

IDENTITY AND REPRESENTATION IN POPULISM: A SCHMITTIAN READING OF LACLAU

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Abstract: This work aims to investigate the interplay between identity and representation in populism. The two categories, proposed by Carl Schmitt in his *Verfassungslehre*, are reinterpreted within the context of Ernesto Laclau's political ontology of populism. Populism always requires representative mediation despite claiming direct people's power. Without representation, there is no production of political identities and the category of people itself cannot be constructed. We find in Laclau's theory of populism a deconstructed notion of identity that interacts with that of representation. We thus find, through the use of Schmitt's categories, the possibility of going beyond Schmitt and thinking about a progressive theory of democracy that holds within it the possibility of populism.

Keywords: Populism – Identity – Representation – Schmitt – Laclau

The two souls of populism

Studies on populism, especially in the area of political science, have often identified this phenomenon with a claim for democracy finally freed from the need for mediation. The criticism of the «caste» of politicians, facilitated by the use of new digital technologies and social media, has indeed been a hallmark of neo-populist parties that have supported the utopia of direct democracy. We can particularly think of «pure populism», such as the case of the Five Star Movement¹, in which direct democracy has been a central aspect of their online voting platform, right down to using the name of Rousseau². The idea of overcoming the need for intermediate bodies is indeed a distinctive feature of the discourse of many populist actors. It seems that populism is a radical claim that Schmitt in his *Verfassungslehre*³ describes as «the democratic principle

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¹ Cf. E. Padoan, 2022.

² Cf. C. Stockman, V. Scalia, 2020.

³ C. Schmitt, 2008. About Schmitt Cf. J. Meierhenrich, O. Simons, 2013; C. Galli, 2010; G. Preterossi, 1996.

of self-identity of the people present as a political unity»⁴. This principle, as a structural attribute of the radical democratic theory, advocates the idea that in a real democracy, the sovereignty of the political decision should not be stolen from the people by any representative institution. It is well known how Rousseau thought that the «people cannot be represented»⁵, at least not in their legislative function which directly expresses their will⁶. The direct presence of the people within the place of power seems to be the political paradigm of populist actors.

This centrality of disintermediation is, however, only one feature of populism. As Schmitt clearly points out in the same work, the impossibility of the presence of the people in their identity as such in the place of power imposes, in varying degrees and forms, the necessity for the representation principle⁷. However, the component of representation cannot be avoided even in such a case of populism as the Five Star Movement which demands the dimension of direct government as an achievable utopia. In this particular case, I speak of Beppe Grillo, formally only the «guardian» of the possibility of a government of the people who represent in the public space the demands of the movement identified with the whole of the people. Nevertheless, this created a paradoxical effect whereby the person who only had to be vigilant actually acquired a symbolic transcendence that delivered into his hand an effective control of power within the Five Star Movement.

Ultimately, it seems that the paradox of populism is resolved in the paradox of democracy, which has no choice but to limit the direct presence of the people, who thus remain in the background only as a constituent power. Hence, populists can only break the mediations of democratic constitutionalism to re-institute another form of representative mediation: that of the leader. Briefly anticipating what will be said later, I believe it can be argued that this form of populist representation is not necessarily a form of authoritarianism but, on the contrary, it can even have a positive effect in «making visible» demands that the representative system of modern democracy (or its degenerations) fails to see. The disintermediation that populism produces is between the people and the leader, not a disintermediation in an absolute sense. The leader, with his/her charismatic legitimation⁸, becomes a direct representative of the people in the place of the power. Alongside the horizontal dimension of power, populism then, through the figure of the leader (central in many concrete expressions of the phenomenon,

⁴ C. Schmitt, 2008, 289. On page 239, Schmitt provides a more extensive definition of the democratic principle of identity: «It can already be factually and directly capable of political action by virtue of a strong and conscious similarity, as a result of firm natural boundaries, or due to some other reason. In this case, a political unity is a genuinely present entity in its unmediated self-identity. This principle of the self-identity of the then present people as political unity rests on the fact that there is no state without people and that a people, therefore, must always actually be existing as an entity present at hand».

