

Populism, Propaganda and Political Discourse

On the Integration of Populism into the Democratic Public Sphere

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Abstract: The central thesis of this article is that populism is a side effect of liberal democracy and a reliable indicator of the relationship between liberal democracy and its polar opposite – illiberal majoritarianism. As long as liberal democracy prevails over illiberal majoritarianism, populism remains dormant. Populism rises and becomes conspicuous only if certain manifestations of illiberal majoritarianism or illiberal elitism reach a critical point in terms of number and impact. More exactly, populism becomes active when there are too few reasonable and effective responses to the growth of illiberal majoritarianism. Illustrating the defense mechanism of compensation, the rise of populism correlates with a cluster of exaggerated or overdone reactions to actions inspired by illiberal majoritarianism. These reactions vary sharply from one society to another according to (a) the specific challenges of illiberal majoritarianism, (b) the reactivity of people who bear the liberal democratic values, and (c) the credibility enjoyed by the mainstream liberal democratic forces in that society. In brief, although illiberal majoritarianism sets off a cluster of populist reactions in any society, the rise of populism always takes distinct forms. Thus, it is confirmed the status of populism as a chameleonic phenomenon.

The argumentative thread has four main parts. Firstly, it is developed a constitutive model of liberal democracy as an ideal political system that is underpinned by the following organizing principles or attractors: inclusiveness, political equality, political participation, predominance of concurrent majority, the containment and predictability of the government power, and the enforcement of the non-aggression principle. Secondly, the attractors of liberal democracy are contrasted against the recent state of affairs in the Euro-Atlantic space to illustrate the assertion presented here that today illiberal majoritarianism tends to prevail over liberal democracy. In the third step, it is argued that the countless definitions of populism only

emphasize different symptoms of the rise of populism, depending on the particular circumstances in which society evolves. Finally, it is substantiated the claim that populism and populists can and should be integrated into the democratic political system, in particular into the democratic public sphere.

Keywords: populism, populistness, liberal democracy, illiberal majoritarianism, polar opposite, side effect, overdone reaction, attractor

1. Introduction

Due to the dualism that “underlies the nature and condition of man” (Emerson 1841), any human artifact has a *polar opposite* and side effects. As a rule, these adverse effects worsen when people act on the basis of flawed knowledge, harmful desires, foolish goals, and ineffectual means. One of the most important human artifacts is government, namely the controlling agency intended to protect and preserve society against the driving forces of inordinate and destructive passions – whether these are assaults from abroad or violent disorders generated from within. The existence of government is not a matter of choice, in other words, like breathing, it does not depend on our volition. As John C. Calhoun rightly pointed out, necessity forces it on all communities in one form or another (Calhoun 1851, 8). Given that government *per se* is good (because it makes society possible), it does not follow that all forms of government are equally beneficial to any society and at any historical stage.

When mixed with a liberal way of exerting political power, the popular government, also called democracy or the government of the people (Calhoun 1851, 29), is generally considered the best form of government because it manifests to the least extent the tendency to oppression and abuse of power even though it does not (and cannot) annul the distinction between the rulers and the ruled. Nevertheless, liberal democracy can be nothing else than an imperfect human contrivance. It has a tense and changeable relationship with its polar opposite, namely *illiberal majoritarianism*, and a cluster of side effects, including *populism*.

Liberal democracy is intrinsically an unstable form of government. If deficient in popular support, it leaves room for its polar opposite – illiberal majoritarianism – in which the ruling class governs in an absolute manner as an unaided numerical majority rather than a concurrent or

constitutional majority.¹ In general, it can be said that illiberal majoritarianism prevails over liberal democracy where politics means legal plunder, in that a supposed numerical majority enjoys the privilege to politicize its particular interests, large categories of people feel unjustly excluded from using political means effectively, and the issues that stay at the core of the public agenda are discussed in an atmosphere of intolerance.

The prevalence of illiberal majoritarianism is also indicated by the rise of populism. Having a latent presence in the political system when liberal democracy is sound and well-balanced, populism gains momentum and manifests itself in a multitude of facets when liberal democracy begins to decay and the organizing principles of illiberal majoritarianism have the power to mold the networks of social relationships.

The main thesis of my article is that populism is a *side effect* of liberal democracy and a reliable indicator of the relationship between liberal democracy and illiberal majoritarianism. Populism itself is not something to be avoided, feared, resisted, or eradicated. It exists despite our feelings, desires, and commitments. On the other hand, we can and must carefully watch the rise or decline of populism in order to estimate the vitality of liberal democracy and the advance of illiberal majoritarianism, respectively. If the rise of populism has unwanted or even unbearable manifestations, the most effective solution is to combat the corresponding organizing principles of illiberal majoritarianism, not the manifestations of populism themselves.

In what follows, it will be outlined a constitutive model of liberal democracy as a political system based on certain organizing principles or attractors: inclusiveness, political equality, political participation, predominance of concurrent majority, the containment and predictability of the government power, and the enforcement of the non-aggression principle. Furthermore, the attractors of liberal democracy will be contrasted to the recent state of affairs in the Euro-Atlantic space in order to argue that illiberal majoritarianism tends to prevail over liberal democracy. The third step will show that the countless definitions of populism only emphasize different symptoms of the rise of populism, depending on the particular circumstances in which society evolves. Finally, the claim that populism and populists can and should be

¹ The distinction between numerical majority and concurrent majority is clearly presented by John Caldwell Calhoun in his posthumous political treatise *A Disquisition on Government* (Calhoun 1851, 28).

integrated into the democratic political system, in particular into the democratic public sphere, will be substantiated.

