



Carmelo **CONTE**

ITALY in the **POPULIST ERA**

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POPULISMS AND POPULISTS

The term Populism, with its modern meaning, was used for the first time about a century ago in the United States, even though some of its substantial aspects were also part of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary French culture of the 18th Century and of the Russian Farmers' Liberation Movement at the end of the 19th Century. The word Populism appeared for the first time in Italy after World War I, specifically on December 3, 1921, when Giuseppe Baretta (aka Piero Gobetti), talked about it in an article published on the "Ordine Nuovo" magazine, founded by Antonio Gramsci, which *was issued when it was issued*. The topic was dealt with also by Giacomo Leopardi in his pamphlet *Discorso sopra lo stato presente dei costumi degli italiani*, published in 1906.

As a people-glorifying cultural and political attitude, populism appeared to be based on Socialism-inspired principle and plans, even though there are many variations of it as an historical phenomenon. Populism can be democratic, constitutional, and authoritarian. It has already manifested itself in different forms: right-wing populism, left-wing populism, innovative or obsolete

ideologies depending on the topics and the sectors, with inconsistent economic plans, like the government agreement signed by Salvini and Di Maio.¹

Some features of Populism appear to be stable and meaningful over time, although it's not scientifically clear where its main principles come from. For sure, it refers to a world vision belonging to eras when the world was ruled by the natural and the sacred, when the balance of society was based on the subordination of individuals towards a limited circle or a single religious, military or dynastic leader.

According to French philosopher Chantal Delsol, populism emerges when a certain slice of the population finds itself a leader who can express claims that it considers to be overlooked, not just by the government, but also by the different ideologies that reach the power subsequently, thanks to the democratic turnover.²

The global communicative and economic process, thanks to increasingly sophisticated media, made populism grow

1 N. Tranfaglia, in the preface of *Populismo. Un carattere originale nella storia d'Italia*, defines populism as follows: "Populism is the ability to persuade the masses by telling them what they want to hear, without providing a specific plan."

2 M. Tarchi, *Italia populista, dal qualunquismo a Beppe Grillo*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2015.

within democracy, not just against it. In this case, populism helps to identify a democratic leader as a necessary requirement to express unity and identity, in order to move from an opposition stage to a government one.

According to populism, sovereignty must not be exercised by democratically elected bodies, but from the people itself, even though its actual forms are not well defined. For example, in Italy, populism uses an online platform, an almighty tool that can actually refute democracy and the people itself.

Such a concept – the concentration of power in an almighty entity – explains why the Five Star Movement’s members have always said, from its establishment to the 2018 Italian general election, that they would never form a coalition with other parties. After they were elected, though, they made a deal with the Lega, a party that had previously been part of four Berlusconi legislatures and that had been an enemy for the entire political campaign. Such a choice was worsened by the explanation provided by Di Maio: they needed the Lega to translate the people’s votes into a concrete government, something that is against the basic principles of the Movement itself and that sounds like an excuse, because every coalition, even though previously criticised by the Movement, has always had the same purpose.

It’s legitimate, therefore, to wonder about the real reason behind the Five Star’s behaviour.

Maybe they had other priorities, as compared to political consistency, such as the aversion toward the current political system and every kind of integration of Italy in a wider context, like the European Union. Maybe it was more important to them to apolitically conform to their leaders' will, rather than their supporters'; maybe their choice was due to national and international economic agents that were interested in the government; maybe they just wanted to rule, no matter the cost, like other democratic parties and autocratic regimes before them.

After this digression about the mysteries of power, its known and less-known rituals, and the interests underlying some decisions, let's go back to the general analysis of the phenomenon.

The populist way of thinking, sharing and deciding manifests itself in so many complex ways that the people acquires different definitions, according to different sociological, economic, religious and territorial reasons: People of city economy; People of the farmlands; People of God. Mainly, the people can be considered either a virtuous source of goods, or an indistinct crowd to be led. One version embodies the idea of people as redeeming mass, the other one considers people as an uncultivated mass.

"The two ideas are not contradictory, though. Just think when the "people" is praised as superior to any

other people for racial, cultural, religious or historical reasons. In that case, for those who glorify it, the people is a metaphysical and salvific entity, even though, as an “actual” mass, it is also uncouth. At this point, the charismatic leader becomes the protagonist of the story. He was born “from the people” and he lives in harmony with it, lifting it up towards its natural values and highlighting the importance of its culture, because the culture (race, religion, traditions...) of his people is the noblest and best culture in the world. This is why the charismatic leader is often considered a “man of Providence”. The people, then, becomes an attachment of something else.”³

All the populist ideologies, even though their roots are sometimes conflicting, refer to the concept of subjection, according to which in order to solve common problems you need a leap of faith towards an external reference point. In doing so, they underline a lack of autonomy and rationality, legitimising a distinction between different kinds of populisms and populists. Peter Wiles made a list of 24 kinds of them, which were later reduced to three. These populisms found their identity on language, territory and political belief, like Russian,

3 N. Merker, *Filosofie del populismo*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 2009.

Marxist, Maoist and third-worldist populisms, where the people is considered a general entity, a mass that has to be guided by a party and its leader.

