

POPULISM FROM ETHYMOLOGY TO COMPARATIVE HISTORY:

POPULISM AS A PRODUCT OF THE ELITES

Biagio Borrelli

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Abstract:

This paper investigates populism by examining its etymological origins and historical manifestations across various societies, aiming to demonstrate that populism represents an elite-manufactured political strategy that emerges in response to failures of liberal democratic systems. The research investigates these questions from an ambiguous perspective because populism exists with multiple definitions. The study examines the semantic development of “populism” through its historical and philosophical aspects, spanning from Roman political rhetoric to modern Western and non-Western applications. The paper draws on the work of Vincenzo Costa, Federico Finchelstein, and Jan-Werner Müller to demonstrate that populist movements often originate from elite strategies aimed at addressing legitimacy crises rather than challenging the elite power. The paper argues that populism operates as a facade of a political system that perpetuates failing representative systems instead of serving as a catalyst for democratic renewal. This study concludes by examining the effects of populist performative discourse on the decline of liberal democracy, while proposing solutions to address this issue.

About the author:

Biagio Borrell is a freshman studying Philosophy at the University of Naples Federico II. He is also pursuing a Master's degree in Global History and Governance at the prestigious Scuola Superiore Meridionale in Naples during his first year there. His interests revolve around political philosophy and contemporary history, which he explores through a comparative approach. He has written an article on Hans Kelsen in the field of law titled *Hans Kelsen: International Law Between Sovereignty and Civitas Maxima* along with a study of the evolution of the Chinese anarchist Paris School from its roots in Parisian anarchism to its alignment with the Kuomintang party.

Introduction:

One of the most contested terms in contemporary political discourse is populism. Frequently invoked in media, politics, and academic settings, but lacks a clear definition. This lack, combined with its instrumentalization for ideological purposes, has altered our modern political outlook. Nowadays, the debate on populism has reached a point where it seems that it can only be defined through multiple definitions. This paper aims to clarify the conceptual and historical complexity of populism, with a central thesis: populism is not a grassroots expression of popular will but a product of elite dynamics and dysfunctions in the liberal-democratic order. This study tries to demonstrate how populism has been repeatedly engineered or facilitated by political and intellectual elites in response to systemic crises. Reaching a clear definition of populism is only possible by supporting the theory with comparative history as a model, which this paper attempts to trace the historical development of populism in both Western and non-Western contexts.

I. Etymology and Conceptual Origins

The term "populism" originates from the Latin word "*populus*," meaning "people." Historically, the term referred to the political body or the general population in classical Roman republican history. However, from its inception, the invocation of "the people" has been a rhetorical device wielded by those in positions of authority. The Roman *Populares* faction, for example, was led by aristocrats like Julius Caesar, who claimed to represent the interests of the plebeians against those of the *Optimates*. Yet, their goals were often motivated by personal or factional ambition. In the modern era, the American People's Party (1890s) and Russian *narodniki* likewise employed populist rhetoric, but were led by intellectuals and elites who sought to mobilize the great masses of disenfranchised people for reformist or revolutionary aims. To this day, the term "people" has in itself different meanings. As Jan-Werner Müller points out in his book *What is populism?*¹, since Greek and Roman times, "the people" has been used in at least three senses: first, the people as the whole political body; second, the people as "the common people"; and third, the people as the

¹ Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

nation.² Therefore, from Müller's perspective, the main aim of populism is to eliminate any form of pluralism, and this can only be achieved by reducing the people's definition to a single one.

Nevertheless, in this study, Müller's opinion on populist anti-elitism will be addressed and overcome. According to him, populist leaders claim exclusive moral representation of "the people," excluding opponents as illegitimate. This moral absolutism, in contradiction with his first thought, mirrors elite-driven ideologies that deny the diversity of a democratic society. Thus, from its very linguistic origins, populism has functioned as an elite discourse masked as a plebeian uprising.