Inasmuch as inclusiveness is a defining trait of democracy, *if* democracy is preferred, all full citizens – including the populists – must be encouraged to participate as equals in political life. Acquiring – *sine ira et studio* – valid knowledge about the causes and effects of populism, it is possible to find a constructive way to use the political energy of populists to the benefit of the whole society.

2. Outlining a Constitutive Model of Liberal Democracy

Populism becomes noticeable when the organizing principles of liberal democracy lose a great part of their force to shape human relationships. Therefore, in order to understand the social phenomenon of populism, we should understand the fundamental principles and values of liberal (or constitutional) democracy. Liberal democracy by itself is an ideal or normative model of government that cannot be found as such in any society. As imperfect beings, people are able to imagine a perfect form of government but not to build it in real life. Prone to behave selfishly, people tend to use all beneficial social institutions for advancing their particular interests regardless of the interests of others. Nevertheless, we can qualify the political regime of a given society as a liberal democracy if it reaches the standards of the ideal model to a sufficient extent.

The system of liberal democracy is based on specific attractors, in other words, on organizing principles or abstract representations that store information about the system's behavior over time (Kiel and Elliot 1996, 27) and bring regularity to the system (Shaffer 2012, xvii). The main attractors of liberal democracy can be defined by answering the following questions: (a) "Who should rule?" and (b) "How should the rulers act?" (*cf.* Kuehnelt-Leddihn 1974, 33).

The answers to the first question outline the democratic dimension of liberal democracy. Roughly speaking, a society would touch the upper limit of democracy if it ruled itself by consensus as a self-governing society. On the contrary, democracy would reach its nadir if society were ruled by an absolutist foreign agency in flagrant contradiction with society's interests. It is self-evident that all human societies are situated between the upper and lower limit of democracy. They appear to be more and less (un)democratic, depending on (a) the size and structure of the endogenous ruling class, and (b) the concordance between rulers' policies and people's interests. It is also noteworthy that we cannot grade societies

by the level of democracy on a cardinal scale. The so-called democracy indexes do not and cannot have absolute values. They only allow us to order societies on an ordinal scale, so that we could say, for example, that Romanian society is more democratic than Mongolian society and less democratic than French society.

Taking into account the contributions of some important theoreticians of democracy – like John C. Calhoun (1851), Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn (1974), Iris Marion Young (2002), and John Gastil (2008) –, I correlate democracy with four essential attractors: (a) inclusiveness, (b) political participation, (c) political equality, and (d) predominance of concurrent majority.

Firstly, the democratic level of a society is reflected in the size and structure of the political body by comparison with the size and structure of the whole society. The political body consists of the society's members who possess political rights, especially the rights to vote and to be elected to a public office. In the course of history, it has comprised: (a) all adult male citizens who served in the army, (b) all adult male citizens who paid taxes above a certain level, (c) all adult male citizens, (d) all adult citizens without any adverse distinction founded on race, color, sex, language, religion or faith, national or social origin, wealth, or any other similar criteria, (e) all adult citizens together with their ancestors (in so far as the living citizens respect the political options of the past generations transmitted by tradition), or (f) all adult citizens and resident non-citizens. The more members of a society are included into the political body, the more inclusive and – *eo ipso* – democratic this society is.

Of course, the analysis of inclusiveness could and should be refined. A political system cannot be called “inclusive” just because an increasing percentage of society's members possess the right to vote. Inclusiveness also implies an increasing pool of potential candidates (to public offices) and a fair representation of vested interests in the ever-changing political agenda. Few democracies actually meet these two conditions. There are countries categorized as full democracies where, for example, higher officials are selected from a relatively small pool of people, who descend from certain privileged families, graduate from the same elitist schools, belong to the same fraternities or sororities, or share the same particular system of values. Most people who enjoy the right of suffrage have in fact no chance to be involved in the ruling class as candidates and afterwards as higher officials. In regard to inclusiveness of political agenda, it is also easy to notice that certain privileged problems and vested interests have a privileged place on the public agenda (e.g. same-sex marriage) while

other issues and interests are ignored or dismissed (e.g. the over-indebtedness of households and states).

Secondly, democracy requires – besides formal inclusion in the political body – the real participation of citizens in political life. Above all else, political participation implies the exercise of the right to vote because the vote is the ultimate political tool in a democratic society. People use the vote to give their consent to the democratic political system, for legitimizing certain candidates in positions of authority, and for ending the deliberations that precede political actions.² Without high turnout, it would be incorrect to say that a political regime instantiates the “government of the people, by the people, for the people”. Unfortunately, both “mature democracies” and “flawed democracies” have struggled to cope with the problem of low turnout in the recent past.

