

Populismo y calidad de la democracia: Italia y Venezuela en perspectiva comparada

(Populism and quality of democracy: Italy and Venezuela in Comparative Perspective)

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By now it is almost commonplace to begin a discourse about populism by underlining its polysemy, its complexity and the flourish of scientific definitions. Faced with such a great theoretical variety we are almost tempted to say that one populism does not exist but rather different varieties of populism exist and that a general theory of populism is almost impossible. In the effort to find an ultimate definition of the concept there is often the risk of getting lost in theoretical subtleties and losing sight of direct study of the phenomena. It's a fact that many forms of populism exist, especially those that are termed 'new populisms' in opposition to the populisms of the twentieth century. On the theoretical level the greatest difficulty is to summarize them under a single concept, or to have them enter under a single logical-epistemological umbrella.

Another fact is that the debate over populism has become current more than ever, in the first place because in the last decades there has been a real proliferation

of populist drifts in many western and non western countries; in the second place, because this populist emergency has produced a renewal of studies on the subject.

In the last thirty years we have witnessed a progressive diffusion of populist political forces on a world scale that have profoundly changed the working of the political system in which they were inserted. In this long wave it is possible to count realities such as the Venezuelan revolutionary Bolivarianism of Chávez and the Bolivian cocalero movement of Morales if we consider the progressive ideological front of Latin American. Le Pen's National Front, the Northern league and Forza Italia are examples of populist movements in Europe who tend towards a reactionary bent. Or even the Five Star movement if we wish to cite an Italian case of populism still current in the area of so called anti-politics. These are phenomena that are very different from each other, in some cases even opposing as to objectives and political guidelines that however maintain many similarities in structural and morphological terms.

This return to populism in its various kinds and forms is matched by a renewal of the scientific debate on this issue. In the last few years political science and political sociology have had to reconsider this category also in relation to contexts that seemed to have reached a level of consolidated democracy. The word itself has undergone a profound semantic transformation significantly increasing the level of ambiguity and conceptual complexity since it has had to include many additional cases and a wider range of shades. The negative meaning of the word itself, once almost essential and absolute has been questioned, as this kind of phenomena has been recognized as being a catalyst of popular mobilization and

having a function of political inclusion.

If at the end of the nineteenth century it was associated with a very circumscribed reality such as Russian populism in czarist times or American populism¹, for a good part of the twentieth century it indicated forms of structured authoritarianism, for the most part in territories outside of Europe and especially in Latin America. Subsequently with the so-called third wave of the processes of democratization² and the end of the Cold War we again spoke about populism but in a very different way and in new geographical contexts. Thus today we have different types: from classic Peron style populism to the hyper liberal mass media populism of Berlusconi, to penal populism. This kind of populism indeed is perhaps a less politically evident phenomena and not necessarily attributable to a leader and yet so widespread and significant since it concerns the democratic respect of the boundaries between the political system and the system of justice³.

To think about populism in the area of social science means therefore to think about an, ever growing condition of democratic life in numerous governments on a global scale. Something that is not confined to a single territorial circumstance or to a political exception in the general panorama, but rather to a condition of this phase of the processes of democratization of the judicial-political form of state. A trend that is manifested in a general social manner that involves grass-roots support, leadership style, government style and all the parts of the entire political system. It

¹ Cfr. Nicolao Merker, *Filosofie del populismo*, Laterza, Roma 2006.

² Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century*, Univ of Oklahoma Pr., 1993.

³ John Pratt, *Penal Populism*, Routledge, London 2006.

is a complexity of elements that cannot be resolved in a mono-causal or simplified way at the scientific level, nor can it be dismissed as a simple effect of the crisis of political representation.

In the political dictionary of Bobbio, Matteucci, Pasquino populism is defined as nothing less than a “syndrome”⁴, borrowing a famous expression of Peter Wiles⁵. This metaphorical label, besides giving a very negative sense to the term as though it were a disease, gives the dimension of a complex picture that indicates an alteration of a normal democratic condition. It immediately gives the idea of the profound relationship between populism and real democracy. However populism can be an internal factor of democratic risk as an element of deterioration of the institutional functioning. For this reason, as we shall better see at the conclusion, many of those regimes that are considered forms of *soft-authoritarianism*⁶, such as the *hybrid regimes*⁷ or the *delegative democracies*⁸ are often associated with populist government parties.

I am inclined to consider populism as a configuration of social power of collective and individual type that begins as a non democratic tendency within democratic contexts, or almost democratic. It is a direct recourse which is emphatic

⁴ Incisa di Camerana L., *Populismo* in Norberto Bobbio, Nicola Matteucci, Gianfranco Pasquino, *Il dizionario di politica*, UTET, Torino 2004, p. 735.

⁵ Peter Wiles, *A Syndrome, not a doctrine*, in Ionescu Ghita e Gellner Ernest, *Populism. Its meanings and national characteristics*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1970.

⁶ Mark Kesselman, Joel Krieger, William A. Joseph, *Introduction to Comparative Politics*, Cengage Learning, London 2012

⁷ Terry Lynn Karl, *The Hybrid Regimes of Central America*, *Journal of Democracy* 6.3 (1995), 72-86.