II. Historical Evolution: Elite Engineering of Populism

1. Interwar Fascism and Post-War Populism

Federico Finchelstein's genealogy of populism highlights its emergence as a post-fascist phenomenon. According to Finchelstein's book *From fascism to populism in history*³, populism is defined as an "authoritarian form of democracy."⁴ This means that populism can be described as a post fascist form of politics that blends authoritarian impulses with democratic structures. This because fascism is defined as an ultraviolent, dictatorial ideology, rooted in nationalism, racism, totalitarianism, and political myth, aiming to eliminate opposition and suppress pluralism; while populism, by contrast, is a postfascist, authoritarian form of democracy, emerging after 1945 that often undermines liberal institutions but does not aim to abolish democratic elections. At this point, populism is not a mystery, but a post fascist response to liberal democracy, shaped by historical trauma and often positioned between liberalism and dictatorship. Populism blends democratic practices (elections) with illiberal attitudes, usually portraying opponents as enemies of the people. Populist leaders frequently claim to be the sole legitimate voice of the people, thereby weakening checks and balances and undermining the rule of law. For instance, populist leaders like Perón in Argentina and Vargas in Brazil did not abolish elections; instead, they centralized power and constructed a unified identity between the leader and the people. Finchelstein argues that this

² Müller, *What Is Populism?*, 22.

³ Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

⁴ Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History*, chap. 2.

trinitarian structure—leader, people, nation—originated from fascist ideology, has been portrayed by populist leaders who, once they have become part of the elite, start manipulating the democratic institutions from within.⁵ Ultimately, populism can be categorized as either left-wing or right-wing, depending on its stance on issues such as ethnicity, economic policy, and nationalism. On the matter Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau have highlighted the need to counter left-wing populism with right-wing populism, and have identified populism as the very essence of politics: politics only exists insofar as it creates a boundary that organizes various needs within a typical hegemonic horizon, distinguishing them from others. Besides, Mouffe presents right-wing populism as a variant of neoliberalism. Right-wing populism restricts the social group that should be at the center of public policy to technical characteristics, rather than social ones.

2. Neoliberal Crisis and the Rise of Contemporary Populism

Western American and European populism must be understood within the context in which it develops and the functional crisis that characterizes those democracies. In the American and European context, it's not possible to distinguish the contemporary history of populism from the crisis of neoliberalism. As Vincenzo Costa argues in *Populismo senza popolo*⁶, populism in the post-political age arises from the breakdown of political representation. Additionally, populism has emerged as a consequence of a breakdown in communication between the real world and political and institutional systems. This breakdown happens when political systems lose their ability to explain the dynamics of the real world, and as a primary consequence, this system becomes unpredictable. However, Costa is clear that this breakdown is not seized upon by the masses spontaneously, but by a new elite that exploits the communicative dysfunction between political systems and the lifeworld. Costa here presents a compelling framework: populism is not a “bottom-up phenomenon” but a consequence of elite closure and semantic control. The people no longer function as a collective political subject but as Leibniz's monads; they are fragmented individuals. In such a vacuum, elites manufacture a symbolic “people” to stabilize their legitimacy. The populist

⁵ Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History*, 130.

⁶ Vincenzo Costa, *Populismo senza popolo* (Rome: Armando Editore, January 10, 2025).

leader, therefore, is not an outsider but a reconfiguration of elite authority under the guise of anti-establishment rhetoric. This new definition of populism can be summarized by dividing it into leaders, activists, and voters.⁷ Contrary to what De Benoist and Michéa suggest, populism does not represent a revolt against the elites. Populism is, instead, how certain elites exploit the crisis of democracy and representation for their internal struggles. Populism is therefore not a reaction to neoliberalism, but its unintended and yet inevitable consequence. In this interpretation, the people, the voters, just become hollow executors of the populist party's work, which is not political anymore, but administrative.

