

ME THE PEOPLE

How
Populism
Transforms
Democracy



NADIA URBINATI

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TRANSFORMS
DEMOCRACY

Nadia Urbinati



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*To the memory of my father,
after twenty years*

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INTRODUCTION

A New Form of Representative Government

For a democratic system, the process of “becoming,” of transformation, is its natural state.

—NORBERTO BOBBIO, *The Future of Democracy*

POPULISM IS NOT NEW. It emerged along with the process of democratization in the nineteenth century, and since then its forms have mirrored the forms of the representative governments it has challenged. What *is* novel today is the intensity and pervasiveness of its manifestations: populist movements have appeared in almost every democracy. They now exist from Caracas to Budapest, from Washington to Rome. Any understanding of contemporary politics that wants to be taken seriously must find a way to deal with populism. Yet our ability to study it is currently limited because until recently, this phenomenon was studied in one of two highly specific ways. Either it was simply conceptualized as a subspecies of fascism or it was studied as a form of government that was thought to be limited to the margins of the West, and particularly to Latin American countries.¹ The latter are considered to be the homeland of populism because they have served as the crucible of the generalizations that we apply to populist political styles, emerging processes, socioeconomic conditions of success or failure, and state-level institutional innovations.²

The fresh interest in populism among scholars and citizens is also something new. Until the end of the twentieth century that interest was strongest among those thinkers who saw populism as a problem connected to the process of national construction in former colonized countries, as a new form of mobilization and contestation against liberal democracy, or as a sign of the renaissance of right-wing parties in Europe.³ Few scholars suggested

that populism might have a positive role to play in contemporary democracy. Those who did saw its virtues as essentially moral. They claimed that it entailed a desire for “moral regeneration” and for the “redemptive” aspirations of democracy; that it encouraged “folk politics” over “institutionalized politics” or privileged the lived experience of local neighborhoods over an abstract, distant state; and that it might serve as a means to realize popular sovereignty, over and above institutions and constitutional rules.⁴

That was the past. Now, in the twenty-first century, scholars and citizens attracted by populism are more numerous, and their interest in it is primarily political. They conceive of populism not simply as a symptom of fatigue with the “establishment” and with established parties but also as a legitimate call for power by the ordinary many, who for years have been subjected to declining incomes and political influence. They see it as an opportunity to rejuvenate democracy and as a weapon that the Left might use to defeat the Right (which has traditionally served as the custodian of populist rhetoric and strategy).⁵ More important still, they see that populist movements have moved far beyond their erstwhile homeland, Latin America, and have established themselves in government in places as powerful as European Union member-states and the United States.

Despite the growing number of scholars who are sympathetic to populism, and despite the electoral success of populist candidates, the term “populism” is still used most often as a polemical tool, not an analytic one. It is used as a *nom de bataille*, to brand and stigmatize political movements and leaders, or as a rallying cry for those who aspire to reclaim the liberal-democratic model from the hands of elites, believing that model is the only valid form of democracy we have.⁶ Finally, especially since the Brexit referendum in 2016, politicians and opinion makers have adopted the term to refer to *any* opposition movement: to label everyone from xenophobic nationalists to critics of neoliberal policies. This usage turns the adjective “populist” into a term for all those who do not themselves rule but rather criticize rulers. The principles underlying their critique become irrelevant. A predictable side effect of this polemical approach is that it reduces politics to a contest between populism and governability, where “populism” is the name for any opposition movement, and “governability” is democratic politics or simply an issue of institutional management.⁷ But when populist movements take power, the polemical approach becomes speechless. It cannot explain the uptake of populism within constitutional democracies, which have become the reference point and the target of populist majorities. And this means that it cannot help devise a successful counterpopulist strategy.