The exercise of the right to vote is the most important form of political participation in a democratic society, but it is not the only one. Citizens may engage constructively in various devices of participatory democracy – for example citizens’ jury, deliberative opinion pool, intercommunity or ethnic-group dialogue –, but they may also resort to obstructive political tactics, like civil disobedience, boycott, strike, street protest, or riot. In a vigorous and well-balanced democracy citizens are actively involved in all forms of political participation to the upper limit of their civic virtues (such as abnegation, patriotism, loyalty, and respect), civic skills (for example, the capability to dialogue, to work in a team, to negotiate, or to build consensus), and civic conduct (such as behaving in a civil manner, being fiscally responsible, accepting responsibility for the consequence of one’s actions, practicing civil discourse, becoming informed on public issues, or providing public service) (Fârte 2009, 29).

All these alternatives of political participation do not change the special status of the vote as the ultimate ending clause of any dispute on a public issue. No other political action – whether constructive or destructive – may overturn the result of free voting.

Thirdly, democracy correlates directly with political equality. Political equality is a simple and ingenuous contrivance by the means of which people who are very different in terms of physical, intellectual, and moral qualities are treated as equal political actors. The abstract equality of political actors essentially means equality before the law and equal rights of suffrage. This does not exclude noticeable differences with

² Even in a deliberative democracy deliberations must have an “ending clause”, and the supreme ending clause is the vote (*cf.* Țuțui 2010, 49).

regard to the practical opportunities to be elected or to the chances to politicize some particular interests effectively. Political equality is an ideal that is steadily eroded by the natural tendency of everybody to crush his competitors or adversaries and “to live at the expense of everybody else” (Bastiat 2011, 99). In every (democratic) society one can notice marginalized groups that never enter a majority coalition and whose votes do not seem to matter. In order to preserve democracy, political equality must be continuously cherished and enforced.

Finally, democracy requires the predominance of what John Calhoun called “the concurrent or constitutional majority” (Calhoun 1851, 35-38). Above all, it is accepted that a majority constituted by fifty percent plus one of an organized collectivity have the “sense of community” to a much greater extent than a single person (such as a monarch, despot, or dictator) or minority group (such as patricians, aristocrats, or technocrats). Having a better sense of community, the majority appears to be the most qualified supplier for a community’s demands even though it is still a fallible agency that often makes wrong decisions. For this reason, people generally admit that neither a single person nor a minority, but a majority has the right to impose its decisions on the whole collectivity.

If society were perfectly homogenous, the action of government would produce the same effects on each person or group. If any majority had pure altruistic feelings, it would selflessly advance society’s interests and never pervert its powers into instruments to aggrandize certain interests by oppressing and impoverishing the others (Calhoun 1851, 15). In fact, every society is made up of different and conflicting interests, and every unchecked power ends up oppressing the rest of society. An unaided numerical majority can oppress and impoverish the ruled even to a much greater extent than an autocratic monarch. Therefore, a well-balanced democracy needs a concurrent majority, namely a numerical majority mixed with the negative power of all conflicting interests. This negative power can be exercised by veto, interposition, nullification, check, or balance of power and must be able to prevent or arrest the oppressive actions of government (Calhoun 1851, 15). Unfortunately, most countries do not have a true concurrent majority. Moreover, due to chronic low turnout, many countries lack even a numerical majority. Under these conditions, to what extent are they democratic?

Answering the question “How should the rulers act?”, one can define the liberal dimension of constitutional democracy. *If* people prefer democracy mixed with liberalism, they should ask the government to

maximize society's degree of freedom. It is an undeniable fact that society's degree of freedom correlates directly with society's richness, but it does not help each member of society to become increasingly prosperous. Even if the most destitute persons in a free society live better than the poorest persons in an unfree society, relative poverty in free societies causes much more grief and resentment than absolute poverty in unfree societies. Therefore, people who resent comparative poverty (in spite of living in relative comfort) want in fact to maximize their personal freedom and not the freedom of the whole society. They prefer democracy (in the form of majoritarianism) much more than liberalism.

The liberal adjuvant of democracy is generated essentially by two attractors: (a) the containment and predictability of government power and (b) the enforcement of the non-aggression principle.

As previously mentioned, the fundamental mission of government is to protect and preserve society against aggressions from abroad and disorders from within. A government's power to prevent oppression and injustice is *always and everywhere* administered by fallible beings (whose individual feelings are stronger than the social ones), therefore it is necessary to set clear and firm limits to this tremendous power. If unchecked, government invariably transforms itself into the supreme aggressor, oppressing instead of protecting the members of society. The discussion below will take into consideration only two modalities to contain the government power in a liberal democracy.

Firstly, government power can be limited by law and a written or unwritten constitution. In comparison with the force of each person, government power is tremendous. Therefore, a government risks inflicting pain to any member of society even though it pursues laudable goals. It is like a lion coming into contact with a gazelle. The gazelle would be exposed to the risk of injury even if the lion were only to play with her. Playing its beneficial role in strict conformity with a constitution and laws, a government creates a sphere of predictability and safety in which human civilization has a good chance to flourish.

A second device to limit government power is to organize elections at periodic intervals so that all key positions in government can be contested and the governmental authority peacefully transferred from one group of people to another. We cannot talk about full liberal democracy where the key positions in government are held in the long run by the same group of people.