3. The Digital Turn and Political Branding

A clear proof of how populism can be considered a product of the administrative elite is in how such parties use digital media. Populist leaders, such as Trump, Bolsonaro, and Grillo, have effectively utilized social media platforms, thereby bypassing traditional democratic intermediaries. Yet, this direct communication is not democratic in any deliberative sense, as the political debate is often nullified in the posts and stories of populist leaders on social media. In the U.S., the Tea Party movement and Trumpism, with his MAGA movement, represented populism as a media construct. Trump's appeal lay not in grassroots mobilization but in elite sponsorship by conservative think tanks, billionaires, and media conglomerates. Similarly, in Italy, the Five Star Movement initially claimed anti-establishment roots, but quickly formed coalitions with traditional parties and operated within existing institutional frameworks.⁸ Ultimately, what is essential to keep in mind is that these individuals do not work alone, not at all. Populist parties were the first to introduce teams of strategists, marketers, and advisors inside the political world. What they achieved first and better than others was a technocratic elite that deploys a populist style for electoral gain. This phenomenon mirrors Jean-Claude Michéa's argument that the left abandoned its working-class roots, allowing a new managerial elite to monopolize both the progressive and populist discourse.

⁷ Costa, *Populismo senza popolo*, chap. 5.

⁸ Costa, *Populismo senza popolo*, chap. 2.

This explains why populists in the West have an advantage, as they reach the people first through the monopolization of their medias and the reduction to its simplest terms of their language.

III. Comparative Dimensions

1. South American Populism

Different is the case in other parts of the world, such as South America, where populism had a more left-oriented development and led to critical social victories for the common people; however, this does not mean that this kind of populism cannot be affected by the same type of decline happening in the US or Western Europe. In this case, Latin America has long been considered the cradle of populist experimentation. Leaders like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia positioned themselves against economic elites, yet operated through top-down redistributive structures that entrenched new ruling classes. The charismatic leader emerges as the arbiter of truth, sidelining institutions and pluralism. Apart from its charisma, Chávez, like other leftist populist leaders in South America, applied a policy based on anti-elite rhetoric, social programs, constitutional changes, and authoritarian tendencies. Though he wasn't part of Chávez's "Pink Tide," Bolsonaro represented the first wave of right-wing populism in South America. Despite being a nationalist and anti-leftist, his political program in Brazil followed a similar path to Chávez's. Contrary to what Camilla Vergara tried to explain in her works⁹, even in the South American case, populism presents itself on both sides of the political spectrum. Besides, we cannot talk about this kind of populism as founded on the promise of redistribution and at the same time being anti-oligarchic and pro-plebeian. Instead, we should speak of it as a different form of populism, but developed by the elite, which, in the end, is not an expression of the people but a new oligarchy or, in some cases, a monarchy cloaked in plebeian symbols.

2. Eastern and Central Europe

⁹ See e.g. Camilla Vergara, "Populism as Plebeian Politics: Inequality, Domination, and Popular Empowerment," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (2020): 222–46; Camilla Vergara, "Republican Constitutionalism: Plebeian Institutions and Anti-Oligarchic Rules," *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* 69, no. 171 (2022): 25–48.

In Hungary and Poland, leaders like Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński have restructured democratic institutions under the banner of populist nationalism. However, as Costa emphasizes, these are not authentic expressions of mass movements but strategic elite reactions to the perceived failure of liberal internationalism.¹⁰ The invocation of "the people" is instrumentalized to justify constitutional changes, media takeovers, and judicial overhauls. These are elite projects with popular veneers.

IV. Philosophical and Structural Analysis

1. The Elite as a Semantic Structure

Costa, in his analysis of populism, is the first to introduce a robust theoretical model of contemporary populism: the elite is not merely a social class but a semantic regime.¹¹ It structures discourse and delimits the horizon of political possibility. Drawing on Derrida and Habermas, Costa argues that populism arises when this semantic regime becomes rigid and unresponsive, prompting the creation of new signifiers (like "the people") to reorganize consensus. In this interpretation, populism is a product of democracy's discontent, which begins when the ruling class in liberal democracies ceases to interact with the social sphere.

