

POPULISM AND NATIONALISM SOCIOLOGICALLY SEEN THROUGH A SYSTEMIC LENS

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Abstract: since the late 1970s numerous studies have been carried out on the rapid spread of different forms of populism and nationalism. When analysing such phenomena, some scholars have highlighted the importance of adopting a historical perspective, emphasising their cultural, juridical, and spatial origins, while describing them as the result of modernity. In this paper these reflections will be interpreted using an ecosystem approach, in order to show the symbolic and communication processes of spatial, social, and individual self- and hetero-identification underlying old and new forms of populism and nationalism.

Keywords: environment-system – emergent properties – identity – symbol – territory

Introduction. Ecosystem Clarifications: Populism and Nationalism between Space and Symbols

The concepts of populism and nationalism involve the ideas of identity-identification and co-adjustment of system and environment. When these two phenomena are analysed by adopting an ecosystem approach, they may be correlated with the temporal dimension of history and both material and symbolic evolution¹. Such issues may be understood by making reference to meaning, while the channel through which the discourse should be developed is that of communication², with both its functions being considered – the internal one, aimed at the organisation and reproduction of a specific social reality, and the external one, focused on the mutual adjustment of system and environment.

According to Mead³, the construction of individual identity occurs when an individual is recognised and identified as a functional component in a given context – society. Through communication processes, the individual absorbs specific ideas, linguistic codes,

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¹ E. Morin, 1988 and 1993.

² N. Luhmann, 1990.

³ G.H. Mead, 2010.

thought and behavioural patterns, which make them become an acting mind. Over time, their behaviour adjusts to their social environment, gradually leading them to build their self. Retrospectively, society develops from personalities that, formed by communicative relationships, organise based on an intersubjectively shared meaning, establishing more or less stable forms of cooperation. The individual and society are one the environment of the other, in a mutual relationship of causation and recognition that is always mediated by communication processes⁴.

In that sense, phenomena such as populism and nationalism may be considered the evolutionary result of the connection between system and environment. In the case of the human species, the struggle for existence was characterised by sexual competition, the control over a territory, the fear of an inhospitable environment, and the exchange of symbols⁵, which led to the development of what would become villages, kingdoms, empires, cities, and nations. Besides being spatially organised units, the latter also were the result of predation that was legitimised and codified based on mythical, religious, and legal truths.

Thanks to the contribution of different scholars, an ecosystem approach may help to show the origins and development of nationalist sentiment and populist narratives, seen as the emergent properties of the specific historical context of modernity.

1. Semantic Clarifications and Evolution

The origins of the first «sociations»⁶ oscillate between codes, created to counteract fears and ensure safety, and regimes of truth, instrumental in constructing a mythical identity that could be the basis for the development of a sense of belonging. Such a process was the result of the action of human beings and their attempt to exercise power over space and those who occupied it⁷.

Throughout history, and in the Western world in particular, two main types of urban agglomerations developed. On the one hand, villages and cities were built that were suited to the predatory habits of those who held power, with such habits being legitimised and institutionalised by claims of divine or mythical descent. These narratives left a (self-)identifying mark on the social body that could instil a strong sense of belonging, while distinguishing the members of a group from outsiders. On the other hand, other types of urban agglomerations led to the development of a common identity based on philosophical and political ideas, as it was for Athenian democracy, religious

⁴ N. Luhmann, 1983.

⁵ E. Morin, 1994, 67-81.

⁶ According to Simmel (1989), these are forms of mutual interaction that strengthen over time.

⁷ T.H. Gyerin, 2000; J. Urry, 2004.

beliefs, with communities welcoming wandering clergy in the High Middle Ages, and corporate acts, as it was for hamlets in the Late Middle Ages⁸.