⁵ J.-J. Rousseau, 2002, 220.

⁶ Cf. *ibidem*.

⁷ C. Schmitt, 2008, 239-240.

⁸ Cf. M. Weber, 1978, 212-298.

especially Latin American ones), produces a dimension of verticalization or transcendence. The people, instead of being the sole protagonist of the political space, in accord with the idea of direct democracy, see themselves reabsorbed in the person who represents them in an absolute sense. Nadia Urbinati uses the concept of *direct representation*, which, as she says, is an oxymoron that «capture[s] the idea that populist leaders want to speak directly to the people and for the people, without needing intermediaries [...]»⁹. This concept expresses well the idea of populist representation, even though – and this is the reason why I will not be following Urbinati’s theory – it shows aspects considered as a political pathology appearing specifically in populist phenomena, which are, however, structural in – though not exclusive to – modern democracy.

In contrast to formalistic views, the paradigm of the *direct representation* embodies what is, in a classic work on representation such as Pitkin’s, called symbolic representation¹⁰. If we go beyond the idea of procedural democracy, where representation is just the transmission of the will and interests of rational individuals to the political representative by electoral mandate, one can see how in every democratic system there is a need for an integration of the transmission. The representative person (or any other symbolic figure) is one who represents (in the sense of making themselves publically visible)¹¹ the political unity of the people¹². In this concept there is a surplus of meanings due to the symbolic nature of a representation that cannot be rationalized and works inside the political system viewed from both a populist and a democratic perspective. After defining the concept of identity, we can now delineate the complementary concept of representation, quoting again Schmitt:

«Representation is not a normative event, a process, and a procedure. It is rather something *existential*. To represent means to make an invisible being visible and present through a publicly present one. The dialectic of the concept is that the invisible is presupposed as absent and nevertheless is simultaneously made present»¹³.

The production of a visible unity of the political body as homogeneity and totalization appear in liberal theory to be at the border of the democratic system and too close to totalitarianism. Nevertheless, the re-emergence of this idea inside the populist phenomenon in contemporary democracies, connected with the claim for popular sovereignty, tells us that it has to do with something deeper which affects the political as such. In the time of crisis of democracy «populism [...] (re)instaurates an homogenizing

⁹ N. Urbinati, 2019, 8. This concept is explained in chapter 4, 158-189.

¹⁰ H. F. Pitkin, 1967, 92-111.

¹¹ Cf. C. Schmitt, 2008, 243.

¹² Cf. G. Duso, 2003, 28.

¹³ C. Schmitt, 2008, 243.

aesthetic regime of total visibility, so as to secure the working of its fantasy of homogeneous plenitude»¹⁴.

Populism shows us that the problem of the presence of the people in the place of the power (which is a populist claim, but also the heart of the radical democratic paradigm) depends, also theoretically, on the representation as an «immediate mediation» that makes the (same) people visible and thereby giving them unity. Extending Schmittian concepts, which he used to describe the modern *Verfassung*, it can be stated that the political logic of populism embraces both identity and representation. Hence, to the Rousseauian inspiration – which seems at first glance more obvious – there must be added the Hobbesian one, thus rediscovering in contemporary populism the fundamental axes of modern political thought. The exploration of the representational logic of populism must begin with the concepts of the Argentinian political theorist Ernesto Laclau. Undoubtedly, Laclau was the thinker who proposed the most relevant philosophical interpretation of populism. And, most importantly, it is an interpretation founded on the theory of representation which, even without considerable direct references, is embedded in the modern legal-political tradition. Laclau's theory of representation, which he developed before and independently of *On Populist Reason*¹⁵ – his *magnum opus* on populism – with always, however, having in mind his political baptism in Peronist Argentina¹⁶, enables us to understand the problem of populist representation (in its dialectic with the identity).