⁸ Guillermo A. O'Donnell, *Delegative Democracy*, *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 5, Number 1, January 1994, pp. 55-69.

and irrational to popular sovereignty as an absolute element of legitimation of political action. Beyond politics, populism is a configuration of social power that develops in democratic or not fully democratic regimes from the meeting of a social anthropological archetype of a patriarchal nature widespread in the social unconscious with the possibility of consensus typical of every democracy. It is as though when being confronted with a rational democratic organization in which “every head a vote”, the most widespread guiding system in the social unconscious becomes emotionally and irrationally activated and bent on opposing forms of elitist and oligarchic domination within the political system itself. Populism is a social-political mobilization that forms on a cleavage between élite and people and whose social historical determinations can be the most varied reasons: for example, because of a blocked macro transition as in Italy, or because of a social-political polarization as in Venezuela. The relationship between populist leader and the community-people may however have a unifying action and thus represents for those who adhere to it a possibility of resolution of this cleavage. The populist option is thus a kind of shortcut that a movement and a leader take in order to overturn an elitist balance of power. Through an instrumental and rhetorical use of popular sovereignty populism establishes a discourse of political consensus in which popular sovereignty is the legitimizing basis of any action for the overturning of the subordination of the people with respect to an illegitimate élite minority.

In order to navigate in the most recent and vast scientific literature Gidron

and Bonikowski⁹ have proposed a classification of the different orientations to the study of populism to clarify and put in order the multiplicity of solutions in the field. These authors have fundamentally recognized the existence of three distinct approaches: populism as political ideology, populism as a discursive or political style, populism as a strategy. Gidron and Bonikowski's classification, which can be summarized in the following diagram (see fig. 1) attributes a theoretical value and merit to each approach, and recognizes how they complement each other but at the same time indicates how they are incomplete. Substantially, for these authors each orientation would take an aspect of populist political form without exhausting it, but completing the other orientation.

From the sociological point of view the defining solution must rather be looked for in an analytical comparison of the individual cases, considered as social-political configurations of complex power and connected to conditions of very precise historical social possibilities. I shall consider the three approaches and the three types of theories indicated by Gidron and Bonikowski rather as three plans of analysis and of study of each case on the basis of which to carry out an equally analytical comparison. More than confirm a theory-label, I shall consider the ideology, the discursive style and the strategy as plans of analysis to explore the empirical complexity.

In this key, here I shall make a first comparison of some analytical elements that characterize two realities that in many ways may be considered opposite:

⁹ Noam Gidron and Bart Bonikowski, *Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda*, Working Paper Series, No. 13-0004

Venezuelan populism after the advent of Chávez¹⁰ and Italian populism with the appearance of Berlusconi¹¹. The objective is to show how in a comparative light it is possible to characterize two types of populism, one Latin American and the other European, and that they can help to outline two opposite sociological-political types in the family of contemporary populisms. Moreover, as Eisendstadt maintains “comparison is not a method unto itself, but rather a particular attention to macro dimensional, interdimensional and institutional aspects of society and of social analysis.” This is especially true if it comes to global political phenomena such as populism which affects very heterogeneous geographical areas and historical-social contexts. Precisely the prospect of global analysis of political phenomena is in this case the best theoretical framework from which to begin in order to construct a general articulate theory of interpretation of contemporary populisms.

Even if only in schematic terms I will not consider Berlusconiism and Chavism isolatedly, but rather in their context and according to the evolution within the political system of these two countries. The movement started by both Chávez and Berlusconi have constituted for the democratic histories of their respective countries a populist transformation of the entire political system which is still in effect even today. I will make a comparison which is in part diachronic since it considers a long arc of time, in part synchronic if the aspects that have remained

¹⁰ Kirk A. Hawkins, *Venezuela's Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Oxford 2010; Ryan Brading, *Populism in Venezuela*, Routledge, London 2012.

¹¹ Marc Lazar, “Testing Italian democracy “, *Comparative European Politics*, 2013, vol. 11, n°3, pp. 316-336; Pasquino, G. (2008), ‘Populism and Democracy’. In: Albertazzi, D. and D. McDonnell (eds), *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

unchanged in spite of the evolutions are considered.

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Old and new populisms.

Often scientific reasoning risks being sterile, merely nominalistic and detached from empirical references even when dealing with the opposition of old and new populisms. Instead it is interesting to see how the element of “populist novelty” with which every populism emerges in its political context of reference distinguishes itself. Referring to our present cases, a first and evident element for general comparison between the Italian neo populist turn and the Venezuelan one is the question of novelty. An aspect cannot be understood if not in the light of the end of the international and national scenarios that were closing and opening.

It is necessary to highlight some things relative to the historical conjuncture. Both phenomena appear after 1989 and the relative collapse of the system of geopolitical and ideological conflict linked to the cold war. We have the first Berlusconi government in May of 1994, while the first government of Chávez appears in January of 1999. In the forefront of this epochal event that marked the real end of the twentieth century and its ideological and cultural references, Berlusconi and Chávez stand out as novelties in opposite directions and in sharp opposition to the background of their own country.

The European context was the disintegration of the soviet regimes, but especially the beginning of the road to liberal democracy undertaken by many

nations that were returning independent. For some entry into the European Union was proffered, for others, a few years later the alternative of coming into the emerging area of Russian influence under Putin's management¹². On the level of political journalism and a good part of public opinion communism was presumed defeated perhaps even definitively dead with a consequent diminishment or even end, as in Italy's case, of national communist parties. By contrast, the parties of liberal and democratic inspiration that had played an anti communist role for almost half a century had undergone a dynamic of loss of prestige and power with the decline and failure of their old adversaries and loss of their role of opposition. A post-ideological condition was now the frontier of the new political forms, causing a substantial change of value with regard to the origin of the political actors and political participants. The end of ideology, pragmatism, an emphasis on local interest were the cornerstones of the new political grammar as a substitution of the twentieth century ideological doctrine. At the end of the systems of party politics based on the opposition and conflict of socialism vs. democratic liberalism civil society was recovering a position of primary importance. In the specific case of Italy the events of the Tangentopoli scandal¹³ decreed the decline of the party system and the end of the governing class which had governed the country for almost fifty years. The road to follow for a new political force was one that no longer took into consideration the ideological conflict imposed by the world order

¹² Roberto Di Quirico, *La democratizzazione tradita. Regimi ibridi e autoritarismi nei paesi ex-sovietici europei*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2013.