Generally speaking, to enforce the non-aggression principle means to forbid, prevent, or punish the proactive use of force in peoples' *own*

sphere. This personal sphere is a *conditio sine qua non* for living a truly human life and includes (a) one's life and bodily integrity, (b) one's physical, intellectual, and moral faculties, and (c) the tangible and intangible goods which persons have acquired by the free exercising of their own faculties and capabilities. Thus, it can be truly said that someone violates the non-aggression principle if (a') he takes another person's life or hurts her body, (b') he enslaves his fellows forcing them to use their faculties and capabilities to his own advantage, or (c') he seizes from others by force or fraud any good they have obtained by free production or free exchange (*cf.* Fârte 2015, 100).

It is worth mentioning that the non-aggression principle does not ask us to save our (mature) fellows from cognitive dissonance, emotional distress, or loss of reputation. Moreover, to forbid someone from expressing an opinion in the public sphere on the grounds that it emotionally hurts other people is a direct act of aggression. Nobody deserves the privilege to include his idiosyncratic beliefs or feelings in a personal sphere that is governed by the non-aggression principle and protected by government. Those people who try to build so-called "safe-spaces" free of "microaggressions" (and consequently of emotional pain) violate the right of free expression (*cf.* Ash 2016) and, implicitly, the non-aggression principle.

Another perverse violation of the non-aggression principle happens when a government uses its power to enforce certain disputable claim rights. If a society reached a very high degree of honesty and solidarity, it would be acceptable for its government to guarantee some claim rights (for example, the right to education, the right to science and culture, the right to affordable healthcare, the right to a living wage, the right to retirement, or the right to unemployment benefits) by a partial redistribution of income and wealth. Unfortunately, politicians' demagoguery and people's false sense of entitlement very often transform government in "that great fiction through which everybody endeavors to live at the expense of everybody else" (Bastiat 2011, 99). Instead of increasing the degree of freedom and solidarity, people create a climate of reciprocal spoliation that impoverishes and dissocializes them.

3. Liberal Democracy *versus* Illiberal Majoritarianism

Organized as a dynamic political system by several important attractors – inclusiveness, political equality, political participation, predominance of concurrent majority, the containment and predictability of the government power, and the enforcement of the non-aggression

principle –, liberal democracy has proved to be a very fragile artifact. Liberal democracy is not a natural result of human evolution and cannot subsist without constant nourishment. It comes everywhere under the pressure of antidemocratic or illiberal forces that tend to turn it into illiberal majoritarianism (or worse).

Contrary to widespread belief, liberal democracy has fallen into a state of decay even in the Euro-Atlantic area. Even here, the organizing principles of illiberal majoritarianism have partially taken the place of attractors that sustain liberal democracy. In what follows, some arguments in favor of this thesis will be presented.

If the attractors of inclusiveness and political equality are active in a society, (a) all vested interests have a fair representation in the political sphere, (b) all vested interests have access to the political means once they oblige themselves to respect the constitutional pact, (c) all vested interests may try to transform any particular problem into a political issue, and (d) once transformed into political issues, all issues or interests (without exceptions) may be discussed in accordance with the rules of public debate.

The condition of fair representation in the political sphere is violated by mainstream parties that impose a biased electoral system in order to be over-represented in the decision-making forums. For instance, in the United Kingdom general election held on 7th May 2015, Labour won 9,347,304 votes and 232 seats in the House of Commons, while UKIP won 3,881,011 votes and only one seat (*cf.* BBC News 2015). This means that the vested interests associated with the Labour Party were represented at the ratio of 1 seat to 40,406 votes, while the vested interests expressed by UKIP were represented at the ratio of 1 seat to 3,881,011 votes. This disproportion is not just unfair but outrageous. Perhaps a cause of BREXIT was the fact that millions of voters became angry with a system that marginalizes their views and interests (no matter how despicable they may be).

The condition of free access to the political means is ignored by politicians, academics, journalists, pundits and other opinion leaders who marginalize and diabolize both certain vested interests and their representatives in order to exclude them from the use of government power. Being labeled “commies”, “pinkos”, “takers”, “social justice warriors”, “snow flakes”, “hate groups”, “populists”, “extremists”, “homophobes”, “xenophobes”, “welfare chauvinists”, “sexists”, “fundamentalists”, “racists”, “bigots”, “white supremacists”, etc., they are treated as pariahs, that is to say, as people intrinsically unworthy to rule

their fellows by means of legal coercion. Democracy is not undermined by detesting leaders like Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Pablo Iglesias, Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, Geert Wilders, Marine Le Pen, and Viktor Orbán or by criticizing the political programs of their parties, but it is severely damaged when some mainstream political groups organize heterogeneous coalitions (like the French “republican front”) in order to ban permanently such leaders and parties from winning government power.

Democracy is also impaired by those influential groups who arrogate themselves the privilege to politicize all particular issues and interests but deny the same possibility to other groups. If all people accepted that the only mission of government is to protect citizens from aggression, theft, breach of contract, and fraud, public issues would solely be alternative ways of enforcing the natural rights to life, liberty and property. Such a limited public sphere seems to be unsuitable for contemporary democratic societies. After decades of demagoguery and generalized legal plunder, people realized that they may politicize any problem or interest. So, it is not surprising at all that some vested interests have politicized particular issues such as same-sex marriage, the right to biological filiation, the sexual right to orgasm, sexual assistance for people who cannot afford it, and bathroom access for transgender people. On the other hand, it is hard to understand why other people’s main concerns about, for example, immigration, religion, crime, welfare programs, indebtedness, cronyism, freedom of expression, freedom of association are dismissed as outrageous issues that cannot be put on the political agenda.