Laclau's theory of representation

Laclau uses *representation* to refer to a range of concepts, in which the political and legal meanings of the term are never fully distinguishable from an aesthetic or an epistemological one. However, even if Laclau does not do so, it seems necessary, in order to understand it better, to refer to the complex German lexical plurality, where the debate over the status of representation was once central, culminating in legal reflections in the Weimar era. In fact, the fundamental distinction in the German debate lies between the concept of *Repräsentation*, which is linguistically of Latin origin and stems from public law, and that of *Vertretung*, with a Germanic etymology and based on private law. As Hasso Hofmann notes in what is probably a major study of the *Repräsentation* concept from a political and legal perspective¹⁷, this sharp distinction and opposition between the two

¹⁴ M. Palacios, 2020, 23.

¹⁵ E. Laclau, 2005

¹⁶ In the years of Laclau's political activism, Perón was no longer in government and lived in exile, but the Peronist movement was the most popular in the country, especially among the working class. Laclau belonged to a current of leftist Peronism. He wrote: «Throughout his life Joyce returned to his native experience in Dublin; for me it is those years of political struggle in the Argentina of the 1960's that come to mind as a point of reference and comparison.» (E. Laclau, 1990, 200)

¹⁷ Cf. H. Hofmann, 1974, 22/29.

concepts is thematized, often in a polemical sense, in the German debate of the 1920s (think of Schmitt and Leibholz)¹⁸.

The best-known synthesis of the *Repräsentation* versus *Vertretung* differentiation emanating from the Weimaran debate, and remaining as a reference, is encountered in Schmitt's famous note to his *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, in which he formulates it with his usual clarity:

«In the phrase *representative system*, *representative* refers to the representation of the (rational) people in parliament. The equation of parliamentarism and the representative system is characteristic of the confusion in the nineteenth century. The concept of representation has a deeper problematic that has not yet been fully recognized. For my purposes here it is enough to refer to parliamentarism and only briefly indicate the particular character of the true concept of representation: It belongs essentially to the sphere of publicity (in contrast to deputization, commission, mandate, and so forth, which are originally concepts of private law), and it assumes a personal worth in the persons representing and represented and also in that person before whom representation is made (in contrast to the representation of interests or management). To give a very clear example: In the eighteenth century a prince was represented before other princes by his ambassador (who must also be a nobleman), whereas economic and other sorts of business could be left to "agents."»¹⁹.

Although in Laclau this distinction, which belongs to the legal sphere, is absent, it can be, nevertheless, said that, in a certain sense, he adheres to it, proposing a critique of the conception of representation of rational interests (*Interessenvertretung*) in order to affirm a symbolic conception of representation (*Repräsentation*) related to the publicity, visibility and singularity of the representative. Laclau's critique extends to all anti-representational political theories or those that consider representation as a moment to be overcome by the achievement of full transparency, that is, the perfect transfer of the will, or interests, or identity of the represented to the representative. Laclau refutes this paradigm and describes it in clear terms:

«It seems that the conditions for a perfect representation would be met when the representation is a direct process of transmission of the will of the represented, when the act of representation is totally transparent in relation to that will. This presupposes that the will is fully constituted and that the role of the representative is exhausted in its function of intermediation. Thus the opaqueness inherent in any substitution and embodiment must be reduced to a minimum; the body in which the incarnation takes place must be almost invisible»²⁰.

¹⁸ Cf. C. Schmitt, 2008 and 1985; G. Leibholz, 1929.

¹⁹ C. Schmitt, 1985, 97 (note 5); I have changed the translation of *Privatrecht* from Civil Law to Private Law to maintain the otherwise incomprehensible German conceptual definition.

²⁰ E. Laclau, 1996c, 97.