My project in this book is to repair this conceptual weakness. I propose that we should abandon the polemical attitude and treat populism as a project of government. I further propose that we should see it as a transformation of the three pillars of modern democracy—the people, the principle of majority, and representation. I do not follow the widespread view that populists are mainly oppositional and incapable of governing. In its place, I stress the capacity that populist movements possess to construct a particular regime from within constitutional democracy. Populism in power, I hold, is a *new* form of representative government, but a *disfigured* one, situated within the category of “disfigurement” I devised in my previous book.⁸

This Introduction has four parts, which set up the conceptual environment for the theory I develop in the rest of the work. First, I propose an outline of the constitutional and representative democratic context in which populism is now developing, and in relation to which it must be judged. Second, I argue that populism can be understood as a global trend, with a recognizable phenomenological pattern, but that every particular instance of populism retains local-context-specific features. Third, I offer a synthetic and critical overview of the main contemporary interpretations of populism, in relation to which I develop my theory. Finally, I provide a brief road map of the chapters ahead.

How Populism Transforms Representative Democracy

This book seeks to understand the implications of populism’s reappearance in relation to constitutional democracy. Constitutional democracy is the political order that promises to protect basic rights (which are essential to the democratic process) by limiting the power of the majority in government, by providing stable and regular opportunities for changing majorities and governments, by guaranteeing social and procedural mechanisms that permit the largest possible part of the population to participate in the game of politics, and by influencing decisions and changing who makes decisions. It does this through the separation of powers and the independence of the judiciary. Stabilized after 1945 with the defeat of mass dictatorships, constitutional democracy was meant to neutralize the problems that populism is now trying to capitalize on.⁹ These are (1) the resistance of democratic citizens to political intermediation, and to organized and traditional political parties in particular; (2) the majority’s mistrust of the institutional checks on the power that the majority legitimately derives from the citizens’ vote; and (3) the climate of distress with pluralism, or with the views

and groups that do not fit with the majoritarian meaning of “the people.” I argue that representation is the terrain on which the populist battle over these issues takes place. And I see populism as a litmus test of the transformations of representative democracy.¹⁰

Let me try to summarize the theory I will put forth. I argue that populist democracy is the name of a new form of representative government that is based on two phenomena: a direct relation between the leader and those in society whom the leader defines as the “right” or “good” people; and the superlative authority of the audience. Its immediate targets are the “obstacles” to the development of those phenomena: intermediary opinion-making bodies, such as parties; established media; and institutionalized systems for monitoring and controlling political power. The result of these positive and negative actions delineates the physiognomy of populism as an interpretation of “the people” and “the majority” that is tainted by an undisguised—indeed, an enthusiastic—*politics of partiality*. This partiality can easily disfigure the rule of law (which requires that government officials and citizens are bound by and act consistent with the law), and also the division of powers, which—taken together—include reference to basic rights, democratic process, and criteria of justice or right. That these elements form the core of constitutional democracy does not imply they are naturally identical to democracy as such. Their intertwinement occurred through a complex, often dramatic, and always conflictual historical process, which was (and is) temporal, open to transformation, and finite. It can be revised and reshaped, and populism is one form this revision and reshaping can take.¹¹ Populists want to replace *party* democracy with *populist* democracy; when they succeed, they stabilize their rule through unrestrained use of the means and procedures that party democracy offers. Specifically, populists promote a permanent mobilization of the public (the audience) in support of the elected leader in government; or they amend the existing constitution in ways that reduce constraints on the decision-making power of the majority. In a phrase, “Populism seeks to occupy the space of the constituent power.”¹²

There are unquestionably social, economic, and cultural reasons for the success of populist proposals in our democracies. One could claim that their success is tantamount to an admission that party democracy has failed to deliver the promises made by constitutional democracies after 1945. Among the unfulfilled promises, two in particular militate in favor of populist successes: the growth of social and economic inequality, so that for a large part of the population there is scant or no chance to aspire to a dignified social and political life; and the growth of a rampant and rapacious global oligarchy that makes sovereignty a phantom. These two

factors are intertwined; they are a violation of the promise of equality, and they render constitutional democracy in urgent need of critical self-reflection on “its failure to put an end to oligarchic power.”¹³ The dualism between the few and the many, and the antiestablishment ideology that fattens populism, comes from these unfulfilled promises. This book presumes this set of socioeconomic conditions but does not intend to study why populism grew, or why it continues to grow. The ambition of this book is more limited in scope: I seek to understand *how populism transforms (indeed, disfigures) representative democracy*.

