization, a process that gradually evolves throughout human history but is significantly propelled by capitalism.

In the third subsection, to better grasp the nature of this process and its consequences, I connect Schumpeter´s work with other concepts closely related to his, namely Max Weber's notion of *Entzauberung*, the disenchantment of the world, and Karl Marx's notion of alienation. The understanding of Marx's and Weber's theory, which are arguably inspirations for Schumpeter's own theory, help us to understand the genesis of the concept of rationalization, its nature and ramifications in modern society.

In section 2 I confront my vision with the relevant literature on populism, with a view to checking how my definition fits with the concept as it is typically used.

Each of the three subsections that constitute this section focuses on one of the main approaches to the concept of populism in the present zeitgeist. These approaches are Laclau's theory, the theory of populism as a political strategy, and the ideational approach to populism.

In section 3 I proceed to connect rationalization and populism, scrutinizing three central components of populist movements that render them especially apt to resonate amongst an alienated group of people, creating the conditions for their growth jointly with rationalization.

The first subsection examines populism as narrative, showcasing the importance of context and manipulation in populist discourse and growth. The second subsection analyzes populism's relation with emotions, demonstrating how its activities aim to resonate with people on an emotional level, rather than a rational one. Finally, the last

subsection connects populist political support with religion, exploring how populism can become the means through which people find meaning in the modern world.

In the last section, I briefly summarize my argument, underscoring that populism is a problem at the root of our societal, political, and economic structures, rather than a surface phenomenon. I also inquire into the ways through which populism might bring about a radical change in the way we view liberal democracy.

1 Schumpeter and the process of rationalization

In 1942, Joseph Schumpeter published “Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy”, a hugely influential book – foreshadowed in many earlier works, such as “Sozialistische Möglichkeiten von heute” (1920/21) - where he presents, *inter alia*, a tendency for capitalism to self-destruct. Capitalism tends to destroy the pre-capitalist framework that sheltered it as well as its own institutional framework, and to cause the obsolescence of the entrepreneur. In this section, I explain how, according to him, all these tendencies are a consequence of a larger process of rationalization, propelled by the capitalist system and the consequences of which surpass the economic realm, spreading across the whole of society. As a matter of fact, capitalism itself represents, in nature and thought, an outcome of the rationalization process, illustrated by the destruction of pre-capitalist institutions as rational thought conquered the human mind.

To fully understand these points, it is necessary to grasp Schumpeter’s conception of capitalism and the exact role of the entrepreneur in this system. First and foremost, it is imperative to establish that Schumpeter’s central aim in his work as a whole is to understand and explain how capitalism evolves due to the endogenous emergence of novelty (Graça Moura 2018, p. 110). In his words, “Capitalism, then, is by nature a form or method of economic change and not only never is but never can be stationary” (Schumpeter 1942, p. 82). This is the case not only because economic life goes on in a social and natural environment the changes of which alter economic data, but also because the capitalist system generates an evolutionary process, which in turn affects the social strata.

The intrinsically evolutionary process of the capitalist system follows from the carrying out of innovations. These innovations can be the introduction of new products in the economic world, the implementation of new production processes, or the opening of new markets, among others. The role of the agent Schumpeter labels “entrepreneur” is to carry out such innovations. This is, quite clearly, a creative response, distinct from ordinary routine activity: to innovate is to develop a new plan and to act accordingly. Innovation is not the production of a new idea but the ability to act upon it, entering unknown territory, outside the realm of routine. In Schumpeter’s terminology, this means that entrepreneurial activities require leadership abilities.

According to Schumpeter, those leadership abilities are not equally distributed amongst individuals. Also, no one is an entrepreneur in all his activities, so it is more appropriate to talk of an entrepreneurial function rather than of the entrepreneur as a profession (Graça Moura 2018, p. 115).

Though it is a creative response, in the sense that it is never uniquely determined by a set of environmental conditions external to the entrepreneurial mind, the entrepreneurial function depends on the institutional arrangement of the society on which it operates (Graça Moura 2015, p. 1131). Capitalism's *differentia specifica* (Schumpeter 1939, p. 117) turns on the set of institutions which allow innovation to flourish as it hitherto never had. It "provides a specific institutional arrangement that propels entrepreneurship, the credit system. The ability of banks to create credit, allows them to finance innovation, providing the entrepreneur with the necessary purchasing power to acquire the means of production needed to carry out their plan" (Graça Moura 2018, p. 116).

The financing of innovation leads to an increase in the existing means of payment used by the entrepreneur to acquire the means of production necessary to his venture before the new products reach the market. Moreover, the process of innovation creates a swarm-like movement that gives rise to a cluster of innovations, especially in related areas (Graça Moura 2018, p. 117). These phenomena lead to an increase in the prices of means of production and of consumer goods, creating a wave of prosperity, where costs rise but also profits. Eventually, the new products reach the market, starting a tumultuous process of competition with the old ones, whereas banks cease to create credit. This will lead to the eventual destruction of firms unable to adapt to the changing conditions. Schumpeter defines this phenomenon of renovation of the capitalist productive structure – and, sociologically, of capitalism's ruling strata - as the process of creative destruction (Graça Moura 2018, p. 123).

What I presented here is merely an approximation of how the capitalist system works, to explain how the transformative nature of the system arises from within and not merely due to exogenous factors[1].

[1] This is merely the explanation for Schumpeter's first, and simplest, approximation of the theory of business cycles. In subsequent approximations he emphasizes other elements, like human error, so as to get increasingly closer to the empirical manifestation of real-world cycles.

In order to understand the full effect of capitalism as a transformative process – its effect beyond the economic sphere strictly defined - we must grasp how capitalist social structures evolve, that is, how they are destroyed and renewed, and, to achieve this, we must turn our attention to Schumpeter's theory of social classes.

As Graça Moura (2015, p. 1134) writes, Schumpeter remarks that the position of a social class depends on the relative social significance of its functions and on the degree to which those functions are successfully performed. He also states that the social significance of any function depends on the degree of leadership needed for its accomplishment. Leadership capabilities are not equally distributed amongst individuals, and accordingly the rise and fall within a given class structure is dependent on individual action. Still, class barriers and processes of entrenchment always exist, hence class positions tend to endure.

Taking account of what was stated before about the capitalist process and the entrepreneurial function, it becomes clear that innovation is the channel through which an individual ascends to the bourgeois class and that the process of creative destruction represents the renewal of the capitalist class. In a broader light, the capitalist process can be seen as "the process in which a class structure and the corresponding institutions are reproduced across time" (Graça Moura 2018, p. 121).

To sum up, in this section we have established that capitalism is in constant evolution due to mechanisms from within. Next, we will dive deeper into "Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy", to understand what this evolution entails and how it propels the process of rationalization.