Finally, the level of inclusiveness and political equality is significantly reduced by politicians, academics, journalists, and other opinion leaders who break the rules of public debates. Within this context it is notably observed that there is a generalized propensity to substitute evidence and cogent arguments with insulting labels and venomous personal attacks. Publishing the article “Donald Trump as Authoritarian Populist: A Frommian Analysis” in the academic journal *Logos: a journal of modern society and culture* (Kellner 2016), Douglas Kellner vividly instantiates this deplorable state of affairs:

“In *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973), Fromm engages in a detailed analysis of the authoritarian character as sadistic, excessively narcissistic, malignantly aggressive, vengeably destructive, and necrophiliac, personality traits arguably applicable to Trump. [...] Trump clearly exhibits traits of the sadist [...]. Trump is one of the most narcissistic figures to appear in recent U.S. politics. [...] Trump’s attitudes

and behavior toward women exhibit traits of Fromm's malignant aggression, as well as blatant sexism. [...] Trump's need for adoration and his malignant and destructive rage at all criticism and opposition shows an extremely disordered personality who constitutes a grave danger to the United States and the world. The necrophilic personality fills his emptiness with sadism, aggression, amassing wealth and power, and is prone to violence and self-destruction."

If academics think and write in this way, what about people who are less cultivated and much more prone to be inflamed by inordinate and destructive passions? Without civilized debates, democracy fades away and political competition degenerates into riots and civil wars.

The attractors of political participation and concurrent majority form the crux of democracy. They correlate with three essential conditions: (a) most members of the political body exercise their right to suffrage, (b) the party that wins the majority of votes exerts political power, and (c) minorities have such a constitutional power to resist that the majority party usually takes into consideration their interests.

The first condition is contradicted by the trend of declining turnout in many Euro-Atlantic countries. For example, turnout dipped to 42.54% at the May 2014 EU election (*cf.* Euractiv, 2014), 55% in the USA presidential election of 2016 (*cf.* Wallace, 2017), 42.64% in the second tour of the legislative elections in France of 18th June 2017 (*cf.* France Info, 2017), and 39.48% at the legislative elections in Romania of 11th December 2016. (*cf.* Realitatea.net, 2016). Having such low voter engagement, it is normal for everyone to express doubts about parliaments' democratic legitimacy and higher officials' credibility.

When voter turnout is around 50%, it is impossible to demonstrate that the winning party represents the majority of society or, at least, the majority of the political body. If majority rule does not apply in the most important context, namely when people entrust their sovereignty to their representatives, democracy reaches a dangerous low level. Properly speaking, such a flawed political system can be called neither "democracy" nor "majoritarianism".

Democratic deficit is aggravated by another two factors, namely the emergence of technocratic governments and the virulence of some pressure groups. Over the last several years it has been possible to note that governments led by technocrats – for example, Jan Fischer's Cabinet (Czech Republic, 2009-2010) and the Cabinet of Lucas Papademos (Greece, 2011-2012) – or composed mostly of technocrats – such as Mario Monti's Cabinet (Italy, 2011-2013), Plamen Oresharski's Cabinet

(Bulgaria, 2013-2014), and the Cabinet of Dacian Cioloș (Romania, 2015-2017) – exerted political power without an explicit electoral mandate. As a rule, people became angry with such cabinets even if they seemed qualified to solve certain ticklish economic problems. The most probable reason for this rejection reaction could be the people's perception that technocratic cabinets are exogenous political agencies and act as such.

The second threat to democracy is posed by pressure groups that seek to influence government policy or legislation without taking a correlative responsibility. As mentioned before, political participation in a sound democracy is not confined to casting a vote at regular intervals. There is no vacuum in the political life of society. Besides exerting the right of suffrage, people permanently perform either constructive or obstructive political actions. However, the particular political actions of the pressure groups should never have precedence over electoral participation because the results of the vote indicate in the most clear way society's general will. For example, the "Resist" movements oriented against the president Donald Trump may not annul the result of the USA presidential election of 2016, no matter how many furious people rally around. Assuming that Donald Trump respects the law, he should remain the president of the United States until the next presidential election. If people are becoming used to challenging the result of an election, they will come to challenge the results of all elections. Under such circumstances, there would be no peaceful ending clause of social conflicts and no antidote to civil discords.

Social peace and democracy are also threatened by the fact that certain social groups consider themselves unable to advance their interests using political means. More exactly, they feel that there is no constitutional instrument at hand to resist the majority party or – more important – to take a stand against a privileged minority that acts with the boldness of a concurrent majority. For example, the recent waves of immigrants from the Middle East and Africa to Europe put the European Union's executive in opposition to some local communities because the European officials wanted to force them to accept a quota of asylum-seekers. The most important aspect of this conflict has nothing to do with the moral traits of the people who refused to accept immigrants. It does not matter whether these people are in fact selfish, stingy, callous, xenophobes, or Islamophobes because no political agency may democratically use government power to enforce certain high moral standards. The real problem is whether a local community backed by

public opinion can resist a superior political agency (which lacks similar electoral support).