The term “populism” itself is ambiguous and is difficult to define in a sharp and uncontested way. This is because it is not an ideology or a specific political regime but rather a *representative process*, through which a collective subject is constructed so that it can achieve power. Even though it is “a way of doing politics which can take various forms, depending on the periods and the places,” populism is incompatible with nondemocratic forms of politics.¹⁴ This is because it frames itself as an attempt to build a collective subject through people’s voluntary consent, and as an attempt to question a social order in the name of people’s interests.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, populist politics is a type of politics that seeks to represent the interests and wishes of ordinary people “who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups.”¹⁵ There are two predefined players in this definition: the ordinary people and the established political elites. The thing that defines and connects these two players is the feeling of the former toward the latter—a feeling that a representative leader intercepts, exalts, and narrates. Populism involves an exclusionary conception of the people, and the establishment is the externality thanks to which, and against which, it conceives itself. The dynamic of populism is one of rhetorical construction. It involves a speaker interpreting the claims of dissatisfied groups and unifying them in a narrative and above all his or her person. In this sense, as Ernesto Laclau has noted, all populist governments take the name of their leader.¹⁶ The outcome is a kind of movement that, if asked to explain what it is that makes it count as the people’s voice, it answers by naming the people’s enemies.¹⁷

The interpretation I advance corrects Margaret Canovan’s divide between populism in “economically backward” societies (where populism can supposedly stretch to give birth to Caesaristic leaders), and populism in modern Western societies (where it can supposedly exist even without a leader).¹⁸ According to Canovan’s framework, Western societies enjoy a kind of exceptionality that makes “populism” almost indistinguishable from electoral cases of so-called silent majorities, who are courted and conquered by

skillful candidates and catchall parties.¹⁹ My interpretation of populism as a transformation of representative democracy is meant to challenge this view. On my theory, all populist leaders behave the same, whether they are Western or not. That said, in societies that are not yet fully democratic, the representative ambitions of populist leaders can subvert the existing institutional order (though they can hardly make the country a stable democracy).²⁰ This is what happened with Italian fascism in the 1920s, and with the forms of caudillismo and dictatorship that one sees at work in Latin American countries.

Furthermore, I hold that before they come to power, all populist leaders build their popularity by attacking mainstream parties and politicians (from the Right and the Left). Once they have attained power, they reconfirm their identification with “the people” on a daily basis by convincing their audience that they are waging a titanic battle against the entrenched establishment in order to preserve their (and the people’s) “transparency,” and in order to avoid becoming a new establishment. Developing a direct relation to the people and the audience is essential for this purpose. Thus, Hugo Chávez “spent more than 1,500 hours denouncing capitalism on *Alo Presidente*, his own TV show”;²¹ Silvio Berlusconi was for many years a daily presence on both his private television stations and Italian state television; and Donald Trump is on Twitter night and day.

The representative construction of populism is rhetorical, and it is independent of social classes and traditional ideologies. As they say in Europe, it is situated beyond the Left–Right divide. It is an expression of democratic action because the creation of the populist discourse occurs in public, with the voluntary consent of the relevant protagonists *and* with the voluntary consent of the audience.²² With all of this in mind, the central question of this book is the following: *What kind of democratic results does populism construct?* My answer is that today, representative democracy is both the environment in which populism develops *and* its target, or the thing it claims its ruling power against. Populist movements and leaders compete with other political actors with regard to the representation of the people; and they seek electoral victory in order to prove that “the people” *they* represent are the “right” people and that they deserve to rule for their own good.

This book seeks to demonstrate how populism tries to transform itself into a new form of representative government. In the literature on populism, which I shall examine in the third section of this Introduction, populism is often opposed to representative democracy. It is associated with the claim of popular sovereigns to immediate power. Sometimes it is also connected to direct democracy. This book, by contrast, seeks to show that

populism springs from *within* representative democracy and wants to construct its own representative people and government. Populism in power does not challenge the practice of elections but rather transforms it into the celebration of the majority and its leader, and into a new form of elitist governing strategy, based on a (supposedly) direct representation between the people and the leader. On this framing, elections work as plebiscite or acclamation. They do what they are not supposed to: show what is *ex ante* taken to be the right answer and serve as a confirmation of the right winners.²³ This makes populism a chapter in a broader phenomenon: the formation and substitution of elites. As long as we conceive of populism as solely a movement of protest or a narrative, we cannot see this fact. But when we consider it as it manifests *once it is in power*, these other realities become plainly evident. Alternatively, we might say we can see things better when we stop engaging in debates about what populism *is*—whether it is a “thin” ideology or a mentality or a strategy or a style—and turn instead to analyzing what populism *does*: in particular, when we ask how it changes or reconfigures the procedures and institutions of representative democracy.