1.1 The path to "trustified" capitalism and the obsolescence of the entrepreneur

Schumpeter's argument begins with the acknowledgement that the common economic views of his time are unsuited to assess capitalist organization and competition. It is a mistake to envision a "golden era" of perfect competition that morphed itself into a monopolistic age, because "perfect competition had never been more of a reality that it is in the present" (Schumpeter 1942, p. 82): it does not exist. Capitalism is by nature a form of economic change that can never be stationary. Monopolistic markets do exist, but they are temporary outcomes of innovative

competition and certainly not protected from the latter, which always operates if only as a potential competition.

The process of creative destruction implies that competition, in the truest sense, does not merely represent a threat for a firm's profit margins but for the firm's existence itself. The constant pressure of innovation means that, at any point in time, a firm may become obsolete:

> "It is hardly necessary to point out that competition of the kind we now have in mind acts not only when in being but also when it is merely an ever-present threat. It disciplines before it attacks. The businessman feels himself to be in a competitive situation even if he is alone in his field or if, though not alone, he holds a position such that investigating government experts fail to see any effective competition between him and any other firms in the same or a neighboring field and in consequence conclude that his talk, under examination, about his competitive sorrows is all make-believe."
> (Schumpeter 1942, p. 85)

So, the emergence of monopolistic markets and the prevalence of big firms is caused by the nature of the capitalist system and represents an unavoidable step in its evolution.

The shifting waves towards the hegemony of "big business" represent an enormous change in the capitalist order. In the bureaucratized corporation, innovation becomes the business of trained specialists. In this sense, innovation becomes routinized and depersonalized office work (Graça Moura 2018, p. 124). As Schumpeter notes, "the romance of earlier commercial adventure is rapidly wearing way, because so many more things can be strictly calculated that had of old to be visualized in a flash of genius" (Schumpeter 1942, p. 132).

Obviously, this does not mean that innovation ceases, but merely that the role of the entrepreneur and its leadership status becomes obsolete. The obsolescence of the entrepreneur represents a major blow to the entire bourgeois stratum, because whilst not every member of the class is an entrepreneur, it is entrepreneurship that explains the existence and ensures the renovation of this class. Without leadership, the entrepreneur loses its social function and therefore, sooner or later, his or her position: the capitalist class is accordingly doomed.

In a broader sense, the theory of the obsolescence of the entrepreneurial function can be seen as a particular manifestation of a process of "rationalization" that goes on throughout human history but is greatly propelled by the capitalist system.

1.2 Rationalization and capitalism

In this section, I elaborate on the concept of rationalization, summarizing Schumpeter's work.

History, in general, is marked by a gradual increase of the sphere within which individuals and groups try to act according to their own lights, to logical rules and empirical evidence (Graça Moura 2017, p. 131). This process gradually chases from our mind metaphysical beliefs, mystical conceptions, or romantic ideals (Schumpeter 1942, p. 127), creating a severance with classic traditions and modes of conduct. Constantly progressing throughout human history, it is greatly propelled by capitalism.

In small and undifferentiated social groups, collective ideas, which are influenced by non-empirical sources, impose themselves on individual minds more than they do in big and diverse groups (Schumpeter 1942, p. 121). So, as communities grow larger in size and diversity, these ideas gradually lose their grip on individual minds. The rationalization of societies does not imply the complete disappearance of the mystical or "non-rational" sphere of the human thought, but merely, the slow and incessant process through which individuals attempt to act according to their own lights, developing consistent patterns of thought which can be expressed in terms of potential experience (Schumpeter 1942, p. 122). When the habit of rational thought crystallizes itself in the everyday life of individuals, it turns back on the mass of collective ideas, questioning their validity and reason. Ideas who were based on mystical beliefs cannot survive the rationalist scrutiny, as they fail to survive empirical judgement. For example, the divine right to be king, or any divine right for that matter, is questioned and rejected.

In his work, Schumpeter posits that the "rational attitude forced itself on the human mind primarily from economic necessity" (Schumpeter 1942, p. 122). Survival and prosperity in a capitalist society depends on the use of rational tools and logical processes of thinking. As Schumpeter observes, a man faced with an economic problem or decision is much more likely to succeed by utilizing practical reasoning than by resorting to any sort of magical belief. This, he argues, "is due to the inexorable

definiteness and, in most cases, the quantitative character that distinguish the economic from other spheres of human action, perhaps also to the unemotional drabness of the unending rhythm of economic wants and satisfactions" (Schumpeter 1942, p. 123).

Once this economic process of thinking is firmly established, it spreads to all spheres of human life.

In addition, capitalism contains specific characteristics that steer the process of rationalization in certain directions. Firstly, it turns the unit of money into a tool of cost-profit calculations, crystallizing and rationalizing the logic of enterprise (Schumpeter 1942, p. 123), giving it a matter-of-fact measure of success and failure, which spreads across other areas of human behavior. Secondly, in addition to creating the mental attitude of modern science, it provides the men and the means necessary to embody it:

> "There is the growth of rational science and the long list of its applications. Airplanes, refrigerators, television and that sort of thing are immediately recognizable as results of the profit economy. But although the modern hospital is not as a rule operated for profit, it is nonetheless the product of capitalism not only, to repeat, because the capitalist process supplies the means and the will, but much more fundamentally because capitalist rationality supplied the habits of mind that evolved the methods used in these hospitals. And the victories, not yet completely won but in the offing, over cancer, syphilis and tuberculosis will be as much capitalist achievements as motorcars or pipelines or Bessemer steel have been. In the case of medicine, there is a capitalist profession behind the methods, capitalist both because to a large extent it works in a business spirit and because it is an emulsion of the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie. But even if that were not so, modern medicine and hygiene would still be by-products of the capitalist process just as is modern education."
>
> (Schumpeter 1942, p. 125)

The rationalistic thought propelled by capitalism represents a certain outlook on the world or, as Schumpeter notes, a certain attitude, "a way of asking certain questions and go about answering them in a certain way" (Schumpeter 1942, p. 124).

It is essential to note that rationalization does not imply the development of a superior rationality or the ability to construct a perfect society using 'purely' rational mechanisms. Rationalization means the process through which individuals begin to increasingly think according to their own lights, which does not necessarily imply that the techniques and information used in this process are the most accurate.

Rationalization, as the process according to which individuals begin to think according to their own lights is, then, by nature, also a process of individualization. In essence**,** it is through rationalization that the individual, as such, is born. In the gradual societal transformation, opportunities and alternatives widen, placing an ever-growing responsibility on individuals to shape their own lives. Identity is no longer determined externally, but rather depends on one's collaboration, as the agent is free to choose identity-constituting roles and relationships for himself (Rosa 2013, p. 474).

1.3 Rationalization, *Entzauberung* and alienation

So far, I have focused solely on Schumpeter's work, starting from his economic theory, and working my way towards rationalization. Now, it is helpful to connect his work to two concepts that inspired his thought on rationalization, Weber's *Entzauberung* and Marx's alienation. I believe this digression is fruitful because, in part, Schumpeter's theory represents a bridge between these two concepts, and understanding the genesis of rationalization will help us grasp its nature and ramifications.