The thesis that at the present time the liberal attractors fade away may seem counterintuitive. Nobody can deny that our society is animated by social emancipatory movements as never before in human history. Myriads of politicians, activists, academics, journalists, Hollywood stars, and other opinion leaders are actively involved themselves in various branches of progressivism – feminism, anti-racism, anti-colonialism, interculturalism, multiculturalism, LGBT rights, disability rights, etc. – in order to discover new marginalized minorities or oppressed groups and promote their rights. It is a matter of fact that large categories of people overcame their reluctance to face up to those minorities' problems, needs, or claims and are favorably disposed to accept government intervention in this domain. Former marginalized minorities or oppressed groups can see today that their problems and claims are placed firmly on the public agenda and their particular rights legally enforced.

However, there is a reverse side of this positive state of affairs. Too often activists ignore the complex network of human relationships and pursue their laudable goals in a ruthless manner. They did not adapt the rhythm and means of the intended reforms to the current reality so that the sweeping changes could be assimilated organically into the fabric of society. Moreover, some of them unfairly dismiss their opponents' concerns, needs, or views and do not hesitate to break the non-aggression principle in order to crush resisters. Of course it is not a crime for anybody to detest their opponents, but it is illiberal for any attempt to destroy their reputation by using derogatory epithets, like “basket of deplorables”, “racists”, “misogynists”, “Islamophobes”, “bigots”, or “homophobes”.³

The illiberal attitude of some progressivists has even more grievous manifestations. Although many so-called progressivists prove themselves to be scoffers and facile critics, they are very sensitive to criticism no matter how good the counterarguments are. For them, all people who contradict claims related to same-sex marriage, welfare programs, abortion, or affirmative action, for example, are hatred-driven persons⁴

³ In 2016 *The Huffington Post* posted several months in a row the following disparaging disclaimer: “Donald Trump is a serial liar, rampant xenophobe, racist, birther and bully who has repeatedly pledged to ban all Muslims – 1.6 billion members of an entire religion – from entering the U.S.” The intention to damage Trump's reputation is obvious.

⁴ As a matter of fact, no polite and reasoned criticism of a thesis is *per se* a token of hatred even if the counterarguments invoked are flawed.

(that is homophobes, welfare chauvinists, sexists, racists, etc.) who may and must be silenced. For example, in March 2017, a debate was planned about political correctness and free speech in academia at MacMaster University. Jordan Peterson, a psychology professor at the University of Toronto, was one of the guest speakers. He became a “controversial figure” because he had refused to use genderless pronouns. Professor Peterson was prevented from giving his talk by a group of student activists who shouted him down. They defended themselves against the accusation of censorship stating that “[t]he concept of freedom of speech has most often been mobilized to protect specifically counter-hegemonic ideas, ideas that actually challenge, rather than reiterate, the *status quo*.” (cf. Beatty 2017) This argument is evidently flawed because the authors of the statement – assuming a very illiberal perspective – confused rights with privileges. A proper right cannot be granted to someone if it is not granted in principle to everyone. If freedom of speech is treated as a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group (namely to the people who challenge the *status quo*), it becomes a privilege.

4. The Prevalence of Illiberal Majoritarianism and the Rise of Populism

This thesis has so far presented the dialectic relationship between liberal democracy and its polar opposite – illiberal majoritarianism – following the main effects of their organizing principles. It has been argued that there is a mounting inner tension in Euro-Atlantic political systems that is reaching a critical threshold. More exactly, the recent state of affairs has been invoked in order to substantiate the claim that today illiberal majoritarianism tends to prevail over liberal democracy. The prevalence of illiberal majoritarianism is suggested especially by the frequent infringements of the right to freedom of speech. An increasing number of issues which stay on the public agenda are discussed in a hostile, illiberal climate due to the fact that many people have arrogated to themselves the privilege of silencing others without any moral or legal ground. It is now time to discuss the rise of populism as an effect produced by the prevalence of illiberal majoritarianism.

As previously mentioned, populism is a side effect of liberal democracy. As long as liberal democracy prevails over its polar opposite – illiberal majoritarianism –, populism remains latent, and very few people could pay attention to it. Populism rises and becomes conspicuous

only after some manifestations of illiberal majoritarianism or (even worse) illiberal elitism reach a critical point in terms of number and impact. In fact, “active” or “conspicuous” populism includes *caricatural reactions* of liberal democracy to the action inspired by illiberal majoritarianism. These caricatural reactions correspond essentially to the attractors of liberal democracy, but they are *exaggerated* or *overdone* and, therefore, somewhat ludicrous and even grotesque. Perhaps this exaggeration appears where there are too few reasonable and effective responses to the growing illiberal majoritarianism.

By treating populism as a latent side effect of liberal democracy and the rise of populism as an overdone and (at least in part) caricatural reaction to illiberal majoritarianism, it is possible to develop an integrative approach to populism that does not invalidate but rather put together many of the existing definitions, descriptions, and explanations.