¹³ Ilvo Diamanti, 1992. *Tangentopoli*, Laterza, Bari-Roma, 2008.

of the cold war, that had nothing to do with the ruling class corrupted by party politics, and that pragmatically assumed political responsibility.

If this was the European and Italian prospect, the one from which Chavism emerges in the Latin American panorama is almost antithetical, the only exception being the degree of crisis for the country, as much institutional as social. The Latin American climate is in fact completely the opposite: the advent of the revolutionary Bolivarian movement headed by Chávez is the starting point of a period of affirmation for the progressive forces in the entire subcontinent. Chávez's rise to command inaugurates a season of leftist electoral victories that see Lula in Brazil, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Kirchner in Argentina and Correa in Ecuador, and that some analysts, have emphatically defined "pink tide"¹⁴ or "left turn"¹⁵. The end of the USA-USSR conflict represents for Latin America, which according to the Monroe doctrine¹⁶ was supposed to be the courtyard of the USA, the end of that system of vetoes both explicit and implicit for every political force of Marxist inspiration in the entire area, that had found in the Condor plan and in numerous coup d'états its hardest and most repressive action. To this was added a new orientation of American foreign policy: less attention for the internal affairs of Latin American countries, also due to the effect of the growing Middle Eastern

¹⁴ Tom Chodor, *Neoliberal Hegemony and the Pink Tide in Latin America: Breaking Up With Tina?*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014.

¹⁵ Maxwell A. Cameron, Eric Hershberg (eds), *Latin America's Left Turns: Politics, Policies, and Trajectories of Change*, Lynne Rienner Pub, Boulder, 2010.

¹⁶ Marco Mariano, *L'America nell'"Occidente"*, *Storia della dottrina Monroe* (1823-1963), Carocci Editore, Roma 2013.

priority.

In the case of Venezuela, the decade after 1989 was marked by the catalyst of a crisis that had already begun at the end of the seventies with an increase in poverty, with the progressive disappearance of the middle class, with the indebtedness of the state, the spreading of corruption and criminality in the streets. It is precisely the disappearance of the middle class that creates an exceptional and dramatic polarization on the social level, and on this basis the Chavist political discourse will be structured according to a classic Manichean opposition of people against élite¹⁷. On the institutional level, with the end of the old corrupt pro-USA party system founded on the *Punto Fijo* pact begun in 1958 that allowed *de facto* for a democratic system founded on two parties, one centre left and one centre right and that completely excluded the communist party and marxist guerrillas to the point of considering it illegal. A system that will regulate Venezuelan politics until the first Chávez government, that was controlled by a corrupt ruling class and based on a patronage system of entitlement, but that especially was kept in power by a limited percentage of voters, the majority of whom came from the upper middle classes.

In this background of decline Chávez appears in the Venezuelan political scene when he was still a colonel in the army as one of the leaders of the military coup d'état of the 4th of February, 1992. Chávez's political discourse immediately proposes the objective of reforming Venezuela in a nationalistic key. While the

¹⁷ Daniel Hellinger, Steve Ellner (eds), *Venezuelan Politics in the Chavez Era: Class, Polarization, and Conflict*, Lynne Rienner Pub, Boulder, 2004.

world mourns the loss of soviet socialism, in Venezuela the foundation is laid for a new socialism that Chávez will define as one of the twenty first century¹⁸. The paradox of the Chavist novelty lies in the fact that it is a novelty only because of the Latin American context, while it is something *passé* or even dead in the rest of the world. As we shall see, even in its ideological structure, Chavism is an anomaly in the global context: a twentieth century phenomenon in many ways when the twentieth century is already considered closed and terminated, according to the famous definition of The Short Twentieth century¹⁹. All the Latin American progressive forces which will follow the *left turn* path, in spite of national differences will be highly influenced by this rhetorical-ideological redemption of the Latin American progressive forces, which will correspond with an extraordinary social and political mobilization especially in the emerging stage. This Latin American trend is thus a counter trend outside of its Latin American context, especially in Europe and it is precisely for this characteristic that it will be the subject of special attention on the part of progressive forces, even contributing to the renewal of an exotic myth of the new Latin American left.

With respect to the fundamental assumptions of the twentieth century political dimension Berlusconi is therefore something absolutely new that feeds off of the rhetoric of novelty. Berlusconi is a novelty, in many ways unconventional and extreme based on a concept of political action highly influenced

¹⁸ Sirio López Velasco, *Socialismo del siglo XXI y Ecomunitarismo: Una mirada latinoamericana*, Editorial Académica Española, 2011.

¹⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991*, Vintage Books, New York, 1996.

by the media to the point that Umberto Eco has defined it “media populism”²⁰. With Berlusconi we have an upheaval of Italian political life. Mazzoleni and Sfardini have defined it as a turn towards a *pop system*²¹ where the leader has a direct feeling with the citizens who are spectators, but it is seen always in a discredited light as a substitution of the political establishment. Berlusconi thus represents a successful post-twentieth century and at the same time anti-twentieth century political experiment which will profoundly affect those who follow him, even those politicians avowedly anti-Berlusconi. The 5 Star Movement and the renewal movement of the Democratic Party headed by Matteo Renzi will develop a variant of this paradigm of political subjectivity based on the principle of “newism”²². Although very different in many ways this element of “newism” is found as a common factor both in the fight against the “caste” and the old politicians led by Grillo and his followers the *grillini* in favor of a new policy, and in Renzi's political speeches about “scrapping”, understood as the substitution of the old leadership of the Democratic Party. The uncritical love of anything new had spread an anti-political criterion in the Italian political context and is solidly opposed to everything that repeats or recalls an aspect of the politics of the First Republic.