The first and most obvious connection to Schumpeter's thought is the Weberian conception of rationalization as *Entzauberung.* For Weber, rationalization is the "disenchantment of the world", that is, "the disappearance of the supernatural and the metaphysical in favor of a hardheaded concern with the here-and-now" (Langlois 2007, p. 19). As in Schumpeter, in Weber, the charismatic leader is the driving force of progress and change throughout human history. However, increasing organizational complexity requires this personal authority to be replaced by a set of traditional rules. In pre-capitalist society these rules were based upon supernatural/religious justifications. In the modern world, traditional rules are progressively replaced by bureaucratic rules, grounded upon pragmatic reasoning rather than metaphysical belief (Langlois 2007, p. 19).

In addition to the connections with Weber, Schumpeter´s view also draws on some aspects of Marx, who, he often concedes, is one of his major influences[2]. Despite stressing the interdependence between the conditions of production and the social

[2] In Schumpeter (1937), he classifies Marx as one of his two main influences regarding the core of his economic argument. In Schumpeter (1942) the connections to, and divergences from, Marx are obviously apparent.

structure, Schumpeter agrees that forms of production have an immanent tendency to change and are the main determinants of social structures, which in turn breed attitudes, actions, and civilizations (Graça Moura 2015, p. 1146). In addition, there are similarities between Schumpeter's conception of rationalization and Marx's concept of alienation:

> "These new types were now cast adrift from the fixed order of earlier times, from the environment that had shackled and protected people for centuries . . . They were severed from the things that had been constant year after year . . . They were on their own, enmeshed in the pitiless logic of gainful employment, mere drops in the vast ocean of industrial life, exposed to the inexorable pressures of competition. They were freed from the control of ancient patterns of thought, of the grip of institutions and organs that taught and represented these outlooks in village, manor, and guild. They were removed from the old world, engaged in building a new one for themselves—a specialized, mechanized world. Thus, they were all inevitably democratized, individualized, and rationalized . . . Trained to economic rationalism, these people left no sphere of life unrationalized, questioning everything about themselves, the social structure, the state, the ruling class."
> (Schumpeter, 1919, p. 190)

The connection with Marxian alienation also helps us to better grasp the consequences of process of rationalization in terms of creating a certain frame of mind among a certain part of the population.

Alienation usually refers to subjective experiences of estrangement, powerlessness, isolation, and detachment (Oversveen 2021, p. 442). A man is alienated when he does not feel himself as an acting agent in the world and when the objects around him feel alien to him, standing above or in opposition to him, even if they are the products of his own creation (Fromm 1961, p. 44). For Marx, this process starts with the capitalist mode of production, as the worker is separated from the results of his labor, creating a sense of estrangement between himself and his work and a feeling of unfulfillment. On the contrary, the worker feels that he denies himself in his work (Marx 1976, p. 398).

Marx also envisioned in his work the ways in which capitalism's extraordinary capacity for technological and scientific change, as production methods are constantly being revolutionized, produces a force that instigates constant societal change. In a capitalist society, traditional and hierarchical social relations and values are replaced by

an expanded and impersonal economic system. In this transition, nature and society lose their mystical and powerful aura, and are treated as objects that can be known and controlled (Oversveen 2021, p. 448-449). With the expansion of production, capitalism tends to produce abstract and impersonal forms of social organization, that subject everyone to the same set of universal and seemingly impersonal economic imperatives.

After evolving in our economic life, rationalistic thought spreads to all areas of society, from politics to art, to science and even religion. In the economy, rationalization causes the obsolescence of the entrepreneur and the mechanization of innovative action. As Schumpeter (1942) notes, capitalist society is intrinsically "anti-heroic".

In the political field, crucially, we have also seen a growing process of rationalization and bureaucratization. Gradually, politics has become less of an ideological confrontation between opposing political and social conceptions. National governments are tasked with solving technical problems such as deficient investment, unemployment, trade disruptions, and other market inequities (Aronowitz 1989, p. 47), as if the economy were a machine that could be precisely adjusted to provide stable growth. This 'technocratic' approach to the political function removed the object of political action from political discussion, as governments from either right or left accepted the same goal, providing only slightly different means to achieve it.

> "Politics became a battle not between competing visions of the good society, but competing teams of administrators of the market system, chosen on the basis of claims to competence and honesty rather than for their ideas."
> (Hopkin 2020, p. 9)

In turn, the decline of ideological appeals in political debate led to a massive growth in political disengagement with growing abstention rates and a general lack of interest in politics.

So, in the economy, the allure of "heroic" capitalism is replaced by massive multinational corporations; politically, ideological views of a better world are replaced by technical adjustments in variables; and culturally and socially, previous stable sources of purpose and meaning are, increasingly since capitalism conquered the world, questioned, and destroyed.

Despite the gradual increase in bureaucratic organization and rational thought, capitalist society does not eliminate sub- or super-rational impulses, though: it simply removes them from the confines of social or religious tradition, as Schumpeter (1942, pp. 127) observes. Additionally, he proceeds**,** capitalist society is unable to create an emotional attachment to its social order, creating a vacuum where certain human impulses are left without a vehicle through which they can be expressed. In due course, this is bound to create resentment amongst those who feel alienated from the social order.

In Schumpeter's work, the endpoint of the rationalization process would be socialism, as it represented the absolute disappearance of the entrepreneur, and the ultimate attempt at rationalizing the economy[3]. Here, though, I will discuss the rationalization process as the primary cause for the growth of right-wing populism in the modern political scene[4].

2 Populism

Before I explain the connection between rationalization and populism in greater detail, it is necessary to understand what populism is in the first place, and its modern forms.

One thing that everybody can agree on when it comes to populism is that it does not have a universally accepted definition. Different theories and political thinkers ascribe diverse meanings, forms, and purposes to this political phenomenon. So, to establish my point, I will have to present the definition that I believe better suits the current political situation. I will start with a brief exploration of the main approaches to populism, to try to find the core concepts that will allow me to better illustrate my point.

[3] While late capitalism continued to develop in capitalist societies, the transition to socialism never happened. The so-called socialist economies emerged mostly in pre-capitalist societies, such as Russia in 1917 (or, later on, in other economically backward countries), or in the part of Eastern Europe the Soviet Union occupied or controlled after World War II. There are almost no examples left anywhere in the globe.

[4] As various authors have remarked (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, among others), populism is a political phenomenon that transcends left/right distinctions. The choice to focus more particularly on right-wing populism stems from its current relevance in western societies and from practical reasons. Despite its bilaterality, right-wing and left-wing populism still require different and particular approaches and there would not be enough space in this work to carefully analyze left-wing populism. In future research it would be interesting to analyze the relationship between rationalization and left-wing populism.

The notion of "the people" as sovereigns is the root of representative democracy as we know it. Coincidentally, it is also the concept that, through some twists and turns, becomes the defining idea of populism. In a sense, then, populism has been present since the dawn of modern democratic regimes[5]; however, scholarly studies of the concept have sky-rocketed in recent years, given the rise in support for many populist parties in western societies. These studies have spurred a myriad of different theoretical and methodological approaches to the term, who attempt to understand the concept of populism in its different forms and actions.