The interpretation of populism as a new kind of mixed government that I propose in this book profits from the diarchic theory of representative democracy I developed in my previous work.²⁴ This theory understands the idea of democracy as a government by means of opinion. *Representative* democracy is diarchic because it is a system in which “will” (by which I mean the right to vote, and the procedures and institutions that regulate the making of authoritative decisions) and “opinion” (by which I mean the extrainstitutional domain of political judgments and opinions in their multifaceted expressions) exert a mutual influence on each other but remain independent.²⁵ The societies in which we live are democratic not only because they have free elections that are contested by two or multiple parties but because they also promise to allow for effective political rivalry and debate among diverse and competing views. The use of representative institutions—a free and multiple media, as well as the regular election of representatives, political parties, and so on—allows time for political judgments to be formed, and for those to inform voting. It also allows time for decisions to be reviewed, rethought, and—if necessary—changed. While direct democracy collapses the time between will and judgment, and so exalts the moment of decision, representative democracy teases the two apart. In so doing, it opens up the political process to the formation and operation of public opinion and rhetoric. In placing our faith in the capacities of representation in political life, we are exploiting an ideological mechanism that allows us to use time as a resource in guiding our politics. Thus, diarchy promises that elections and the forum

of opinions will make institutions both the site of legitimate power and an object of control and scrutiny. A democratic constitution is supposed to regulate and protect both powers.

In conclusion, the diarchic theory of representative democracy makes two claims. First, it asserts that “will” and “opinion” are the two powers of the sovereign citizens. Second, it asserts that they are different in principle, and should remain distinct in practice, even though they must be (and are) in constant communication with each other. Diarchy is my name for a mediated or indirect kind of self-government, which presumes a *distance* and a *difference* between the sovereign and the government.²⁶ Elections regulate that difference, while representation (which is both an institution inside the state and a process of participation outside it) regulates that distance. It is precisely this difference and this distance that populist forms of representation question and transform, and that populism in power tries to overcome.²⁷ Yet its “directness” remains inside representative government.

In these ways, the new mixed regime inaugurated by populism is characterized by *direct representation*. Direct representation is an oxymoron I use (and unpack in Chapter 4) to capture the idea that populist leaders want to speak directly *to* the people and *for* the people, without needing intermediaries (especially parties and independent media). As such, even though populism does not renounce elections, it uses them as a celebration of the majority and its leader, rather than as a competition among leaders and parties that facilitates assessment of the plurality of preferences. More specifically, it weakens the organized parties on which electoral competitions have until now relied and creates its own lightweight and malleable party, which purports to unify claims beyond partisan divisions. The leader uses this “movement” as he or she pleases, and bypasses it if need be. In a conventional representative democracy, political parties and the media are the essential intermediary bodies. They allow the inside and the outside of the state to communicate without merging. A *populist* representative democracy, by contrast, seeks to overcome those “obstacles.” It “democratizes” the public (or so it claims) by establishing a perfect and direct communication between the two sides of the diarchy and—ideally—merging them. The goal of opposing the “ordinary people” to the “established few” is to convince the people that it is possible for them to be ruled in a representative manner without the need for a separate political class or “the establishment.” Indeed, as I explain in Chapter 1, getting rid of “the establishment” (or whatever else is conceived of as lying between “us,” the people outside, and the state, understood as inside apparatuses of elected or appointed decision makers) is the central claim of all populist movements. It was certainly the core theme running through Trump’s inaugural address, when he declared that his arrival in Washington represented not

the arrival of “the establishment” but rather the arrival of “the citizens of our country.”