2. Populism and the Crisis of the Political

In Arendtian terms, politics is the space where plurality meets actuality through speech and action.¹² Populism negates this by asserting a monological relationship between the leader and a homogeneous people. What emerges is not political revitalization, but the simulation of politics — a performance staged by elites to fill the void left by the depoliticization of society. Today, the populist ruling class is comprised of mere administrators, largely due to two critical issues concerning contemporary democracy: monadism and individualism among the people, which have eroded the social sphere, and the reduction of politics to mere administration. Regarding the first issue of monadism among the people, we can consider it a product of the global transformation of

¹⁰ Costa, *Populismo senza popolo*, 58.

¹¹ Costa, *Populismo senza popolo*, 74.

¹² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

workers into self-entrepreneurs. The worker-entrepreneur is someone who has internalized neoliberal culture, not merely suffering from it but reproducing and imposing it on others with every action. Marx's alienation now becomes a manifestation of one's own life, an expression of one's freedom and *conatus*. The people have been reduced to a collection of individuals—entrepreneurs and/or consumers—who do not mobilize as a “we” and who do not codify the actions of power in terms of class. Within the neoliberal horizon, action and discourse—which Hannah Arendt considers the specific characteristics of active life—become futile occupations. Neoliberal culture has dissolved politics because it has made both the concept of militancy and that of dissent morally degrading. In the liberal era, everyone is their own entrepreneur. This means that the master-slave dialectic is produced within the subject itself, splitting it into two. The subject feels alive only in the competition of work. The notion of authenticity changes: authentic is the time devoted to asserting oneself in competition with others. Therefore, the people disintegrate into a set of corporate interests. Neoliberalism has destroyed the public man. The bio-employed establishes the master-servant relationship within the economic system. Regarding the reduction of politics to mere administrative tool, Costa explains it by addressing the presence of a failure in the “circulation of sense” between governed and governors.¹³ When elites cease to interpret and integrate societal demands this generates democracy’s discontent and lead the masses to just look out for a reliable administrative system and populism emerges as a such for doing so. Yet this mechanism is elitist by design: it filters mass discontent through pre-formulated narratives.

V. Conclusion

This post-political era of democracy’s discontent is inherently populist. There are no political projects, only words that are modified as needed. Political formations do not organize consensus around a political project of transformation, but rather tune in to the communicative code of the multitudes. Populism arises from the disintegration of collective subjects. Tocqueville, in the

¹³ Costa, *Populismo senza popolo*, chap. 6.

second part of *Democracy in America*¹⁴, had already noted the self-destructive character inherent in liberal culture. Neoliberal culture tends to destroy the existential conditions of citizenship, rendering it entirely residual. The individual relates to the state to limit it, to safeguard their particularity as an individual. Foucault, in *The Birth of Biopolitics*¹⁵, emphasizes how neoliberalism was a total revolution of liberalism. In this system, individuals are transformed to act according to the rational order of the market. Neoliberal policies aim to transform lives. In neoliberal culture, modernity dissolves itself, thereby losing all traces of historicity and the future, and consequently, it becomes timeless. This is where the depoliticization of neoliberal society takes place. Therefore, there is populism because there are no longer the people.¹⁶ The philosophical and historical implications of this study reveal that populism cannot be defined as a spontaneous eruption of popular will; instead, it is a shadow play of elites confronting the disintegration of political legitimacy and the erosion of collective identity. From its etymological roots in elite rhetorical traditions to its historical instantiations as elite-managed crisis response, populism should be understood not as the voice of the people but as the ventriloquism of elites. Understanding the nature of populism enables us to reconstruct the reasons why the democratic space, grounded in plurality, participation, and genuine representation —features that have been key to liberal democracies for decades— is actually declining. What we can now do to prevent liberal democracy from being completely eroded by populism seems to be the question of the century. Although finding a clear answer to this problem seems impossible, this study believes that several key elements should be considered, including the necessity of defending political disputes, liberal institutions, media monopolization, and promoting inclusive cultural and social growth, which can be achieved through education and dialogue. Only by opening a clear and critical debate on the matter of populism in our post-political era and by revitalizing liberal democracy that we will prevent it from its demise.

¹⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

¹⁶ Costa, *Populismo senza popolo*, 89.

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