The most difficult step in defining a concept like “populism” is to find the proximate genus, in other words, “the next above it in the series”. Inasmuch as populism is an elusive and “chameleonic” phenomenon (Rooduijn et al. 2014, 564), it is no wonder that theoreticians include in their definitions very different proximate genera. Thus, it is said that populism is a “form of illiberal democracy” (Mudde 2017b), a “philosophy”, more exactly, a “loose set of ideas” (Inglehart and Norris 2016), a “(thin-centered) ideology” (Mudde 2004), a “discursive frame” (Aslanidis 2016), a “property of a message” (Rooduijn et al. 2014), a “mode of political practice” and a “flexible way of animating political support” (Jansen 2011), a “political practice” or “style of politics” (Wolkenstein 2015), an “illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism” (Mudde 2017a), or an “irrational response to economic change” (*cf.* Jansen 2011). This great variety of proximate genera suggest that populism is not a well-circumscribed and stable entity. As side effect of liberal democracy, populism is a latent entity void of actual properties. As such it cannot be analyzed. Populism acquires content only if it rises sufficiently and forms a *cluster of reactions* to the challenges of illiberal majoritarianism. But these reactions vary sharply from one society to another according to (a) the specific challenges of illiberal majoritarianism, (b) the reactivity of people who bear liberal democratic values, and (c) the credibility enjoyed by mainstream liberal democratic forces. In brief, although populism is everywhere a cluster of reactions, it always takes very different forms confirming its status as a chameleonic phenomenon.

The rise of populism spread *populistness* – to a greater or lesser extent – in myriads of persons, groups, organizations, institutions, messages, spontaneous behaviors, actions, or events. For example, within the Euro-Atlantic area we could easily notice the trait of populistness in some political leaders (Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, Geert Wilders, Marine Le Pen, and Viktor Orbán), political parties (The National Front in France, The Party for Freedom in The Netherlands, The UK Independence Party in the United Kingdom, Sweden Democrats in Sweden, Podemos/ We Can in Spain, and Syriza/ The Coalition of the Radical Left in Greece), socio-political movements (the 15-M Movement in Spain, Occupy Wall Street, Safe-space, Black Lives Matter, and the Tea Party in the USA.), electoral programs (e.g. Marine Le Pen’s presidential platform “144 presidential commitments. Marine 2017”), political messages (e.g. the electoral slogan “Make America Great Again” or the tweet “We will BUILD THE WALL”), and political measures (e.g. Donald Trump’s executive order by which citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries were barred from entering the US for at least 90 days). Of course, none of the above-mentioned examples epitomize populism in proportion of one hundred per cent. Nobody and nothing is absolutely populist. The presence of populistness in any bearer is a matter of degree.

Both illiberal antidemocratic challenges and the reactions to them differ significantly from one society to another (and from time to time), therefore it is improbable to find populistness epitomized in well-articulated ideological systems. On the other hand, populism has remained latent until now in other Euro-Atlantic countries (for example, Romania) although the population has had to face illiberal majoritarian challenges.⁵ Perhaps the shortness of democratic tradition and the disposition to bear abuses explain the latency of populism in these countries.

Caused very often by temporary factors, the rise of populism has many ephemeral manifestations. For example, the UK’s retreat from the European Union gave satisfaction to UKIP’s electorate but reduced the advance of the corresponding populist party. While at the general election held in May 2015, UKIP won 3,881,011 votes and one seat in the House of Commons, at the 2017 general election UKIP gained only 594,068 votes and no seat in the House of Commons (*cf.* BBC News 2017). The reactive nature of populism means that every populists’ success is followed by a serious setback.

⁵ A diffuse presence of populism could be present everywhere. Someone could find a trace of populistness even in this article.

Given that the rise of populism always correlates with a cluster of reactions and these reactions are necessarily different from one country to another, it would be useful to know why certain “populist traits” are more conspicuous in a country than in another.

According to Cas Mudde, populists consider society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite” and genuine politics an expression of the general will of the people (Mudde 2004, 543). Cas Mudde’s consideration appears to cover all countries where the rise of populism is conspicuous. For example, Mudde’s definition seems to be illustrated by Donald Trump, who used the slogan “Drain the swamp” during his presidential campaign.⁶ However, Donald Trump cannot be considered populist just because he utilized an anti-corruption slogan. The anti-corruption discourse is not confined to the populist rhetoric. It is used in a recurrent manner by all parties, including the mainstream ones.

In fact, Donald Trump proved to be populist because he underscored the everlasting antagonism between *the rulers* and *the ruled* (not just between the elite and the masses), knowing the fact that populists feel themselves closely associated with the ruled. In democracy, these two classes are neither homogenous nor immutable. For example, the democratic ruling class is a mixture of voters and elected officials and includes very different categories, even groups that are usually treated as weak and vulnerable: academics, journalists, farmers, the unionized workers, women, racial minorities, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, the disabled, welfare recipients, (illegal) immigrants, religious organizations, and activists.⁷ Thus, populists notice that the rulers are not necessarily superior in terms of wealth, status, intellectual competences, or moral virtues but have the privilege to politicize any personal problem or interest. In their opinion, the rulers receive undeserved benefits by means of lawful coercion while they can earn a livelihood only through work and free transactions. Under these circumstances, people who feel marginalized and are represented by diabolized leaders and marginalized

⁶ Trump promised to clean up Washington, D.C. by imposing “a five-year lobbying ban on senators, representatives and top staffers” (Overby 2017).