On the other hand Chavism's novelty and that of the other Latin American

²⁰ Umberto Eco, *Turning Back the Clock: Hot Wars and Media Populism*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 2007.

²¹ Gianpietro Mazzoleni, Anna Sfardini, *Politica pop. Da «Porta a porta» a «L'isola dei famosi»*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2009.

²² Michele Sorice, *Web democracy between participation and populism Crisis, political parties and new movements in the Italian public sphere*, CMCS Working Papers, Rome, 2013.
http://mediaresearch.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/cmcswp_0213.pdf

progressive forces could almost be considered *vintage*, since it repropose with relative success something that outside of that context is over and unrepeatable. Chávez's Latin American socialism and the socialism of the other Latin American progressive forces represent the reconsideration of a formula that in many ways belongs to the twentieth century there where those aspects of the twentieth century were unable to come to fruition. Moreover, also the evolution of Chavism is an exasperation of elements that are moving in this direction. The symbolic and paradigmatic role of the Cuban experience and the objective weight in international relations, the intensification of the anti-imperialistic and anti-American aspect in geopolitical choices, the radicalization of the anti-neoliberal action move in a conscious countertrend with the rest of the world. It is also true that the movements of the "left turn" exhume the old illuminist myth of a united Latin America, land of liberty and of the rights of man, which had been one of the foundational ideological features of the period of independence from the Spanish.

At the basis of the historical action of these populisms is the paradox of a Latin American political novelty as a fulfillment of what is dead elsewhere and of what was not possible, which can be summarized in this manner: *what is not possible elsewhere and what was impossible before, here is possible thanks to our leader.*

Leadership: Civil society and praetorianism

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A comparison of Berlusconi's leadership with Chávez's would merit a much more extensive dissertation, especially if we consider the aspects of biographical and psychological nature. Here I will limit myself with considering the source and the relative fall of each of them in terms of consensus of their social figure in public opinion.

The appearance of Berlusconi in Italian democratic history is the appearance of an unusual political subjectivity: civil society as an active actor on the political scene. In an anti-party and anti-political key civil society emerges as an autonomous actor without mediation or political supports. The entrepreneur is a metonymy of civil society, and thus of the citizens, who comes forward assuming collective responsibility to intervene where professional politics failed. The famous speech about his entry into the field made by prerecorded video and broadcast on the major television channels is a debut that anticipates and encompasses many basic populist aspects of the new Italian politics of the so called Second Republic. He presents himself as a protagonist without any political connotations, as a responsible individual making a speech based on the discredit and mistrust of the old party politics, on his anti-communist feelings, on his personal paternalistic commitment, on the exaltation of pragmatism over ideology, on the rhetoric of a good father who wants to run Italy well like his own family, on the exaltation of doing and the discredit of the smoky politics of mere words. The speech is aimed at introducing him as a successful Italian citizen tired of political logic, inviting the spectator to an identification and to an alliance among people outside of politics but subordinate and vexed by politics. That slick rhetorical speech is paradigmatic of

all the successive neo-populist political communication: Berlusconi presents himself as a successful man with all the necessary requirements to be the leader of a new social and political alliance against the political establishment. This is an alliance for consensus that is typically populist: *I one of you (people) with you (people) against them (élite), beyond social and ideological differences*. The mythology of the leader, citizen, successful entrepreneur will be fed through the media system of the Mediaset group and specific marketing actions that include interviews, articles, and biographies.

The political advancement of civil society as a sphere that is autonomous from politics and no longer subordinate to politics is a paradigm shift of the populist turning point in Italian democratic history. The horizon of consensus opened by Berlusconism partially crystallizes the anti-political discredit of the Tangentopoli period and the end of the first Republic and partially opens the way to the possibility of new political subjectivities unleashed by the old party logic. This will be particularly determining in the years of Berlusconi's consolidation of power when the action of government will induce the most critical part of public opinion to recognize the populist ambiguity of Berlusconi's style. Many of the old vices of the old politics, many of the same personages of the establishment are assimilated into the Berlusconi hive. Added to that are the controversies on the theme of conflict of interest, on the orientation increasingly focused on personality and the shameless defense of Berlusconi's private interests.

It should be noted that during the years of the affirmation of Berlusconismo, in line with the dynamics of European civil society transformation, there will also

be a profound transformation of Italian civil society. A widespread anti-European sentiment, a spreading of populist phenomena also in other countries, the first forms of malcontent with the onset of the economic crisis will set the stage for that phenomenon that Ruzza has called the “uncivil society”, that is to say “that expressions of uncivil society include manifest hostility towards liberal democracy and some of its practices, and expressions of a principled rejection of it”²³. It’s a widespread condition in European public opinion which is inclined to a devaluation, often radical, of the dimension of institutional politics on the part of forms of activism coming from civil society. If in many European countries the “uncivil society” will assume nationalistic and racist connotations, for many aspects already noted, in Italy there will be some very original variations. In fact, it is in the very sphere of civil society that other forms of anti-political and anti-institutional political subjectivity markedly populist in character will come into being: Grillo’s Five Star Movement and the movement of renewal of the center left represented by the leader Matteo Renzi. As we shall see later, two anomalous political figures with respect to the political establishment, who have taken strong anti-Berlusconian positions, yet they arise as variants of the same paradigm.