In both cases, the power to create, maintain and/or control social configurations was characterised by symbols, seen as a powerful social catalyst, due to people rallying around them and being able to define their identity thanks to them⁹. Despite being often ignored as an investigative approach, an analysis of the symbolism of (religious, military, and political) power may be crucial to reveal hopes, images of the individual and social self, and that feeling of belonging that leads one to embrace their identity and distinguish themselves from the «foreign» other. Symbols encapsulate the reasons why people choose to be together, giving up a part of their self¹⁰. Symbols are kept alive by those who create and make use of them¹¹.

Communication processes, symbols, a sense of identity and belonging, the relationship with one's homeland and history are the components of a logical-semantic network that may help to analyse different forms of populism and nationalism. Starting to develop in past ages, such phenomena have gradually evolved, with them currently showing significantly different features from those they exhibited in the early modern period.

However, it should be pointed out that the meaning of such concepts is based on different social aspects. When it comes to populism, the idea of «people» does not refer to a specific societal configuration, but it rather describes a group of constitutive elements that are so undefined that they prevent from identifying the specific collective, political, and normative features of the subjects that are part of a given society. Conversely, the term «nation» has a clear historical origin, as it defines an ideal or real socio-political community that unifies by overcoming internal linguistic, cultural, and religious differences.

By adopting a systemic perspective and making specific reference to Luhmann's reflections, Spagnolo¹² has shown how the concepts of people and nation provide the necessary meaning to react to an external environment that is perceived as being dysfunctional and threatening, thus becoming tools to ideally legitimise a political power or counter-power. Therefore, a populist or nationalist strategy may be said to be a form of reduction of the complexity of communication. This is aimed at both identifying an «enemy» and unifying the social reality characterising a vast territory, through a semantic catalyst that has specific emotional and identity connotations, which create a sense of belonging¹³.

⁸ R. Sennett, 2012.

⁹ É. Durkheim, 1912.

¹⁰ G. Zagrebelsky, 2012.

¹¹ G. Zagrebelsky, 2012, 26 and 43.

¹² C. Spagnolo, 2017.

¹³ N. Luhmann, 1999.

Spagnolo has emphasised such an interpretation when analysing the sudden scientific interest sparked by the crisis of Marxism in the late 1970s. Such a crisis was particularly evident in the United Kingdom, where identity started to no longer be defined by the concept of social class¹⁴. Similarly, as Anderson has pointed out, the Southeast Asian conflicts over national borders that involved Cambodia, Vietnam, and China were a historical, political and intellectual embarrassment to the Marxist current, due to these being revolutionary and socialist countries whose ideas were connected with proletarian internationalism¹⁵.

In 1983, Gellner, Hobsbawm and Ranger, and Anderson published three different works in which a cultural analysis of nationalism and populism is carried out, with both phenomena being described as «inventions». According to Gellner, nationalism develops from the perception of a political and cultural threat, which leads a community to create a narrative that allows it to self-identify as a unique unit that differs from others¹⁶. Hobsbawm and Ranger have shown how a nationalist narrative is based on seemingly ancient and sacred traditions, which an analysis of cultural symbols and rituals may easily reveal to be the result of recent inventions, as their research on Welsh, Scottish, English, Indian and African customs has demonstrated¹⁷. By contrast, Anderson does not consider the phenomenon of the nation and the nationalist discourse mere lies and inventions, rather seeing them as creative processes of collective thought. The originality of her reflections lies in her regarding nationalism as a sacred, almost religious, concept that helps modernity to fill the void left by the disappearance of religious, dynastic and temporal aspects. The nation responds to the need to identify with something greater, something unique that is characterised by spatial features and persists over time¹⁸. Therefore, modernity feeds different forms of re-enchantment that are based on modern concepts such as those of sovereignty and people, despite leveraging ancient mental states including fear, uncertainty and insecurity¹⁹.

In the early modern period, national sovereignty made use of the myth of a strong, responsible individual subject – the self-made man – who was proud to participate in the construction of mythical human progress²⁰. However, in the current phase of modernity, such mythical hopes of collective sharing that could lead to a prosperous future seem to have vanished. Nevertheless, some of the communication mechanisms that used to characterise old populist and nationalist narratives still persist.