⁷ Investigating the possible predictors of voting support for populist parties, Ronald F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris found that “[p]opulists [...] received significantly *less* support (not more) among sectors dependent on social welfare benefits as their main source of household income and among those living in urban areas. (Inglehart & Norris 2016, 4). Although poor, welfare recipients have common interests with the ruling class, not with the ruled.

parties put the following question: “Why they, why not we?” The rhetoric based on antagonism between the rulers and the ruled can be effective in heterogeneous societies where large categories of people could feel that their votes do not matter, but it fails to animate the populists in homogenous societies like Denmark, Norway, or Sweden.

The opinion that populism presents a “Manichean outlook”, in which there are only friends and foes” and no compromise is possible (Mudde 2004, 544) is contradicted by the fact that populist parties were ready for compromise and enter government when such offers are made. Because of critics in the mass media, the mainstream parties are more reluctant than so-called populist parties to form a governmental coalition. It is an undeniable fact that people who share “black and white views” build a polarized society (Mudde 2017), but the virulent critics of populists share a great part of responsibility in polarizing society.

It is also said that “[p]opulism favors mono-culturalism over multiculturalism, national self-interest over international cooperation and development aid, closed borders over the free flow of peoples, ideas, labor and capital, and traditionalism over progressive and liberal social values” (Inglehart and Norris 2016, 7). Confirmed *grosso modo* by reality, this observation needs some clarifications. It is obvious that such populist reactions could appear only in globalized societies that have to cope with large inflows and outflows of people, goods, or money. As with any change in human history, globalization creates winners and losers. Populists distrust the collateral effects of globalization (such as multiculturalism, the free flow of peoples, ideas, labor and capital, and open borders) because they already lost (at least in part) their jobs, prosperity, and way of life without receiving something valuable instead. In addition to their distress, they have to cope with the hostility and public disdain of mainstream opinion leaders.

If the benefits of globalization surpassed its perceived costs, the populists would surely adopt a cosmopolitan attitude. For example, Romanian people are more supportive of the European Union than many Western European countries mainly because they realize that their future is brighter in the EU. Therefore, instead of criticizing populists for their defensive attitude towards globalization, politicians, academics, journalists, and other opinion leaders should help them to express their concerns in the public sphere and to find a political solution within the liberal democratic system.

The last populist trait discussed in this context is that populists prefer charismatic leaders who provide simple solution to complex

problems (Dzurinda 2016, 171). Like in the case of supposed antagonism between “the corrupt elite” and “the pure people”, we do not have to do with a characteristic trait of (active) populism. It is not just populist parties, but all parties that strive to present charismatic leaders before their voters. The new president of France, Emmanuel Macron, won the electoral contest against Marine Le Pen as a charismatic leader equipped with all the corresponding qualities. Who could dare to say that Emmanuel Macron is a populist politician? On the other hand, it is not true that populists want simple solutions to complex problem because they rarely take into consideration such issues. As mentioned before, populists are anxious, defensive, and reactive. Populists tend to mobilize themselves only if they have to cope with individual issues that directly affect their lives.

5. Final Remarks: Let’s Accept Reasoned Populist Stances in the Public Sphere

In conclusion, as a side effect of liberal democracy and reliable indicator of the relationship between liberal democracy and its polar opposite – illiberal majoritarianism –, populism cannot be eradicated. However, it is possible and recommendable to monitor the overdone reactions associated with the rise of populism in order to prevent or contain those manifestations that could cause major upheavals in society.

The worst possible way to combat the rise of populism is to diabolize or marginalize the most conspicuous bearers of populistness and to get rid of (as harmful) all their messages or actions from the public sphere. No populist is so powerful to rise populism by himself. If populism rises, there are enough supraindividual factors that sustain it. These factors belong in large part to the prevalence of illiberal majoritarianism.

We should accept that it is possible to contain certain exaggerated reactions caused by active populism if the main attractors of liberal democracy – inclusiveness, political equality, political participation, predominance of concurrent majority, the containment and predictability of the government power, and the enforcement of the non-aggression principle – are enforced with renewed vigor. Above all, it is necessary to enforce inclusiveness in regard to populists treating them as equal partners in the political sphere. We should accept that it is possible for populists to feel a deep sense of frustration because they perceive a wide

gap between them and certain “privileged minorities” that may affirm their particular identities, can easily politicize their specific problems or interests, and are able to use political means effectively.

The inclusiveness in regard to populists has a peculiar importance in the sphere of democratic public debates. Populists could and should be invited as equal partners, and all participants – populists or not – should oblige themselves to follow the minimal rules of public debates: (1) Do not label your opponent; (2) Do not make malicious speculations about your opponents; (3) Do not seek your opponent’s interests or motives for holding his claims; (4) Do not invoke the character, temperament and personality traits of your opponent; (5) Provide relevant evidence for your claims; and (6) Stay focused on the issue discussed. Known as *loci communes* in the sphere of (civilized) public debates, these rules provide a good starting point for a necessary reconciliation between populists and their adversaries.

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