If with Berlusconi a new form of protagonist political subjectivity emerges from the sphere of civil society, Chávez’s appearance represents the return of a traditional populist leadership already familiar in Venezuelan history: that of the military leader near the people and for the people. As some Venezuelan historians

²³ Carlo Ruzza, *Identifying uncivil society in Europe*, in Ulrike Liebert, Hans-Jörg Tren, *The New Politics of European Civil Society*, Routledge, New York 2011.

have demonstrated²⁴, praetorianism has a long tradition in the institutional history of Venezuela and Chávez represents only the ultimate variation in socialist and Creole key. From the period of independence (1812-19) the direct intervention into public affairs is a continuum in Venezuelan state politics. When the republican and democratic institutions faced a period of crisis, the army intervened reestablishing order and managing public affairs. The long period of the republic of Punto Fijo from 1958 to the advent of Chávez may be considered an exception in many ways in which a party politics institutional system with strong American foreign support managed to subordinate the army and the military class to the point of limiting their influence. A subordination due especially to the use of the national army on the domestic front against Marxist guerrillas. From a structural point of view there is an element that characterizes the Venezuelan national army: the majority of its officers come from the lower end of the social spectrum or the middle and lower middle classes. A notable difference, for example, with respect to the composition of the highest sectors of the armies of countries such as Chile, Peru and Argentina, whose officers have always been of aristocratic and high middle class extraction, and thus often holders of conservative and reactionary ideologies. This peculiarity of the social composition of the Venezuelan army is the basis of the Marxist conditioning of the army carried forward by leftist revolutionary forces from the end of the sixties to the nineties in a Maoist view of converting the national

²⁴ Domingo Irwin, Ingrid Micett, *Caudillos: militares y poder. Una historia del pretorianesimo en Venezuela*, Publicaciones UCAB, Caracas 2008; Hernán Castillo, Manuel Alberto Donís Ríos, Domingo Irwin, *Militares y civiles, Balance y perspectivas de las relaciones civiles-militares venezolanas en la segunda mitad del siglo XX*, Publicaciones UCAB, Caracas 2001.

army into an army of the people with the final goal of a civic-military alliance²⁵. As he himself declared, as a youth Chávez participated in these meetings, becoming convinced of the necessity of a leading role of the military in a socialist revolution.

Also for Venezuela, the neo-populist turning point arrives with a speech in front of television cameras, but it is fortuitous and unprogrammed. Until that fateful 4th of February 1992 Chávez was an unknown. A few hours after the first events, the coup d'état is over due to the reaction of the national army. The outcome of the coup d'état was a 14 deaths and more than fifty wounded. Some of the officers who were authors of the military uprising are arrested. While they are led to prison, as a mouthpiece of the group it is he who speaks in front of the microphones to invite the last revolting troops to surrender. The speech is short: he encourages everyone to be calm, he admits defeat, but above all he utters a phrase that will remain famous: “for the moment ('por ahora'), the objective has not been reached” For anyone who is in front of their television screen that unknown officer becomes the voice of the rebels and of popular malcontent, who admits having lost a battle but not the war necessary to change the current and corrupt political system. To put it briefly, Chávez is a popular hero, the streets fill with murales with his face and that phrase 'por ahora', symbols of the hope of a change that is about to happen. During his time in jail, with the complicit aid of institutions he receives visits from admirers and curious people of all kinds. There are people who remember dinners or lunches within the jail during which he held long speeches on the future of

²⁵ Hugo Chávez Frías, *Hugo Chávez Frías un uomo, un popolo. Conversazioni con Marta Harnecker*, Edizioni Pettiroso, Napoli 2002

Venezuela. Chávez is soon a symbol of redemption in the imagination of a population oppressed by the economic, social and institutional crisis but he is also a hope founded on two certainties imprinted profoundly in Venezuelan history: the certainty that soldiers can save the country and the guarantee of a man whose political discourse recalls the national hero, Simon Bolívar. In 1994 he obtains amnesty, he wins the elections of 1998 and he will remain president of Venezuela until his death, winning numerous administrative and political ballot, both regional and national.

Praetorianism will also be a trait of the institutional phase of Chavism and of its governmental style: many men from the military sphere will be selected as candidates and elected to the National Assembly with Chávez's party, first called *Movimiento Quinta República* and then from 2007 *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuel*. Many will assume key governmental positions, others will become ambassadors, and others will go to run the most important national companies such as PDVSA, the state petroleum company. The praetorian style will be reflected in the party organization, in the action of the government and in the administrative organization. Many mayors, even of secondary cities, elected in the socialist ranks, will often be ex officers of Chavist faith. Just as Berlusconi will hire personages from the civilized world, from enterprises and from television for his local and national electoral campaigns, so Chávez will often duplicate the military style of leadership in many spheres of state organization.

Strategic and tactical ideologies

The relationship between ideology and populism is as complex as the problem of defining populism. Cas Mudde proposed considering populism as a 'thin centered' ideology. For Mudde:

[populism is] a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people””²⁶

Mudde takes inspiration from the expression 'thin-centered' which is characteristic of the thought of the English thinker Michael Freeden²⁷. According to Freeden this label must imply those subtle ideologies but not weak. These ideologies don't fit in the family of the great ideologies, that appear fragmentary in many ways and are part of the post-cold war and post-Marxist era. Those terms imply the period following the decline of real twentieth century socialisms. Mudde's approach takes one of the fundamental conditions of possibility of populism: the structural conflict between an *élite* and a people, obviously in favor of the latter. The criticism that

²⁶ Mudde, Cas. 2004. 'The Populist Zeitgeist', *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 39 (4), pp. 542–563.

