

Rising Political Participation: Popular or Populist?

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“They call us populists. We are proud of that, and angry too.”

Beppe Grillo, 5 Star Movement’s demonstration in Genoa, December 2013

The 2008 financial crisis and the austerity that is implemented as a policy reaction to it has inaugurated a new era of contention and of increased pressure from below. This is evident not only in developing countries, but also in many developed and prosperous countries of the West. In most cases discontent takes the form of resentment against elites, political and economic. It is expressed mainly through voting for anti-systemic political parties, and through participation in movements, which once again focus on materialist issues, until recently thought to have been irrevocably resolved in the developed countries of the world.

In this new political and economic environment, political struggle in many countries increasingly revolves around a debate on whether popular reaction should be described as populist, a condemnatory term used in most contexts in a pejorative way, or as popular, a term with positive connotations due to its relation to a democratic imaginary. In Europe, this debate is most heated in peripheral countries strongly affected by the crisis, and most of all in Greece and Italy: is the Coalition of Radical Left (SYRIZA), the main opposition party in Greece, equally populist as Golden Dawn? Is Beppe Grillo in Italy the leader of a populist party, or of a popular movement? Or should we understand populist as meaning popular, as Grillo is repeatedly suggesting in front of his party’s supporters lately?

Social scientists are joining the debate, by attempting to clarify the meaning of “populism”. Most students of the phenomenon agree that at the heart of the problem lies an inadequate conceptualization of the term “populism” in the academic debate. This however is hardly convincing. The meaning of the term is reasonably unambiguous and, in fact, uncontested. At the heart of the controversy lies a much bigger stake than just a linguistic controversy in everyday interaction, or a lack of analytic rigor in an academic debate. Much more than anything else, this is a real social struggle, at the heart of which lies the question of what is, and what should be, the role of “the people” in politics and social life. And eventually, what is the meaning and the political significance of “democracy”. I will try to clarify my point by first showing why the meaning of the term “populism” is less problematic than most social scientists tend to think. After identifying what I see as the heart of the controversy, I will then examine some of the implications for social research.

The criteria for applying the term “populism” to a specific situation are relatively uncontested. It refers to a style of politics characterized by a political discourse that dichotomizes citizens in two broad groups. On one side stand the vast majority of the population, “the people”, which are portrayed as representing a unity and as having common interests, despite differences which are played down as non politically significant. On the other side of the divide stands a tiny elite, which is corrupt and self-serving, and thus is preventing “the people” from achieving their potential for full freedom, material well-being and happiness. If “the many” could sidestep that elite, their problems would be resolved.

If these are the criteria for applying the term “populist”, then it is easy to show empirically that all three parties that I mentioned earlier, Golden Dawn and SYRIZA in Greece, and 5 Star Movement in Italy, do produce a discourse that divides political space in exactly these terms. In fact, the leaders and supporters of these parties would easily accept that. They would add, however, that they see nothing problematic with this; quite to the contrary, they find it as the best indicator of the democratic character of their political project. This is because, surprising though it might seem to

those who see populism and democracy as radically opposed to each other, the existence of a united and sharing common interests “people”, the subject of populism, is implied in the very concept of democracy, understood as popular sovereignty. What distinguishes the two terms, “popular” and “populist”, is not different conceptualizations, but the evaluative stance towards the relation between citizens and their government. On one side stand those who see popular will as the only criterion which should inform and direct political decision. On the other side stand those who claim, first, that the unity of the people is nothing more than a rhetorical claim; in fact people disagree on the ends they want to pursue, and even more on the appropriate means for achieving their aims. Second, they object that even if people were united in their wants, there are limits on what they can legitimately aspire for, and even more, on what they can plausibly achieve.

The linguistic debate and the theoretical controversy over the meaning of populism, are in fact demonstrations of a substantive social struggle between two competing ways of classifying reality, which lead to different practical decisions about who should decide and what can be decided on crucial social issues. Understanding the issue in these terms is rich in implications for the role of social research in understanding and possibly affecting political reality.

For a descriptive and explanatory approach, it means that in order to understand why specific social outcomes occur, we need to examine how political space is divided by political actors, what links do they make through discursive practices between events, causes and effects, interests and identities. Social outcomes are not produced mechanically out of forces acting regardless of actors’ consciousness. They are the product of complex interactions between actors who are guided in their decisions by contingent and inherently political articulations of the social. The distinctively sociological question here is why among competing discourses some prevail over others at specific junctions? In my research I am investigating how the interaction between party framings and popular receptions of the crisis in Greece lead to the radicalization of politics, or the electoral rise of specific parties instead of others.

The most important question however is whether we can have a prescriptive role to play in this social conflict. Do we have anything to offer beyond useless expressions of personal preferences? Do we possess theories or methods that enable us to make more informed decisions among available alternative solutions, or our choices are as capricious and subjective as anyone else’s. Does, eventually, anything go?

We first need to acknowledge here that practical reasoning is definitely not an exact science. It should however be self evident that some means are more effective in achieving given ends under given circumstances. The political problem then is first how to identify those with reasonable plausibility, and then how to convince others to adopt them.

A first step towards choosing the most appropriate means is having a description of the world which is as accurate as possible. Starting from the important insight that everything in the world is relations and processes, not essences and things, we should use the method of comparison for specifying how things relate with each other. Comparison gives us the only measure available for deciding on the plausibility of competing discourses. In order to evaluate for instance the discursive claim that corruption is the main cause of the financial problems of Greece, one has to compare the governmental practices and the social relations underpinning them in Greece not with an abstract, normative model of how ideal government or democracy should be working, but with relevant practices and their effects in other countries of the world. Comparison should provide us with a reasonably credible sense of proportions, which is indispensable in the process of decision-making.

The next step is to take into account the rules of practical reasoning, so often overseen by political actors, as guiding lines for decision-making. We have to be aware that often choosing some end limits automatically the means available for achieving it, when there are necessary means for achieving this specific end; that previous decisions might limit our autonomy at latter stages; and, finally, that there are objective limits on what any political community can plausibly achieve. In the

modern world, the most important limits on national sovereignty are the ones set by competition in an international capitalist economy.

Eventually, however, all these theoretically and practically rational processes, even if ideally followed by social scientists for making optimal decisions, are not going to produce any effect in practical politics, if the ideas thus produced are not communicated to the public in a way which is emotionally engaging and capable of catching the imagination and inspiring hope. This is the lesson that political realists need to learn from the successes of populist politicians, as a middle way between utopia and pessimism is once again urgently needed in national and international politics.

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