The process of representation for Laclau is, on the contrary, opaque; the representative, not being regarded as a copy of the represented – unlike in the paradigm of representation that belongs to the copy theory of knowledge – does not have to adhere perfectly to the represented. In contrast, it is the representative himself who gives form to the represented. The populist leader-representative (particularly his name, following Lacan's theory of the Name-of-the-Father), specter of the Hobbesian representative-sovereign person, with his public, singular, visible appearance, unifies the disseminated demands which emerge from the social and shape the people.

For Laclau, both the paradoxical conception of representation, built on the basis of an anti-representational theory found in Marxism, and the liberal-democratic theory of representation, conceive the agents who need to be represented as fully constituted identities with specific (individual or class) interests. For this reason, both theories ignore the dimension of the radical construction of any identity that underlies Laclau's theory of political subjectivity and also determines how he thinks about the political order that these subjectivities can constitute.

In Marxism, the proletariat is the social class that directly embodies universality in history and, therefore, immediately represents the universal interests as a «universal class». In this theory, there is no place for a wholly political idea of representation as a construction of identities, which, on the contrary, are derivatives of the economic field. Marxism moves from a theory of representation modelled on the *Interessenvertretung* (representing the social and economic interests of the proletariat) but then theologizing it into an immanent providence that guarantees the establishment of a society without the need for political representation, because it lacks all social antagonism. Laclau terms this impossible idea of society the «fullness of community»²¹ which means a definitive reconciliation achieved in the history in the moment of total emancipation from any kind of oppression. In this moment, the representation is so perfect and the mediator/representative is so transparent that he/she disappears:

«That is, a fully rationalistic and secular eschatology has to show the possibility of a universal actor who is beyond the contradictions between particularity and universality, or rather, one whose particularity expresses in a direct way, without any system of mediations, pure and universal human essence. This actor is for Marx the proletariat, whose particularity expresses universality in such a direct fashion that his advent is conceived as the end of the need for any process of representation»²².

Whilst the Marxist theory sees the idea of the end of representation as a real possibility, in the liberal-democratic theory it is «accepted only as a lesser evil, given the impossibility of direct democracy in large communities like modern nation-States»²³. The

²¹ E. Laclau, 1996b, 42.

²² E. Laclau, 1996, 11.

²³ E. Laclau, 2005, 158.

Rousseauian utopia, which is later tempered in the modern political and legal theory, always works within the theory of democracy which «has to be as transparent as possible: the representative has to transmit as faithfully as possible the will of those he represents»²⁴. According to liberal theory, however, we would, on the contrary, end up in forms of authoritarianism or absolutist power. Modern representative democracy in this sense pursues an impossible model of rationalistic transparency, which misconceives the real processes of constituting identities through a bidirectional representation, considering them truly undemocratic, when in fact, according to Laclau's analysis, they are the only possible mechanism for the functioning of democracy. As Thomassen wrote, the Laclauian theory of representation «goes beyond conventional understandings of political representation in two ways: first, he does not limit representative politics to formal political institutions; and, second, he takes the act of representation to constitute – or construct – what is represented»²⁵.

To Laclau, the same wrong conception recurs in twentieth-century theories of democracy. In particular, he speaks about two models of the political: the aggregative and deliberative, which Mouffe in her *On the Political*²⁶ (published in the same year as Laclau's *On Populist Reason*, so there is clearly a direct linkage between the two²⁷) perceived as evolutions of the liberal thought, to which Schmitt had already strongly objected in his *The Concept of the Political*²⁸. For this reason, his work, as Mouffe says, has remained relevant. Laclau writes about these paradigms:

«The main difficulty with classical theories of political representation is that most of them conceived the will of the “people” as something that was constituted *before* representation. This is what happened with the aggregative model of democracy (Schumpeter and Downs) which reduced the “people” to a pluralism of interests and values; and with the deliberative model (Rawls and Habermas), which found in either justice as fairness or in dialogical procedures the basis for a rational consensus which eliminated all opacity from the representation process. Once that point has been reached, the only relevant question is how to *respect* the will of those represented, taking it for granted that such a will exists in the first place»²⁹.