²⁷ Freeden, Michael. 2003. *Ideology: A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

can be leveled at Mudde's theory is that it tends to overlap ideology and populism in a manner which is too reductionist, neglecting the different relationships that can be established between different types of populisms and different kinds of ideologies keeping an analytical autonomy. A comparison between contemporary Venezuelan and Italian populism can be a clear demonstration.

If it is easy to deduce and almost obvious to state the opposition between the socialist orientation of Chavism and the liberal inspiration of Berlusconi, grasping a structural difference of the relationship between populist configuration of power and ideological configuration is less obvious. In the first case we are talking about an ideology that structures the political culture of the populist movement according to a unifying framework, a high degree of internal coherence, a strategic prospective; while in the second case we are dealing with a more tactical relationship between populism and ideologies, more instrumental and as a pure 'packet of ideas' to use according to the occasion. As I explained in another work²⁸, Chávez's Bolivarian revolutionary ideology is a reinterpretation in a socialistic key of the civil cult of Simon Bolívar that was born after the death of the hero of independence. A maximalist socialistic ideology that has its roots in the sixties and must be contextualized as one of those Creole socialisms, according to the definition of Alain Rouquié, *L'America Latina*²⁹, born during the cold war on the basis of a Marxist reinterpretation of the heroes of independence and based on

²⁸ Manuel Anselmi, *Chavez's Children: Ideology, Education, and Society in Latin America*, Lexington Books, Washington 2013.

²⁹ Rouquié Alain, *L' America latina. Introduzione all'Estremo Occidente*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2000.

ethno-nationalistic elements. In many oligarchic, democratic, and dictatorial governments of the republican history of Venezuela we can speak of classic Bolivarianism in which the cult of Bolívar acted on the social fabric in a “top down” manner performing a symbolic-ideological function ordering the state in a paternalistic and concessive key for the benefit of the oligarchic or elitist command³⁰. The Marxist revolutionary reinterpretation transforms it into cult of the people for the people aimed at revolutionary socialist struggle, directed at the unification of a popular “bottom-up” coalition. Chávez’s revolutionary Bolivarianism uses the symbol of the hero of independence in an analogical manner to construct a new ideological prospective: just as Bolívar fought for state and territorial independence from the Spanish, revolutionary Bolivarianism will have to tend to the emancipation from the new forms of colonialism determined by neo liberalism and by American imperialism and independence will mean autonomous national management of the country's resources for a redistribution to the national population. Chavist ideology, in the tradition of Marxist ideologies and guevarism, aims for the reorientation of the liberal state apparatus. In this sense we understand how one of the first acts of the first Chávez government was more than constitutional reform but a reconstruction of the whole state and the renaming of the republic with the addition of the adjective 'Bolivarian'. Revolutionary Bolivarianism establishes itself according to a long term strategy that corresponds with the objective of the creation of a socialist community-state to which is also

³⁰ Carrera Damas Germán, *El culto a Bolívar*, Alfa Group Editorial, 2003

associated the formation of a revolutionary citizen. Bolivarian ideology calls for militancy and totally uncritical commitment to the revolutionary process. The logic of consensus is subordinated to a general ideological project for the entire nation.

If the configuration of Chavism is very similar to that of many twentieth century socialisms, Italian neo-populisms are a very different matter, especially with regard to ideology. The starting post-ideological horizon constitutes a break with the general transformative conceptions of society. Ideology does not perform a structuring function of the movement's political culture to the point of tying every single action or program to basic ideological assumptions. The populist movement and leader have rather an instrumental relationship with ideology that is tactical and contingent: according to the necessity of consensus of the moment. Especially on the level of communication Berlusconi can say things that seem rightist and the day after contradict himself saying things that we would recognize as leftist. He can oscillate between liberalism and social democracy, between catholic positions and lay positions.

This populist instrumental and tactical relationship with ideology is observed in the other political figures who have arisen after the country's populist turn. Such as the Five Star movement that seems leftist in some points of its program, for example the defense of common goods, and for others rightist and reactionary, as many of Grillo's xenophobic utterances demonstrate. Also the current premier Renzi, as a leader with strong populist connotations, even while

being the head of a social democratic party that has entered into the family of European socialism, often expresses markedly liberal positions on themes like work and economic programming. Ultimately, for Italian neopopulisms reference ideologies do not exist to constrain a programmatic action, but rather reservoirs where you can get “packets of ideas” useful for maintaining the momentary level of consensus. Autonomy of political consensus exists with respect to ideologies and their subordination as rhetorical-argumentative tools.

Revolutionary pastorality or franchising

As Jansen demonstrated³¹, a study of social mobilization and of political participation of the populist movements inevitably implies a reflection on populism as a strategy. This analytical key to understanding provides a very interesting horizon of comprehension both on the conditions of political participation and on the local roots.

Like other Latin American populisms of the 'left turn' Chavism, in its initial phase, in terms of social mobilization played an important role of inclusion of the excluded social sectors in the political life of the country. The most disadvantaged social groups which had not had political representation in the former political system of Puncto Fijo, enduring the oligarchic entitlement political choices, found in Chávez a chance to take part in republican life. The progressive and inclusive

³¹ Jansen, Robert S. (2011). ‘Populist Mobilization: A New Theoretical Approach to Populism’.