Despite this variety, there are, as Mudde & Kaltwasser (2017) highlight, some approaches that have garnered the most influence among recent studies of the phenomenon. As a complete review of all the existing definitions of the concept would be impossible in a work of this size, I have selected three approaches that I consider to be the most prevalent for our time and for this work, as they allow for a comprehensive view of many essential aspects of populism both in their similarities and their differences. These three are: Laclau's approach, the political strategy approach, and the ideational approach.

2.1 Laclau´s populist reason

Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism is one of the most influential and controversial theories on this subject. This is due to the innovative approach that the author uses, where, instead of viewing populism as a sort of 'disease' that affects liberal democracies, it considers populism to be the concept that best represents the political as such. Instead of being considered a form of distortion or manipulation, populism is seen as the expression of a specific political rationale (Peruzzotti 2019, p. 34).

In Laclau´s approach, liberal democracies are the disease and populism is the cure. The institutions of liberal democracies serve as neutralizing and depoliticizing tools, as they seek to absorb different individualized demands within a successful institutional

[5] "This idea of the people as the ground of authority would become a beacon for the political imagination of popular movements in every democratizing government, from the eighteenth century up to this day. The idea that "the people" can authoritatively recover power from the government to reconstitute institutions, or wrestle power from corrupt or self-serving elites, would be the ground from which the earliest movements that could be properly called "populist" emerged in the nineteenth century." (Kaltwasser, Cristóbal Rovira, and others (eds), 2017)

system. By individualizing social and political demands, 'the people', as a homogenous identity with unified demands ceases to exist and, according to this theory, so does politics itself (Laclau 2005, p. 37).

As individual demands become less homogenous, forming various smaller groups with particular and contrasting interests, institutional arrangements become incapable of properly addressing social demands, leading to a crisis of representation which opens the door for the rise of a populist movement. In the wake of this crisis, the population is forced to unify their individual demands in a homogenous claim, thereby identifying themselves as 'the people'. The construction of the people and the formation of their unified claims breaks with the principles of political symmetry and equality, as the people see themselves as 'the whole', excluding any dissident voices to the role of the "enemy" (Peruzzotti 2019, p. 37).

For Laclau, the birth of political asymmetry, with the construction of the people and its enemies into homogenized opposing groups, doesn't represent a political problem. On the contrary, it is the true representation of the political game.

In order to construct the people, populism relies on the use of vague and ambiguous terms, empty signifiers, who allow for the different individual demands to be subsumed under the same homogenous voice. The ultimate force of unification in populist movements comes in the form of the leader, who becomes himself a signifier, representing the embodiment of the people´s voice and political claims (Peruzzotti 2019, p. 38). The success of any populist movement means the creation of a new political hegemony where the empty signifiers become crystallized into permanent systems of identification.

While this theory is very relevant to understand the relationship between populism and liberal democracy, as well as the surge of strong identity politics in response to a crisis in representative democracies, the ultimate conclusion that populism represents a process of transition to true politics and democracy is not aligned with the consequences of successful populist movements that we have seen throughout our time. The homogenization of the people as the rulers and the exclusion of everybody that does not fit into that group represents, in truth, a dictatorship of the majority, if indeed it is a majority. Instead of reigniting the political game, the latter is nullified, as there is no need for politics when there is only a homogenous ruling group. In addition

– and I will return to this point later - the creation of “the people” under populist movements usually contains a degree of manipulation that seeks to steer people’s volitions into specific political ideas, that don´t necessarily represent their interests. Furthermore, the empty signifiers utilized to unify social claims are often so empty that they don’t represent any plan for actual change in society. And let us not forget that many populist parties have risen to power inside the institutions of liberal democracies without breaking them.

2.2 Populism as a political strategy

The political strategy approach to populism is less interested in the set of ideas that form the populist worldview, but more concerned with their actions and ultimate goals. According to this view, populism is a means of gaining or maintaining political power based on the mass mobilization of supporters.

This perspective places much emphasis on the inversion of political influence between “the people” and the leader. Instead of being a bottom-up mass movement, where the people take the country’s fate into their own hands, populism acts as a formation of the people that intrinsically follow the leader, who claims to act on their behalf (Weyland 2017, p. 79). This way, populism becomes a top-down strategy through which a leader utilizes his support to achieve certain goals that he himself defines.

While an understanding of this inversion is essential to understanding the current populist surge, it is important to note that populist movements usually contain aspects of grassroots mobilization and of top-down mobilization simultaneously, forming a complicated relationship that needs careful consideration (Barr 2019, p. 48).

In order to attain and maintain popular support, populists usually resort to quasi-direct appeals that mainly come from the leader, who embodies the “will of the people”. The leader serves as the unifying force of the populist movement, behind whom the people rally (Weyland 2017, p. 84-85). This leader is then tasked with spreading its message through different avenues, whether it is social media or television, with the aim of reaching the maximum number of people. In this process he or she usually resorts to an anti-elite discourse, but according to this theoretical framework, this use does not stem from ideological or ideational beliefs, but merely from a deliberate political strategy

that allows for a formation and strong identification of the people against its enemies, the elite.

Importantly, populism represents a different view of representation in politics. Populism places identification at the center and the relationship between the leader and the supporters is seen as a personal one.

> "This deep association gives populism the intensity that provides many followers with a sense of belonging, which liberal, pluralist democracy with its reliance on "cold" procedural mechanisms lacks."
> (Weyland 2017, p. 86)

This aspect will be essential for this work, for I see populism as a political movement whose purpose is to create resonance amongst people who feel alienated or disenchanted with the world, due to the process of rationalization.

Despite this, labelling populism merely as a political strategy to obtain power and support is to miss the specific avenues through which populists search for their support, as well as the societal conditions that allow for the populist strategy to become such a powerful vehicle to mass political support.

2.3 Ideational approach

According to the ideational approach, populism can be described as "a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, the pure people versus the corrupt elite, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017, p. 6). The term "thin-centered ideology" refers to the vagueness and malleability of populist beliefs, as they often come attached to multiple, different ideologies that might even be contradictory. It also captures the fact that populism has no intention of providing complex answers to political questions, but on the contrary, intends to simplify its answers to the maximum.

Additionally, populism also incorporates a moralistic view of politics, as the separation between the people and the elites is intrinsically moral (Mueller 2016, p. 30).