At this point, rather than going into the details of these political theories, it is much more important to understand the point of Laclau's critique. The problem with those he calls «classical theories of political representation» is that they do not recognize the ontological moment of antagonistic production of political identities «through acts of

²⁴ Ivi, 158.

²⁵ L. Thomassen, 2019, 1.

²⁶ Cf. C. Mouffe, 2005, 11-13.

²⁷ Cf. C. Mouffe, 2005. Based upon the fact that Laclau and Mouffe were research and life partners and finding obvious similarities in their works, one can reasonably infer a mutual influence.

²⁸ Cf. C. Schmitt, 2007.

²⁹ E. Laclau 2005, 163-164.

identification»³⁰. For Laclau, quoting Thomassen again, «there is nothing beyond representation, or, to be precise, there is no being that is extra-representational»³¹. The need for the representation as a form of identification of the represented with a representative is necessary because of the ontological impossibility of the existence of every actor being provided with a constituted identity and will. It is the ontological lack in the structure of every subject that makes necessary the supplement of representation to constitute the subject himself. The same applies to the subject-people in populism.

If we began by talking about a conception of the people close to Schmittian identity in populism, we now see that Laclau completely reverses the perspective. Populism shows the need for representation in politics, which in this case is the result of the masses identifying themselves with the leader. However, it is also in Schmitt's work that we can speak of a primacy of representation over identity, even in modernity, although the principle of identity remains necessary for a thinking democracy³². In both Schmitt and Laclau, the moment of the representation is central because they share the idea which comes from Hobbes's *Leviathan* that the political community needs a moment of representation to take a form (in Schmitt's words), or to be articulated in a system (in Laclau's words).

But what is represented in democracy, according to both authors? We can answer, with a simplification, that it is the idea of a «political unity». Not the interests of the social groups, which in Laclau don't exist *a priori* and, in Schmitt, have nothing to do with the specifically political dimension.

In Laclau's paradigm, which works in general for the political sphere but is particularly evident in the case of populism, there is a particular signifier – like the name of leader – which is emptied of his/her contents or connections (ideological, political) to represent the unachievable universal totality. The political unity, which is a fiction, is produced by the act of unification of the different particular demands which emerge from the social and are represented by something that symbolizes all of them. In this sense, without the representative function of the empty signifier that represents the possibility of the absent fullness of the community, the creation of a people will not be possible. Because the people, for Laclau, are only a creation resulting from a unification of what he calls a chain of equivalences³³. So, the people of populism is the expression of this absent fullness, represented by the leader that antagonizes the power bloc which is seen as impeding the people from reaching out to be a reconciled community. In this notion of the people in populism, the idea of the existence of the people prior to the act of representation is completely erased. There is no such thing like a pre-politic people: it can be constituted starting from many different demands unified by an idea of political order (a new order, that challenges the power bloc to subvert it).

³⁰ E. Laclau, 1996c, 92.

³¹ L. Thomassen, 2019, 7.

³² Cf. G. Duso, 2004, 160.

³³ Cf. E. Laclau, 1996b, 39.

In Schmitt's theory, we can say that there is something similar. The representative can only represent the idea of the political unity as a totality, even though some pre-political homogeneous features may help this process. But, if we go back to Hobbes, we find an even more radically constructivist paradigm where the order is established only because of this unity is represented by a «person» as the sovereign. Representation, in all these theories, is the act of unifying through identification with a symbol which transcends the community.