Sociological Theory, 29(2), pp. 75–96.

action of this kind of populism has brought us to reconsider the absolute negativity of the very concept of populism. In the most militant and leftist exponents these populisms have been seen as a new form of progressive Caesarism, according to Gramsci's famous definition. The very action of the Chavist government has been strongly conditioned by this aspect in its maintenance of the inclusive tension of the disadvantaged classes. The government's massive commitment to social programs in the struggle against absolute poverty and illiteracy has caused the structuring of a new welfare with strong ideological and social connotation. The missions to increase literacy, to provide health assistance, the Bolivarian schools are all national programs that Chavism has accomplished to improve the conditions of those citizens who only shortly before had been excluded from every logic of redistribution of the national wealth as well as any form of governmental deliberation. On the other hand it is also true that a second ideological and propagandistic end has overlapped this governmental action of social inclusion, through these social projects ideological strongholds of local control have been established, often in the form of entitlements and patronage. Precisely the analysis of the organization of Chavist militant groups with respect to the territory reveals the type of governmental strategy of this populism. Particularly an analysis of the planning of the *Circulos bolivarianos* has shown paramilitary criteria in the division of the territory and the militant presence on it. In pamphlets provided by the Chavist government the basic criteria for the organization of militant groups are explained: every territory either urban or rural must be subdivided in zones and for every zone a leader must be indicated who has precise characteristics. The leader must know

how to identify individuals living in conditions of social and moral crisis and approach them expressing a positive attitude and offering a glimpse of hope. Often these local leaders intervene as supervisors and mediators where management problems arise within schools, hospitals or any other type of administration or public service. Ultimately, this kind of militancy is a general strategy for defense of the national territory that in many ways recalls that of the church; in fact both the organized groups and these local leaders seem to be involved in a more general dynamic that we could call revolutionary pastorality.

The Italian context is another matter entirely. The Italian populist turn coincides with a profound change in the political participation of all the Italian parties and movements. The dissolution of the old party politics system of the First Republic has produced new forms of mobilization and participation of the citizens in political life. Progressively the forms of political socialization guided and coordinated by the local secretariats of the parties in the territory are being reduced. The populist leadership having prevailed, belonging to a party is no longer through registration in a party organization but is founded on the personal adhesion to the discourse of the movement or party, the bond between leader and citizen is ever more one of adhesion based on symbolic elements. As Sartori has underlined, from *homo ideologicus* we go on to *homo videns*³². But above all the citizen can be committed in the movement without becoming a militant but remaining a citizen, and always maintaining his own place in civil society. Even the activism which

³² Giovanni Sartori, *Homo videns. Televisione e post-pensiero*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2000.

characterizes many of the adherents to the Five Star Movement is a form of hyper-civilism that must always and constantly distinguish itself from the forms of professional and classic politics. Party registration loses the value it had in the sixties and seventies when it was a real identity option, now it has a purpose more symbolic than functional and concrete. An evident example is the drastic drop in registrations to the Partito Democratico after about a year from the start of Renzi's mandate as national secretary: from 500 thousand registered in 2013 against the 100 thousand of 2014³³. The citizen becomes Berlusconi, Grillo or Renzi directly without any apparent political conversion but continuing his own daily life in civil society. The populist leader is like a brand or a fashion style that can be worn anywhere. And the party organization itself is affected by this model that has been defined as franchising³⁴. Especially the organization of the meet ups by the 5 star movement highlight this kind of organizational formula. The citizens who can see themselves in the message launched by the leader get organized on a local level asking for the use of the brand and the possibility of representing an outpost of the movement in that place. The democratic centralism of the classic parties is thus replaced by a kind of rhizomatic organization, molecular, based on self representation and on symbolic affiliation.

³³ http://www.corriere.it/politica/14_ottobre_03/pd-tesseramenti-calo-bersani-senza-iscritti-addio-partito-3ba0cbaa-4b0e-11e4-9829-df2f785edc20.shtml

³⁴ R. Kenneth Carty, "Parties as Franchise Systems: The Stratarchical Organizational Imperative," *Party Politics*, 10 (January, 2004), 5-24

Symbolic order and communicative style

The populist turn is the explosion of a new symbolic order, structured according to a Manichean opposition: us/people vs. them/elite. Within this social macro-representation the communicative acts of the populist movement become concrete. Every speech and every action should tend to a demolition of the symbolic order of the political establishment, relative to *them*, in order to thus strengthen the identity of the movement, of the *us*. This function of deconstruction of the political unconscious of the opposing party serves to reinforce a founding feeling of belonging, based on an almost mystical and absolute conception of popular sovereignty, of a relationship without mediation between power and people. And the leader is the personified synthesis of this union. It is a dynamic of continual victimization and irresponsibility: evoking a corrupt value order that has rendered the people subordinate, they try to strengthen a popular coalition proposing the idea of an innocent and pure community-people without any blame for the social and political corruption which they are fighting against. This dimension of absolving the community-people from all blame is constant and often nourished by an amplification and distortion of the elite's possibilities and it is at the basis of the rhetorical-conspiracy theory tendency of many populist phenomena³⁵. Proposing an order of corrupt powers against the will of the people, on the one hand populism exercises a form of control of the internal behavior of the community-people

³⁵ Taguieff P.A., *L'imaginaire du complot mondial: Aspects d'un mythe moderne*, Paris, Mille et Une Nuits, 2006.

through the threat of expulsion and betrayal; on the other hand it renews solidarity based on the simple condition of being citizens of a nation. For populism the adversary is always the betrayer of the people and of the people's good. Beyond the specific meaning, that can be foreigners, “the caste”, financial lobbies or Jewish-Masonic lodges, plots and conspiracy make up a form of social representation inclined to both the demarcation of the logic of a general *ingroup/outgroup* and the positive and supportive connotation of the *ingroup* and the negative one of the *outgroup*.