¹⁴ C. Spagnolo, 2017.

¹⁵ B. Anderson, 2006.

¹⁶ E. Gellner, 1983.

¹⁷ E.J. Hobsbawm, T. Ranger 1992 (original work published 1983).

¹⁸ M. Longo, 2005, 131.

¹⁹ W. Davis, 2018, 33-45.

²⁰ M. Longo, 2001.

2. From Early Modernity to the Current Neoliberal Society

Despite belonging to three different generations, Weber, Foucault, and Malešević have all shown that State and Nation, and hence populism and nationalism, are the result of modern technical-instrumental rationality aimed at profit.

Weber has clarified that such rationality developed in the late Middle Ages, in that mercantilist society that focused on making profit outside the European continent, along the Silk Road. Driven by the spirit of Calvinism²¹, merchants played a key role in a cultural revolution that paved the way for radical social and political change. Money, as both a medium²² and a philosophy²³, required discipline, organisation, and territorial peace that could only result from the use of codes that legitimised the «monopoly on violence» held by a sovereign state²⁴. While the individual became instrumental in achieving economic progress and collective well-being²⁵, hence the importance of the reflections on natural and subjective rights²⁶, the expropriation and concentration of administrative, military and economic power marked a first step towards a global capitalist organisation and representation of society.

Foucault's theories have led to the development of two dynamics of the modern episteme of rationality. At a macro level, power creates increasingly big structures that make it possible to manage vast territories, unlike it was in the Middle Ages, thus leading to the growth of national sentiment. At a micro level, power reveals itself in terms of regulations, with individual bodies disciplining themselves accordingly. Therefore, between hetero- and self-surveillance, bodies and discursive regimes have made modern society develop, organising territories based on ideas, such as those of people and nation, and objectives, including (territorial) conquest, (economic and scientific) progress, and (political) revolutions²⁷.

Malešević has emphasised the ideological relationship between identity and nationality/people²⁸. The modern discursive regimes of self- and hetero-identification have evolved, legitimising the nation-state as the only form of territorial government. Such legitimation occurs through a variety of devices²⁹, which may impact and influence the meso- and microcosm of kinship, family, friendship, and local networks. Rationality is expressed through the standardisation of production, administrative, cultural, educational, and hence ideological, processes. Despite being allowed within the same

²¹ M. Weber, 1991.

²² T. Parsons, 1975.

²³ G. Simmel, 1900.

²⁴ M. Weber, 1999.

²⁵ A. Smith, 1976.

²⁶ M. Longo, 2001.

²⁷ M. Foucault, 2004.

²⁸ S. Malešević, 2006.

²⁹ Such devices include the army and police forces, but also urban infrastructures and furniture, schools, associations, and parades.

territory, cultural diversity vanishes when an entire community identifies with popular sovereignty, in order to fight against the imperialism of the foreigner and/or foster collective emancipation³⁰.

These scholars have shown how any old and new social element is absorbed into communication and regulation processes of reproduction of the rationalist episteme aimed at profit. Two main mechanisms feed such episteme and make the processes of social transformation efficient – expropriation and subjugation. Nation-states and supranational organisations have been increasingly deprived of their decision-making power and their function of orienting the community, being subject to the logic and fast pace of capitalist rationality, exemplified by corporations and the financialization of the economy³¹. In a world that has become dynamic and small due to a kind of communication technology that would have been inconceivable just a few years ago, the economic power of turbo-capitalism seems to be independent of any state power and specific community, be it a people or a nation. At a macro level, it rapidly flows along digital bytes, whereas at a micro level it weakens those institutions on which people used to build their own individual and collective stories, that is, parties, social classes, labour, and welfare. Consequently, the end of early modernity resulted in a pervasive sense of insecurity, uncertainty, and loneliness³². By contrast, the authoritarian and centralising nature of technical-instrumental rationality strengthened, making it turn into a sort of new religion, with its own dogmas and rituals.