The process of identification, that Lalcau takes from Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, is the key to understanding the idea of representation³⁴. If there is no fixed identity prior to the process of representation, any actor can act as a unity only by identifying himself/herself with a symbol. The identification of the people with the leader is for them the same as the moment of autopoiesis. But the object of identification, in Laclau's political paradigm, is ever the object of love. This is what he terms «radical investment», as a construction of an affective bond³⁵. For Laclau it is not only in the political pathologies, like totalitarianism, that love (and affects in general) is involved in the process of political identity-making. Populism only shows this fundamental logic better. It is also possible, following Freud, that «love for the father is the *only* link between the brothers»³⁶. This is, for example, the case of Peronism after the defeat of Perón in 1955 during his exile – which is an extreme example of this logic. In this moment, the name of the leader could signify everything, the signifier was so empty that he represented many very different political options. Everybody invested Perón with a kind of political identification that produced an affective bond, as the love for the father, because he was the only connection between the different souls (the brothers) of Peronism. The result, as it is known, was the collapse of Peronism when, after his return to Argentina in 1973, different groups started to fight with each other³⁷.

This logic of identification and radical investment explains well the logic of representation in populism, when transcendence is a symbol which unifies the movement around the (unachievable) idea of a politically reconciled community.

However, this theory of populist representation does not seem to justify what I have said about the possibility of its positive function with respect to democratic politics. Indeed, it seems that the instance of people power, connected with the Schmittian concept of identity and the Rousseauian moment of populism, is nothing more than a demagogic deception. If it is, in fact, the leader who «gives form» to his people, what remains of the protagonism of the masses? In this regard we would see confirmation of the usefulness of the Schmittian paradigm of illiberal plebiscitary democracy to read populism only in the negative sense that is criticized by, for example, Jan-Werner Müller³⁸.

³⁴ Cf. E. Lalcau, 2005, 84.

³⁵ Cf. *ivi*, 110.

³⁶ *ivi*, 217.

³⁷ *ivi*, 214-222.

³⁸ J.-W. Müller, 2016, 49-52.

If we want to save populism and its idea of representation, we should find a positive top-down/bottom-up dialectic that can enforce the claim for a radical democracy. Representation and identity have to produce a mutually virtuous relationship that puts popular demands at the center and makes political systems more inclusive and egalitarian. Only in this sense we can theoretically think of the use of Schmitt which goes beyond his political intentions.

Representing «the part of those who have no part»

Before continuing, it is necessary to recapitulate and clarify some points I have addressed in the previous paragraph. According to Laclau, there is no possibility of a full identity of the democratic people and their presence as something constituted prior to the representational process. There are only identifications that construct the people and all political subjects. Nevertheless, although Schmitt's concept of identity was not regarded as existing autonomously but, instead, only in relation to representation, Laclauian constructivism is, undoubtedly, more radical. Therefore, having Schmitt still in mind, we need to think beyond Schmitt about how the logic of the protagonism, self-governing of the *demos* – a necessary element in modern constitutional democracy³⁹ and populism – can be applied in a context of radical deconstruction of all identities. In this sense, in Laclau, one needs to think about how this dialectic between the activism of the representative and the protagonism from the bottom is structured (if we want to redefine the principle of identity in this way).

This chapter aims to explore how the process of protagonism of the *demos* can be imagined in the context of a theory of populism. In other words, to think about a theory in which populist representation does not lead to authoritarianism.

Approaching this problem from the perspective of the bidirectional nature of the representation, one finds in Laclau a clear exposition of the «double movement» of political representation:

«The double movement which we have detected in the process of representation is very much inscribed in the emergence of a “people”. On the one hand, the representation of the equivalential chain by the empty signifier is not a purely passive one. The empty signifier is something more than the image of a pre-given totality: it is what *constitutes* that totality, thus adding a qualitatively new dimension. This corresponds to the second movement in the process of representation: from representative to represented. On the other hand, if the empty signifier is going to operate as a point of identification for all the links in the chain, it must actually represent them; it cannot become entirely autonomous from them. This

³⁹ Schmitt (1985, 241) clearly recognizes this when, for example, he writes: «[...] there is no state without structural elements of the principle of identity. The principle of form of representation can never be instituted purely and absolutely by ignoring the people who are always somehow existing and present».

corresponds to the first movement found in representation: from represented to representative»⁴⁰.