In this sense, an atypical kind of populism has emerged, whose purest expression is the German one, as long as it can be defined populism.

In Germany, at the beginning of the 19th century, they felt the need to distinguish themselves by taking advantage of their own ethnical and genetic diversity (the Aryan race) meant as “people”, in order to get rid of the foreign supremacy (Napoleonic, French). Even Hegel, whose ideas revolved around the concept of State, considered the people a shapeless mass, which can become something more only through the intercession of a monarch. In his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, he wrote: “the people without a monarch is nothing but a shapeless mass”, which is not entitled to have any kind of sovereignty, because “sovereignty only exists when it represents the personality of totality, and this personality lies in the monarch.”⁴

A contradictory vision was the French Revolution’s one, which considered the people as a different social identity, an alternative to monarchy and its world.

Different populisms, same limits: they all identify

4 Ibidem.

their ideal people and assert that it represents the whole population.

“Democracy,” said Peron, “is when governments do what the people want”, meaning the governments’ people. “I am Chávez...I am the people” used to claim the Venezuelan caudillo. “Fascism is the Italian people. All of it” said Mussolini. These are the same identification and the same lie used, with different tones, by Grillo, Berlusconi and Salvini.⁵

It is worth mentioning how the British identified their idea of “people” in pivotal times of their history. In October 1647, in the middle of the Civil War, as Londoners were fighting in the streets, appointing the Parliament as their mouthpiece, and the Puritans were demanding the same dignity for all human beings, they signed the “Agreement of the People.” Its advocates called themselves the authentic and autonomous voice of the people, with no need for mediation by the already existing political structures, as they represented a population of equal individuals.⁶ That movement was a forerunner of British democratic and constitutional culture, which seems to have inspired – in a vague and adulterated way – Grillo’s ideology.

5 L. Zanatta, *Il populismo*, Carocci editore, Roma 2016.

6 A. Mastropaolo, *La democrazia è una causa persa?*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2011.

Carmelo Conte was born in Piaggine and lives in Eboli. He is a lawyer, former mayor of Eboli (1973-1974), member of the Regional Council, vice president of Regione Campania (1976-1978), member of the Italian Parliament for four legislations (1979-1994), Secretary of the Council of Ministers of Italy (1979-1980) and Minister for urban areas (1989-1993). He proposed and advocated many important laws, such as L. 219/1983 (areas affected by the 1980 earthquake); L. 64/1986 (Southern Italy development); L. 465/1990 (1990 FIFA World Cup); L. 396/1990 (Roma Capitale); L. 211/1992 (Improvement of the underground lines). He was among the speakers at the 1989 Hofstra University (New York) conference on organised crime, together with Rudolf Giuliani. He is a pundit and, among other things, he has also published six books: *L'avventura e il Seme* (1993) *Sasso o Coltello* (1994), *Dal quarto Stato al Quarto partito* (2009), *Dialoghi nel tempo* (2010), *Il Sud al tempo degli italiani*, (2011) *Coincidenze e poteri* (2016).



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“Let’s think about this: Italy is the only European country where, after World War II, there hasn’t been any completely left wing government nor a completely right wing government. We have never had a leading party, but always coalitions and compromises, with different parties sharing the stage.”

Starting from this consideration, Carmelo Conte describes the current political situation in Italy, highlighting the contradictions that fostered the rise of populist ideologies that are establishing roots in the Italian Parliament. By dealing with different topics, from political parties to participacy, from populism to its many types, *Italy in the Populist Era* describes impartially and thoroughly the current political situation of the Mediterranean country. This book provides an unbiased portrait of a cultural – not only institutional -disease that slogan after slogan changed Italy and its political narrative in the last twenty years, imposing populism as the only language that voters can understand and appreciate.

When populism reaches a governmental status, it loses its own nature and becomes illiberal.

Berlusconi and Renzi’s governments have represented its laissez-faire vision, while Salvini and Di Maio are stressing its authoritative and state-controlled approach.

Populism doesn’t feed itself with history or future, but with a present made of resentment and fear: Europe, Islam, migrants, social outcasts.

The active-criticism anti-politics has become a media product at the service of a leaderism-based system.

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