Clearly, we must understand who constitutes the people and the elites, and what is the common will. Populism always involves the claim that just a part of the people is

the ‘people’ and that only populist leaders are able to represent the ‘real people’. When close attention is paid, we realize that, in this scenario, the people are a symbolic representation, “a homogeneous and morally unified body whose alleged will can be played off against actual election results in democracies” (Mueller 2016, p. 50). In this “fictional” conception of the people, the “general will” emerges, not as the result of citizens’ participation, not even, necessarily, as the will of the majority, but as the will of the “true citizens”, whose voice only the populist leader is able to hear and express:

> “The leader correctly discerns what we correctly think, and sometimes he might just think the correct thing a little bit before we do.”
> (Mueller 2016, p. 62)

Contrary to what the term populism could *prima facie* suggest, one important factor of populist activity is to exclude everything that it labels as the establishment (Urbinati 2019, p. 81). Despite this, it is important to note that the elite or the establishment are not linked to social economic status, but to a moral division. The anti-establishment roots of populist movements do not intend to establish any kind of direct democracy, where the ‘people’ hold the ‘power’. Instead, the aim is to replace the current elite, seen as morally corrupt, by another elite, representing the interests of the morally good people (Urbinati 2019, p. 95).

This is why it is difficult to understand certain approaches that view populism “as a positive force for the mobilization of the (common) people and for the development of a communitarian model of democracy” or as a means of “reintroducing conflict into politics and fostering the mobilization of excluded sectors of society with the aim of changing the status quo” (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017, p. 3). The definition of the ‘common’ people and their will utilized by populists is fabricated by the leader, often a member of the elite, who has no real interest and presents no actual plan to solve the problems his or her supporters might face.

This begs an important question: if the populists fabricate the people, their will, and the elites who imprison them, how are they able to gather such resonance with large parts of the population? Later in this dissertation, I will seek to explain how viewing

populism as the result of a larger process of rationalization enables us to understand the basis for populist support.

As many studies have proposed, rather than 'either-or' thinking, the study of populist support should focus on the complex relationship between demand and supply factors (Molls & Jetten 2020, p. 3). In this dissertation, populist movements are viewed as an attempt to read voter sentiments as well as shaping them into a particular political structure of thinking and acting.

For this, we must look at the psychology of humans when it comes to politics. In "Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy", Schumpeter (pp. 262) proposes that citizens do not always feel the highest degree of responsibility in their political involvement and, therefore, do not necessarily apply their full capacities of rational and critical thought. On the contrary, when it comes to politics, people's thinking has a tendency of becoming "associative and effective".

This problem is exacerbated by the existence of political groups whose interest is to stage "political shows" with the goal of, to a certain extent, manufacture the "general will" (Schumpeter 1942, p. 263). To achieve this goal, these groups adopt strategies of action and communication who attempt to contact the "subconscious", avoiding rational arguments and discouraging critical thinking.

> "The ways in which issues and the popular will on any issue are being manufactured is exactly analogous to the ways of commercial advertising. We find the same attempts to contact the subconscious. We find the same technique of creating favorable and unfavorable associations which are the more effective the less rational they are. We find the same evasions and reticences and the same trick of producing opinion by reiterated assertion that is successful precisely to the extent to which it avoids rational argument and the danger of awakening the critical faculties of the people."
> (Schumpeter 1942, p. 263)

These strategies often involve the manipulation of information and 'facts' in order to fit a certain political message or the citizen's preconceived ideas.

When I mention a 'fabricated will', I am not claiming that these political groups hold such a complete control over people's minds which enables them to create fictional problems. The populist political message usually derives from genuine problems, but its

focus is to “twist existing volitional premises into a particular shape and not merely the attempt to implement them or to help the citizen make up his mind” (Schumpeter 1942, p. 264).

3 Rationalization and Populism

In the previous section I presented the three main approaches to the concept of populism. From this analysis I retrieve three central aspects of populist movements: strong identity politics amidst a crisis of representation; an inversion of the relationship between the political leader and its supporters; and the intricacies of populist anti-elite discourse.

As I have shown, rationalization continuously diminishes the role of metaphysical beliefs, magical aspects, and traditional values in society. Instead, it gradually increases individual self-determination. For some, this transition represents an increase in freedom, as the external shackles of society lose their grip and individuals are free to act and be as they choose. For others, the loss of a stable, external, and predictable social roles and values represents a loss of meaning and purpose in the world. These people, who feel lost in the modern “chaos” are the perfect targets for the political discourse of populism.

In this section, I will re-analyze populism through the lens of the process of rationalization, and show how, at its core, populism is a movement centered around creating resonance with people who feel disenchanted or alienated from the world. From the analysis that I have made concerning the different theories and studies on populist movements, I contend, that this resonance is achieved, mainly, through three central aspects of populist discourse and activity: its narrative focus, its manipulation of emotions, and its connection to religion.

3.1 Populism as narrative

Populist discourse centers around a narrative structure, as its main goal is to make certain events be perceived in the particular way that better suits the leader’s political ambitions and aspirations. The discourse will incorporate a sense of urgency, a call to action, and a grim and apocalyptic view of the present, a scenario where the future needs to be rescued. Populism will attempt to create a deeper connection with its

supporters, focusing on emotions, dreams, and beliefs, rather than policies or concrete political plans.

What I have quoted above from Schumpeter, regarding some political actors and their interest in staging political shows, ties in with the populist emphasis on narrative and spectacle. It is through this use of narrative that populists connect deep and complex political issues with emotions and values.

In general, narratives are an essential tool through which human beings make sense of their social world (Nordensvard 2021, p. 863). They function as sense-making tools, who allow us to construct meaningful totalities out of scattered events (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2003, pp. 92-93). In the construction of the plot, the discourse must introduce a conflict, which represents the differences between the actors - the hero, and his opponents - as well as a perspective that defines success and failure in the hero´s goal (Nordensvard 2021, p. 865).

I will explore this in greater detail in the rest of this paper, but, in general, populist narratives present a homogenized group of people, 'the people', who are good and pure, that must fight against the 'bad' elites that have taken control of their country. As noted earlier, the populist leader takes central stage in this plot, as the truth teller and the savior, who can defeat these corrupt elites and defend the interests of the 'true' people. Additionally, these narratives often evoke a call to the 'great past' of a nation that must be restored.

It is important to note that the use of the narrative is essential not only as a means of conveying a political message, but also because the act of staging people in a narrative is itself important. As mentioned, narratives allow us to create meaningful totalities out of scattered events, which becomes even more essential when we consider people who feel disenchanted with the world. The narrative allows the overcoming of that feeling of meaninglessness, because it gives people a sense of belonging and a call to action. Alienation is turned into resonance as the narrative tells people who they are, what is happening, and what they must do.

The narrative is essential not only in its content, but also in its presentation. Populist movements often place a great deal of importance on spectacle and "stage-performance techniques" to further their political narratives, with special attention to the populist leader, who usually attains celebrity status and whose actions and discourse

present much emphasis on appearance/performance (Wodak 2013, p. 28). Creating a spectacle is an essential focus of these movements, who often produce scandal, through the use of calculated ambivalence, with the goal of attracting media and public attention (Wodak 2013, p. 33). It is not rare that even before they have gathered significant political support, populist leaders are already television and social media "sensations", thanks to their shocking remarks. The focus on the scandal, the shock, and the spectacle, is the counterpart of their radical anti-intellectualism, their aggressive exclusionary rhetoric that boasts an "arrogance of ignorance" (Wodak 2013, p. 28).