What appears from this reciprocal relationship is that both the emergence of social demands and putting them into a representative form are necessary moments for the creation of the people – the people who can be intended, as in Laclau, as the actor of a progressive transformation and questioning the established power. To give a voice and make «visible» the claims of the popular classes, it is necessary to understand this democratic and transformative function of the representative creation of the people by the populist leadership. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (where, however, Laclau does not speak of populism) but more clearly in his *On Populist Reason*, Laclau takes the «third world»⁴¹ or the «peripheries of the capitalist world»⁴² as paradigmatic cases. According to him, in these contexts it is more difficult for social demands to have a space for political representation in their singularity than it is in a more structured and complex societies and, hence, it will be more likely to create, through a chain of equivalences, a unified front that divides society into two fronts⁴³ (as people/elites in populism). In this process, popular symbols are necessary to unify and represent these demands. In populism, whose logic for Laclau, however, is no longer limited to the third world contexts but becomes an ontological condition of the political, it is the «name of the leader»⁴⁴ as an empty signifier that represents the whole chain of equivalences of socially different demands. In doing so, the process of representation is a democratic moment that enables demands, which would otherwise remain dispersed, to present themselves on the political arena as popular claims. Laclau writes:

«The construction of a chain of equivalences out of a dispersion of fragmented demands, and their unification around popular positions operating as empty signifiers, is not totalitarian but the very condition for the construction of a collective will which, in many cases, can be profoundly democratic»⁴⁵.

In this sense, the democratic moment and the representational one in populism are necessarily connected. When people emerge in struggles for the construction of a new order as hegemonic system, populism gives agency to the popular classes⁴⁶. In certain cases, such as the so-called «mature democracies», thanks to populist parties with strong

⁴⁰ E. Laclau, 2005, 162.

⁴¹ Ivi, 73.

⁴² E. Laclau, C. Mouffe, 2001, 131.

⁴³ Cf. E. Laclau, 2005, 74.

⁴⁴ Ivi, 100.

⁴⁵ Ivi, 166.

⁴⁶ The populist theory in this sense contradicts also the Schmittian idea according to which representation corresponds to the anti-democratic moment of the democracies. For Schmitt, in fact, representation brought to its absolute form is the absolute monarchy. Cf. C. Schmitt, 2008, 239.

leadership, some demands that are denied by the hegemonic power bloc can emerge and be made visible.

It can be stated, entering into the populist conception of the concept of people in Laclau's view, that it is the result of the representation of «the part of those who have no part»⁴⁷. Within the populist representative phenomenon there is always, through the action of «a part» struggling to represent the same totality of the people, the rupture of the idea of full totality of the political unity of the hegemonic order. The totality of the citizens – the people – is always a «partial totalization»⁴⁸, that is, the result of a metaphorical-hegemonic process whereby a part is presented as a totality. This part, according to Rancière's theory from which Laclau takes considerable inspiration, is not a social group with its interest but only the exhibition of the principle of the freedom of the people⁴⁹, conceived as the pure equality of the citizens⁵⁰. Like Sieyès *Third Estate*, the *demos*, i.e.. «the part of those who have no part», is nothing⁵¹ (not recognized in the distribution of privileges), and for that reason it can be the whole. It is the negative equivalence that opposes the hierarchical partitioning of undemocratic societies.

This part, which does not receive its portion of privileges from society and which claims to be the totality of the society is, also for Laclau, the people, but viewed in an internal dialectic between *plebs* and *populus*. According to Laclau, democracy in this sense is made possible by the idea of the end of a society or community structured by hierarchies (which is the Democratic Revolution)⁵². Nonetheless, it does not mean that society cannot be structured at all. On the contrary, the structure of the political unity is the result of this partial totalization that is produced through the metaphorical articulation of the people.