Within this context, social actors, immersed in meaningless individual experiences³³, find their satisfaction in the homophilic algorithms³⁴ of echo-chambers, attacking anyone who seems to be different, whereas nationalism and populism mainly develop in online discursive spaces. Therefore, if the state is replaced by the global economy of neoliberal capitalism and parties are substituted by the charismatic leadership of politicians who are ever-present on social media³⁵, then the citizen-worker is superseded by the prosumer, the producer-consumer of online content, spaces, and time³⁶.

Nationalism and populism have become a sign of retrotopia³⁷, a kind of society in which neo-tribal attitudes and cultures³⁸ are complemented by subjectivities whose liquid nature strengthens due to increasingly ephemeral social relationships and a significant online presence³⁹. The mythical ideal no longer consists in identity and defence of territorial sovereignty, as it no longer develops when collective well-being is fostered. The

³⁰ S. Malešević, 2013, 2019.

³¹ L. Gallino, 2011.

³² W. Hutton, A. Giddens, 2000; R. Sennett, 1998; Z. Bauman, 1999.

³³ R. Sennet, 2002.

³⁴ A. Salvini, 2007, 47.

³⁵ M. Higgins, 2008.

³⁶ G. Boccia Artieri, 2001.

³⁷ Z. Bauman, 2017.

³⁸ C. de Anca, 2012.

³⁹ As a result of machine learning processes. See M. Mazzotti, 2015.

focus is rather on surviving in a world of potential enemies, by taking shelter and narcissistically showing off⁴⁰ in the neo-medieval fiefs of the Internet, adhering to new forms of association and following new political leaders who are perceived as the guarantors of a possible return to, or at least a possible reclaiming of, ancient and mythical beliefs.

Concluding Remarks. The Other Side of the Coin

As Luhmann has pointed out, the hyperdynamic mechanisms of power produce communication processes that fail to go in the same direction as technical rationality, showing alternative forms of representation of reality and different ways to share it. These counterproposals are the result of the double contingency of content and processes that are causing the concentration-expropriation of decision-making powers and the well-known phenomenon of globalisation. Reference needs to be made to the enhancement of local identities, which is often reduced to the promotion of an area or one of its distinguishing features. Nevertheless, sometimes the human and material resources of a place are mobilised, which results in the internationalisation of specific areas. Semantic and ideological conflict arises when such community effort becomes a political reaction to either a State that is deemed incapable of dealing with global issues, such as migration flows, financial crises, and pandemics, or supranational economic and financial organisations that are perceived as a threat or as parasites that take advantage of the resources of local areas⁴¹. Although these reactions are not devoid of forms of populism and nationalism, it would be wrong to explain them by simply making reference to these concepts. Indeed, this would lead one to mistakenly think, as Le Bon has done, that mass protests are merely the result of the dehumanisation of individuals who have been influenced by irrational ideas⁴². Local people clearly perceive the loss of national and local sovereignty, while state and supranational institutions counter-react by simplifying the phenomenon, stigmatising it as being a form of populism or nationalism. Such oversimplistic and reductive definitions may hide shared ideas, forms of direct democracy. These are embraced by actors belonging to the same area, who aim at defending their spaces, seen as the main factors underlying self-identification and collective memory.

In conclusion, it seems that scholars should reconsider their idea of populist/nationalist phenomena. It would be necessary to focus on those socio-communicative realities that are trying not to succumb to power laws, as the latter lead

⁴⁰ V. Cesareo, I. Vaccarini, 2012; Botturi F. *et al.*, 2014.

⁴¹ P. Borgna, 2012; L. Gallino, 2013.

⁴² G. Le Bon, 2004.

to a concentration of power in organisations that are alien to the experience of traditional local and national groups.

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