Some of the constant terms of Berlusconian language and of the contemporary Italian populist movements have played this function. The indiscriminate use of the term 'communist' against all adversaries, or the use of the word 'caste' on the part of activists in the Five Star Movement against their opponents, or using the invocation for “scrapping” on the part of Renzi are expressive formulas that have a general labeling function of an adverse dimension outside of the populist community-people. They generate populist macro frames, to use Lakoff's terminology³⁶. The symbolic order is all inclined to the exaltation of men from civil society dedicated to politics on the basis of civic pragmatism and a “logic of doing” and against all ideological, bureaucratic, politicized rhetoric. The Italian neo-populisms have imposed a general style that discredits their political adversaries, the constituted authorities and the entire political establishment that they hurl themselves against. If Renzi distinguishes himself for being politely

³⁶ George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*, Chelsea Green Pub Co, Maine, 2004.

discrediting, since he liquidated his adversaries as old and obsolete, Berlusconi clearly uses harsh tones, often making recourse to obscenities, a stylistic mode based on insult against adversaries, and who finds in the ethno-populist leader of the Northern League a real maestro as Lynda Dematteo has demonstrated³⁷. Another general aspect of the Italian neo-populist turn is the widespread anti-intellectual attitude that has often led to discrediting campaigns against the world of culture on the part of the neo-populist movements. It suffices to remember the famous line about culture that doesn't give bread on the part of the Berlusconi minister Tremonti, or Grillo's insults against famous intellectuals or Italian journalists who aligned themselves against his movement, or Renzi's disparaging attitude towards intellectuals who were critical towards his reforms. The populist symbolic order delegitimizes all of the established *auctoritas* especially if they are connected with the establishment.

This is certainly not the place to analyze in detail the complex role played by the media, especially the television media in the Berlusconi system of power, to the point that it has been defined a videocracy. I will only note that since the advent of Berlusconi every Italian political leader's intervention has been calibrated to the television or media audience. Even when a leader intervenes at the end of a debate or in parliament, the structure of the speech is not meant to be directed at those present, but is directed towards the public of the mainstream media, or to be recorded by the social network like Twitter. This also denotes the populist

³⁷ Lynda Dematteo, *L'idiota in politica*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2011.

distortion of the basic forms of Italian political debate.

In Venezuela, on the other hand, the expression “escualidos” with which the Chavists labeled all the people who opposed the revolutionary Bolivarian system has become famous. A branding term that gives the measure of the dramatic ideological polarization of the country. At any rate, if the symbolic order of Italian neo populism is definitively anti-system and anti-political, Chavist populism is strongly nationalistic. The basic logic is to re-semanticize all the spheres of the state in a revolutionary Bolivarian key. The basic logic is the re-appropriation of the state on the part of the people. In this regard, it is interesting to note how the adjective 'Bolivarian' has been progressively added to many institutional denominations, beginning with the name of the republic which from 'Republic of Venezuela' became 'Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela' and so the constitution and many other institutional spheres. During his very long television monologues on his weekly program, Chávez used to maintain a direct relationship with the citizens that asked him for help or that asked him questions. Through the national media close to the party, Chávez was the first commentator of the national and world events. He explained what he was doing directly to the public, or gave his version on international politics. Almost always Simon Bolivar, the father of the country and hero of independence, was re-evoked as a founding mythical figure that legitimized his own vision. It is interesting to note that with the death of Chávez, the Chavist movement has progressively substituted Bolivar in his role of mythic legitimizing personage. The commandant had entered the pantheon of his movement dominating its symbolic scene.

Conclusions

As part of a general theory of populism, in this article I have tried to propose a comparison of two cases that are very different from each other according to analytical elements that correspond to structural aspects. I have tried to clarify that the studies of populism rather than trying to give a limiting definition of populism as a single abstract category, must analyze the single cases of study recognizing on the one hand the sociopolitical complexity. The objective is in fact to develop a comparative theory of types of global populisms, starting from the most diverse cases. On the basis of an interpretation of Gidron and Bonikowski's classification, I particularly followed the relationship between populism and ideology, between populism and strategy and populism and communicative style.

In both cases that were examined, both for Venezuela and for Italy, it is more opportune to speak not of populisms isolated from their context but of a populist turn of the political system constituting two types of socio-political configurations in many ways opposite. If Berlusconi marks the beginning of a new family of post-ideological and media neo-populisms, strongly neoliberal even when they are presented as social democratic, expressions of the civil society with an autonomous and instrumental relationship towards ideologies, a territorial rootedness similar to a company franchising and a symbolic order based on the exaltation of pragmatism and delegitimizing the public and state institutions of

classic politics. Chavism will instead represent a kind of twentieth century populism after the twentieth century, almost *vintage*, with a leader who is the affirmation of the protective function of praetorianism in a socialist key, who has rooted the party in a paramilitary manner according to a revolutionary pastorality and who expresses a symbolic order of reformation of the state in a key of re-appropriation for the people, using also the media as a means to promote his populist agenda.

The observed oppositions are the first differential elements for a strict typological description of global populisms, also in the light of an ulterior evaluation of the relationship between populisms and quality of democracy. As has in fact been noted for Chavist Venezuela the populist governmental style has been one of the fundamental conditions of the transformation of the liberal democracy into a hybrid regime, that is to say a new form of regime not fully democratic. This confirms the fact that a political science evaluation of a democratic regime can not overlook a comparative sociological analysis of the real social configuration of the populist power in all of its complexity.

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