The concept of the people encompasses two meanings: «the community as a whole (the *populus*)» and, at the same time, «the underdog (the *plebs*)»⁵³. The legal concept of people as a constituent power is what legitimizes the political order and have representation. Hobbes says that in a monarchy even «the King is the *People*»⁵⁴, in the sense that after the unification of the multitude into the person of the sovereign he can be identified and act as the people as whole. Nevertheless, in the political tradition there is also the concept of *plebs*, as the popular classes, the part excluded from any privileges, «the underdog», says Laclau. The metaphorical creation of the people in populism works when the part (*plebs*) reclaims to be the whole (*populus*) and struggles to produce a hegemonic system. The *plebs* in this sense is «not a part of a whole, but a part that is the

⁴⁷ J. Rancière, 1999, 30.

⁴⁸ E. Laclau, 2005, 78.

⁴⁹ Cfr. J. Rancière, 1999, 6-7.

⁵⁰ Cf. *ivi*, 15.

⁵¹ E-J. Sieyès, 2003, 94.

⁵² Cf. E. Laclau, C. Mouffe, 2001, 152-159.

⁵³ E. Laclau, 2005, 224.

⁵⁴ T. Hobbes, 1983, 151.

whole»⁵⁵, the *populus*. This logic of populism is emphasized also by scholars from different traditions; for instance, Canovan in her contemporary classic book on the concept of the people says that «populist movements mobilize the excluded people-as-part (whether “common people” or “ordinary people”) by summoning up the authority of the people-as-whole»⁵⁶. If, in Urbinati’s view, this feature of populism shows its totalitarian nature because it denies the legitimacy of other parts of the society⁵⁷, one can say, following Laclau, that this logic is the guarantee of democratic openness in the logic of the «immediate representation» of populism. In fact, if the people of populism are not a real, substantial totality but only a «partial totalization», the political unity should be always precarious and vulnerable to hegemonic challenges from another part-as-whole. This internal dialectic in the concept of the people always limits the absolutization of ‘one’ representation of the social totality. The people-as-whole will always be internally split and open to from-the-bottom-emerging demands that the leader-representative can only articulate and recompose. Expressed differently: there will always be active *plebs* disputing the construction of the people.

Briefly summarizing, we can conclude that, starting from the supposedly more obvious idea of the populist phenomenon and using Schmitt’s categories of representation and identity to interpret it, through the work of Ernesto Laclau, we have reached a more complex articulation of these concepts which overarches Schmittian theory. In the context of the categories of identity and representation in populism, we should say that according to Laclau, representation assumes centrality and identity is deconstructed, but in some way still present, persisting in two senses.

Firstly, thinking of identity as the moment of protagonism of the *demos*, identity is, as we have seen, present inside representation and in the endless process of identifications that permit the emergence of the popular demands along with the internal dialectic of the concept of people (*plebs/populus*).

Secondly, the idea embodied by the representative/empty signifier of the fullness of the community is in populism the myth (impossible to achieve, for Laclau) of the self-identity of the people beyond the need for power. In this sense, the totalization of the people is impossible and needs the representative to be embodied, but it is still necessary as a horizon for the political action. For Laclau, the utopia of the direct government in populism is no more than the myth that gives energy for the questioning and, at the same time, the construction of a precarious (new) political order. One can maintain, using a Derridean concept⁵⁸, that the identity of the people, fully present in the place of the power, is a spectral presence. For this reason, every form of democracy does need representation. Populism clearly illustrates the dialectic between the need for representation and the claim for a government of the people. It can be concluded that,

⁵⁵ E. Laclau, 2005, 225.

⁵⁶ M. Canovan, 2005, 90.

⁵⁷ Cf. N. Urbinati, 2019, 90.

⁵⁸ Cf. J. Derrida, 1994.

according to Laclau, populism is not a symptom of a decadent democracy but a manifestation of its deeper soul.

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