This arrogance is related to the much-discussed concept of post-truth. This concept refers to the notion that, in certain conditions, referring to facts is less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief (Zeli 2023, p. 59). The hopelessness of referring to facts is connected to a deeper issue, which is the impossibility of socially conveying reality, truth and meaning in today's highly fractured society, where the advent of modern technologies and social media, allows individuals to live completely isolated in their own constructed realities (Zeli 2023, p. 61).

Through narrative, populists offer a 'plausible' reality that is rendered immune to facts and critical thought, but resonates with people´s feelings and emotions, effectively shaping perceived reality as they please and excluding every contrasting voice out of the conversation. This problem is exacerbated by current media culture, as spectacle itself has become an essential part of everyday life:

> "Simply put, the rhetoric of populism is not the only populist rhetoric, nor is it ever only a populist rhetoric; the aesthetic relations of popular spectacle itself reproduce this rhetoric on their own terms all the time, and in the context of new media culture, we must necessarily imagine the ontological production of populist rhetoric that Laclau draws out in detail as a figuration of the social that must harmonize with a million other such figurations, or else, successfully compete with them on yet another register of hegemonic status."
> (Sutherland 2014, p. 342).

The narrative is a tool that populists use to make their discourse resonate with its supporters on a more emotional level. If we want to understand their support, we must understand the complex role of emotions in the political space.

3.2 Populism and emotions

Emotions take on an interesting role when applied to the political sphere. They are neither fully rational, since they often disregard self-interest and the real causes of events, nor irrational, since they express people's position in the social world (Illouz 2023, p. 1966). The emotions that inform political thinking comprise two sides. On the one hand, they can be the shared feelings of a group of people who experience similar social and economic conditions. On the other hand, they are also the result of a conscious effort by political actors, media outlets and other forces, who attempt to shape citizens' vague sentiments into a specific political framework or ideology (Illouz 2023, p. 1997).

Emotional thought, then, operates according to certain tendencies. It generalizes, in the sense that it places individuals either as members of a community or as enemies of that community, and it maximizes or idealizes certain objects, exacerbating their qualities as either absolutely good or bad as it takes every situation to the most extreme conclusion (Bird-Pollan 2021, p. 44).

In turn, rationalization, as it destroys the societal structures who sheltered certain rational-emotional impulses regarding society, community, or religion, forces people to "try to make systematic what cannot be made systematic because, like love or hatred, certain feelings are not the sort of thing that admit of full rational articulation" (Bird-Pollan 2021, p. 49) People who identify with certain communal values feel the changing societal order is a threat to their core principles and way of life. In this scenario, they feel the need to find political representation with the objective of fighting for their right to exist (Bird-Pollan 2021, p.49).

Populism can be seen as the direct result of political actors taking a group of people experiencing a vague feeling of disenchantment, loss of meaning, loss of structure, and loss of purpose, stemming from the ongoing process of rationalization, and shaping those emotions into new political structures and ideologies. This is where we can see the relationship between the earlier mentioned demand and supply-side factors. The demand-side, rather than stemming from specific grievances of the population, represents more of a general 'feeling of grievance' that a large part of the population is experiencing. This helps to explain why there are many factors that can be seen as possible explanations for populist support, from economic grievances to cultural

ones. On the other hand, simply analyzing the demand side factors is to ignore the very careful and well-thought-out political strategies, positioning, and discourse that populist parties have adopted in their political activity. As I said before, and will continue to explore, the specific way in which certain social or cultural problems are brought to the center of political debate by populist actors is as important as the problem itself.

In this light, it becomes essential to directly address some of the specific emotions most prevalent in populist political discourse.

As it has been widely acknowledged, one of the primary emotions exploited by populists is resentment. The politics of resentment involve the interaction between different social identities, the sense of political irrelevance, and anxieties over the loss of social and economic status (L. Cohen 2019, p. 26-27). Political discourse takes a group of people experiencing a sense of loss and anxiety and frames that loss as result of the undeserved success of another social group. By doing this, it creates a conflict between a deserving group who has been usurped, and an undeserving group who seems to "cut-ahead" (L. Cohen 2019, p. 27). This explains why populist discourse has been effective in directing the anger of people from the lowest economic strata to immigrants and not to the richest minority of the population[6], as immigrants are the ones directly competing for the same jobs or social welfare. The dichotomy between deserving and undeserving social groups also matches the previously mentioned need some have of feeling a sense of moral superiority, a sense that stems not just from their individual life, but from an exterior group identity.

While the feeling of resentment arises out of the contrast between one group's failure and another group's supposedly undeserved success, the primary negative emotions are mostly connected with two other essential emotions: fear and nostalgia.

As some have pointed out, fear is increasingly becoming the distinct feeling of current society. Nowadays, we seem to be "less moved by the promise of advancement than we do by the fear of exclusion" (Bude 2018, p. 17). In a society that emphasizes individualism and the possibility of personal success as result of one's individual action, the confrontation of such expectations with the failure of most people to experience them seems to have spurred a myriad of different fears concerning one's social, cultural,

[6] Left-wing populist movements usually do target their attention to this minority.

and economic standing. The emphasis on competition has a negative affect amongst those who feel they have lost the race and, by consequence wasted their life. They feel a sense of humiliation that might reflect itself in a "tendency to withdraw, and an attitude of being offended by life itself" (Bude 2018, p. 59). In today's society, it feels that "one is overwhelmed by a sense of having been catapulted into a world to which one no longer belongs" (Zulehner 2016, p. 57).

The fear of simply drifting through life seems to have encapsulated a large part of the population without discernable purpose (Bude 2018, p. 18). This fear is a direct consequence of the process of rationalization, as it directly stems from people´s inability to find meaning in what is perceived to be a structureless society, an inability that I have previously discussed, and it can be utilized by political actors to support many different agendas, whether it be discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities, immigration control, or protectionist economic policies.

Populism, in sum, is capable of weaponizing the feelings of anger, fear, and resentment that people experience due to a sense of 'lost purpose' or 'lost meaning'. But, to complete the picture, it is necessary to analyze another feeling, one that unifies recent populist movements: the feeling of nostalgia.

Etymologically, 'nostalgia' means "a painful yearning to return home" (Davis 1979, p. 1). More specifically, nostalgia evokes the notion of a positive past, as a stable source of value, meaning, structure, community, identity, and agency, in comparison to a present in which these values are felt to be missing, threatened or subverted (Tannock 1995, p. 454-455). This sentiment represents a yearning for a lost golden era of the past defined by its moral coherence, heroic virtue, and ethical certainty (Stauth and Turner 1988, p. 47). Present in nostalgia, there is also a sense of lost simplicity, spontaneity, and authenticity (Elçi 2021, p. 699).

In the political sphere, nostalgia is used in a collective sense, meaning that it is "contingent upon thinking of oneself in terms of a particular social identity or as a member of a particular group" (Elçi 2021. p. 699). In this sense, nostalgia is a vehicle through which people use the past as a source of meaning and identity that they seem incapable of finding in the present. More than an objective yearning for the past, nostalgia is a yearning for a safety, certainty, and purpose. The past, a past that has never

existed as it is portrayed**,** is an object stemming from people's frustrations with the present, created to represent all the things that the present does not.

> "It is a search for continuity in amid threats of discontinuity."
> (Davis 1979, p. 35)

This why it is essential for the nostalgic narrative to see the transition from the past to the present as a radical and definitive break caused by external factors. It sees the present as a completely separate world from the utopic past, refusing to accept that the gradual process of transformation that occurs through time and turns the past into the present is formed by internal forces and mechanisms that were present in that past (Tannock 1995, p. 460).

Pertinent to this discussion are also the concepts of "restorative" or "reflective" nostalgia. While the first involves attempts to reinstate a past set of cultural and social arrangements, the second is more concerned with the past as a means of creating the conditions for a re-evaluation and differential perception of the present (Kenny 2018, p. 411). Populist movements usually present characteristics of both forms of nostalgia but, more often than not, their actions fit within reflective nostalgia as they are more focused on delivering a type of message and inciting a form of reaction than in seriously attempting to turn back the clock to previous times.

Alongside the content of the message, the vehicle through which the latter is delivered plays an important role in the populist movement. The media, in its many modern forms, is essential not only as a means of spreading the message as quickly and widely as possible, but also because the medium itself informs the form and content of the message[7].

3.3 Populism and religion

In the advent of rationalization in capitalist society, the process of disenchantment diminishes the grip of religious beliefs and activities in the fabric and

[7] Relevant to this argument, is not only the way in which these political agents use the media as a source of growth for their popular support, but also a more general process of "mediatization" that has transformed political discourse as a whole. The "mediatization" of politics can be seen as process through which political discourse becomes dominated by certain practices of media logic (Kissas 2018, p. 262).

organization of society. This factor must not be understated when studying the populist phenomena of 21st century politics. Not only has religion been one of the flagships through which populists look to gain support but**,** in their practices, populist movements are not dissimilar from religious activities. It seems that in the "spiritual vacuum", politics has been the field where people look for spiritual guidance and meaning in the human condition (Zúquete 2017, p. 572-573).

All of the components of populism that I have been discussing, such as narrative and emotions, come together when we analyze the religious or quasi-religious nature of the problem.

In this sense, populism appears as the complete contrast to bureaucratic politics. Instead of administrative visions and policies for society, we have a political discourse with heavy emphasis on a confrontation of good vs evil that detaches itself from the "normal" and holds the promise of the "extraordinary" (Zúquete 2017, p. 574). As I mentioned, the separation between the people and the elites is intrinsically moralistic and, in the light of this vision, it becomes a confrontation between the sacred and the profane.

Populist movements, then, can be seen as political religions built on three basic pillars: charismatic leadership, a moral community, and a mission of salvation (Zúquete 2017, p. 578). The leader takes on a central role, embodying the prophet, the martyr, and the missionary, as he represents a pillar of morality and righteousness and, most importantly, a defender of the people. The people represent the moral sacred community, who separates itself from the corruption of the profane surroundings. Within the community, historical figures, places, and myths gain a status of adoration, as they become symbols of the glorious past which has been corrupted in modern society. The mission of salvation represents a break with the present, which is seen as corrupt and profane - a place where real people are subjugated by the elites, that needs to be completely transformed to precipitate a change in values and a moral rebirth for the nation. This mission is usually rooted in a narrative of restoring what has been lost, pointing to a distant, often fictitious past, where sacred values were respected (Zúquete 2017, p. 580-583).

> "From this perspective, doing politics means making certain elements sacred and giving them primacy within a social whole. This ensures that the groups composing it direct themselves toward these objects considering their sacrality. By this, I mean that they respect the prescribed considerations for approaching them, direct themselves towards them with respect and care, participate in the rituals that recreate and celebrate them, etc. Similarly, this implies a negative side when certain objects are made infamous or insignificant and relegated to the margins of a given social whole."
> (Basso 2024, p. 42)

Taking this into consideration, populist movements might represent something much more complex that what is often discussed. Instead of representing just a vehicle for people to release their social and economic grievances, populism might be the engine through which people find re-enchantment in the world. They are the place in which people find their identity, their salvation and their connection and purpose. This could explain why populist discourse has been so effective against traditional politics, even though its plans to solve people's problems are not very concrete, and why it seemingly resists every criticism or confrontation with facts. Since it is a matter of faith rather than reasoning, it can dispense with concrete plans or facts, in the same way religion does not need to prove the existence of God.

4 A foundational problem for liberal democracy

I have explained how the rationalization process gradually increases throughout human history, especially in capitalism, and what this gradual increase entails for human society. Additionally, I have elaborated a multidimensional analysis of populism to illustrate how it functions as a means of creating resonance with the "victims" of rationalization. I hope that my argument is now clear, even though some topics still need to be addressed.

My approach, despite having a different starting point, does not intend to dismiss other arguments that have been at the forefront of the analysis of populism. The correlation between cultural backlash, economic grievances, or immigration and the populist phenomenon is well-established. What my argument proposes is a unifying framework that underlies all these partial explanations, rendering them part of a single structural process.

As far as I can see, focusing on specific problems as causes for the rise of populist support is to address the latter in the same way as any other type of political support. It entails regarding populism as merely a response or possible solution to a circumstantial problem and ignoring the structural one that is the basis of that support. It means looking at the results rather than processes, ignoring the overall, ongoing process that I have outlined in this work, which led to things as they stand today. This viewpoint fails to explain why populist leaders are so resistant to failure and contradiction. It also fails to fully explain the explicit, polar division between anti-populism and pro-populism, a division that goes beyond age, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity, because it is predicated on a more nuclear structural difference.

The act of supporting a populist leader has become an integral part of some people's identity. The difference between populist parties and traditional parties is that populist support realizes itself in the act of supporting rather than on the results of political action. In this way, it serves as an external source of identity and meaning for those who feel that these structures are missing in current society.

As I have discussed, we have a large portion of the population who feel disenchanted, disengaged, lost, etc. A political message that arises feelings and passions rather than rational thought gives them, not the solution to their actual problems, but the escape from their absence of connection to the world. Marx (1844) was probably right when he claimed that religion was the people's opium, he just failed to see how, in the face of trouble, we would long for escapism rather than solutions.

This can be exemplified by the January 6, 2021, happenings. Why did Trump supporters storm the Capitol? What was their goal? What did they achieve? There was no revolution, Biden became president and served his mandate as had every other president. But to focus on the goals is to miss the point. The important thing wasn't 'how is our action going to help solve our troubles?', it was that 'the people' were united, engaged and righteous.

While I have been writing this dissertation, the 2024 American presidential election took place, and Donald Trump was elected president for another four years. Since his new government has, in just a few months, far surpassed what happened in 2016, I feel it is pertinent to discuss briefly what is happening, even though events so recent do not facilitate a serious analysis.

This time around, clearly, there is a much more aggressive attempt to erode the institutional arrangements of democratic and economic activity. There have been attacks on free trade, with protectionist tariffs, there have been threats to the sovereignty of foreign countries, there have been attacks on the freedom of the press, there has been disrespect for courts, and much more. Maybe not surprisingly, it is increasingly difficult to see how any of these measures so far announced will remotely help to solve the problems of the people who voted for this administration. There has been a complete failure in reducing inflation, which was one of the main talking points of the election campaign, and this will probably not change for some time. A colossal amount been lost in stock markets, affecting everyone, with the possible exception of those who might benefit from insider trading. Unemployment has surely risen, affecting Trump voters. What we are all witnessing underscores the idea that populism and its support do not function in the same vein as any other type of political support, as actual solutions to real problems seem to be less important than constructing the fictional narrative of the resurging glory of the nation.

The combination of a different type of support and a very specific goal is what raises questions about populism's relation, and possible threat, to democracy. Now, I will undertake a brief review of this topic and present the possibility of a new perspective on this matter, a question that in recent months has become more significant than ever.

Of course, much has been written about the possible threat that populism represents for democracy, particularly to liberal democracy[8]. Considering the roots that I have previously outlined for populist support, I do not believe these worries are in vain. Specifically, I believe that populists operate under a different vision of democracy and of political activity than traditional parties, forcing us to reconsider certain conceptions about democratic activity.

Democracy, in its minimal form, has been defined by two central aspects: popular sovereignty and majority rule (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017, p. 80).

Today, most western democracies are "liberal" democracies, systems that combine the rule of the people with the rule of law, where independent institutions, such as constitutional courts or central banks, are intended to guarantee fundamental

[8] See Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017 or Akkerman 2003, among others.

rights, freedom of expression, among others, serving as limitations to the power of elected governments (Akkerman 2003, p. 155).

Populism represents more of a threat to liberal democracy, than to democracy itself, as it actually places the bulk of its attention on majority rule. Populist leaders communicate as if they were speaking for the silent majority, constituted by the true and moral people, whose presence they wish to confirm through popular vote. The threat is then substantiated by this moral divide between the true people and the corrupt elites, which functions as an opposite force to the pillars of equality and freedom on which liberal democracies stand.

Populists in power tend to abuse the rule of the majority by seeking to overturn or dissolve the independent institutions who limit their power, describing them as bureaucratic impediments to the realization of the "true people's will" (Finchelstein & Urbinati 2018, p. 24). Populism utilizes the concept of the rule of the people, intrinsic to democracy, but twists in a way as to create a more authoritarian regime, where principles like minority rights or freedom of the press are put in danger.

The recent actions of the new American administration have proven this, as most of the political actions and discourse are centered around trying to weaken the institutional arrangements that limit political power and guarantee fundamental rights.

Constitutively, then, populism is at odds with constitutionalism, aiming to utilize the majority popular vote to erode the barriers that obstruct political power. The basis for this threat is the 'special relationship' between populist leaders and their supporters, which stems from a different view of the political game. The "populist way" places heavy emphasis on strong leadership and a sort of political "entrepreneurship", as political leaders shrewdly assess their consumer's volitions, aiming to shape their preferences into a particular political support (Akkerman 2003, p. 38).

In 1942, Schumpeter proposed a theory of democracy that deviated from the classic doctrine, one that while not representative of every democratic regime, surely is useful in understanding the actions and goals of populist movements. This theory twists the power dynamic between people and elected politicians, challenging the notion that the people elect governments who execute the people's will. On the contrary, it is the political leader who turns voter's volitions into political factors, shaping and working

them in a way to strengthen its case in the competitive political field (Schumpeter 1942, p. 270):

> "Its choice—ideologically glorified into the Call from the People—does not flow from its initiative but is being shaped, and the shaping of it is an essential part of the democratic process. Voters do not decide issues. But neither do they pick their members of parliament from the eligible population with a perfectly open mind."
> (Schumpeter 1948, p. 282)

This shift in the relationship between politicians and the electorate signifies a very significant change in the way democracies operate, constantly eroding the space for public discussion, whereby even minority interests would play a part in political action. With populists in power, conversely, leaders will seek to weaponize their voting majority to further their agendas over any minority groups.

Viewed from this perspective, then, populism definitely is a very clear threat to liberal democracy and its principles.

Conclusion

I began this work with the goal of obtaining a deeper understanding of the structural and societal problems who are at the root of populist support. Instead of merely analyzing current phenomena and linking them directly to the rise of populism, I attempted to go back and present populism as an issue that has been in the making for a long time. The polarization between pro-populism and anti-populism, rather than stemming simply from circumstantial factors, comes from a deeper, more fundamental, place in individuals. In my view, this polarization is represented by the ability, or lack thereof, to find structures of meaning and resonance in current society.

I then presented populism as a political movement which is perfectly tailored to take advantage of the process of rationalization, as it is capable, differently to traditional political parties, of creating a deep resonance with its supporters.

I also made a brief analysis of populism's relation with democracy, using this new perspective to shed a different light on the matter.

There remains a point I would like to address. I purposefully avoided discussing possible solutions to prevent the continuous growth of populist support, and there are two main reasons for this.

The first is that I believe it is more important to develop a deeper understanding of the subject at hand, before starting to elaborate on solutions and recommendations. I still think that the populist phenomenon is far from being understood in the academic field - which is exemplified by how frequently it is able to surprise us.

The second reason is that, taking into consideration the argument I have proposed, it is not easy to develop effective solutions to the problem. If populism is as rooted in the social, political, and economic structure of society as I believe it is, then, there are not many short-term solutions that might have any sort of significant effect. 'The line has been drawn'. People who are suffering from disenchantment of the world, people who feel alienated by it, will not stop feeling this way, presumably, for a long time. The potential growth for populist support is limited only because of the large portion of the population who don't feel that way and can see the abysmal failure of populist leaders, of which the first three months of Trump's new mandate may represent an as yet unsurpassed example. In this sense, it is a battle fought at the margins.

On the other way, there are some clear factors in the growth of populism that can be changed and countered. The failure of non-populist parties to convince people of their actions is a result of continued incapacity to address social issues. The abandonment of social consciousness, the abandonment of culture, the degradation of the educational system, the degradation of the media, among others, all seem to be relevant factors in the dissemination of populist discourse and, most importantly, in creating the frame of mind vulnerable to such discourse.

In the end, one thing is clear: we are living the end of an order or way of life. In this world, things can never be what they once were and there is no point in trying to bring back what has already passed. The truth is that a lot of people are absolutely lost in the modern world as they cannot seem to know where they are going or what they should be doing. The desperate clinging to the false prophets of populism is a plausible response for people in a state of desperation. Ultimately, the only thing one can do is to look forward, to see things as they are and not how they were or how we wish they were, and, most importantly, to keep calm.

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