Pivotal to this analysis of populism is the direct relationship that the leader establishes and maintains with the people. This is also the dynamic that blurs the democratic diarchy. While in opposition, populism stresses the dualism between the many and the few, and expands its audience by denouncing constitutional democracy. Populists argue that constitutional democracy has failed to fulfill its promise of guaranteeing that all citizens enjoy equal political power. But once populists get into power, they work incessantly to prove that their ruling leader is an *incarnation* of the voice of the people and should stand against and above all other representative claimants and repair the fault of constitutional democracy. Populists assert that, because the people and the leader have effectively merged, and no intermediary elite sets them apart, the role of deliberation and mediation can be drastically reduced, and the will of the people can exercise itself more robustly.

This is what makes populism different from demagoguery. As I explain in Chapter 2, populism in representative democracies is structured by the trope of “unification versus pluralism.” This same trope appeared in ancient demagoguery in relation to direct democracy. But the impact of the populist’s appeal to the unification of “the people” is different. In ancient direct democracy, demagoguery had an immediate law-making impact because the assembly was the unmediated sovereign, rather than an organ made up of people who were not physically present and were therefore defined and represented by the political competitors. Populism, however, develops within a state order in which the popular sovereign is defined by an abstract principle, leaving rhetoricians free to fight over the interpretations of that principle and to compete for its representation in the state. This is true even though populism initially develops within the nonsovereign sphere of opinion (the world of ideology), and may very well remain there if it never gets a majority to govern. In this sense, I am well aware of the crucial differences that elections bring to democracy. But I contend that referring to the ancients’ analyses of demagoguery can help us explain two things: (1) like demagoguery in Aristotle’s rendering of the *politeia*, populism intervenes when the legitimacy of the representative order is already in decline; and (2) populism’s relation to constitutional democracy is conflictual; this conflict helps us to name and shame the ways in which populism co-opts the principle of majority in order to concentrate its own power and inaugurate a majoritarianist government.²⁸

In my previous work, I argued that it is simplistic and inadequate to think in terms of a simple dichotomy between direct and representative democracy—as if participation sided with the former and elected aristocracies sided with the latter.²⁹ Democratic politics is *always* representative

politics, insofar as it is articulated and occurs in the form of interpretations, partisan affiliations, engagements, and finally decisions by the majority of individual votes. These processes do not merely produce a majority: they produce the majority *and* the opposition, in a ceaseless, conflicting dialectic. Citizens' expression of proposals, their contestation of ideas, and their consent to proposals and ideas (and the candidates who speak for them) are all components of democracy's diarchy of will and opinion.

Taking a diarchic perspective, I can argue against conventional wisdom, according to which populism is best understood as "illiberal democracy."³⁰ A democracy that infringes basic political rights—especially the rights crucial for forming opinions and judgments, expressing dissents, and changing views—and that systematically precludes the possibility of the formation of new majorities *is not democracy at all*. A minimal (as electoral) definition of democracy thus implies more than merely elections, if it is in fact to describe democracy.³¹ As Bobbio writes, electors "must be offered real alternatives and be in a position to choose between these alternatives. For this condition to be realized those called upon to make decisions must be guaranteed the so-called basic rights: freedom of opinion, of expression, of speech, of assembly and association etc."³²

The diarchy of will and opinion means that democracy is effectively inconceivable without a commitment to political and civil liberties, which requires a constitutional pact to proclaim and promise to protect them, and a division of power and the rule of law to protect and guarantee them. Of course, none of these liberties is unlimited. But it is essential that the interpretation of their scope does not lie in the hands of the majority in power—not even a majority in power whose policies seem to meet the social interests of the many.³³ This is *the* condition for representative democracy to work, and for its process to remain open and indeterminate. As such, thinking and talking in terms of a distinction between "democratic" and "liberal democratic" is misguided, as is thinking and talking in terms of "liberal democracy" and "illiberal democracy."³⁴ These terms, while popular, are shortsighted and imprecise because they presume something that in fact cannot exist: democracy without rights to free speech and freedom of association, and democracy with a majority that is overwhelming enough to block its own potential evolutions and mutations (that is, other majorities).³⁵ From the diarchic perspective, liberal democracy is a pleonasm and illiberal democracy is a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron.³⁶

Moreover, the concept of "liberally hyphenated democracy" plays into the hands of those who claim that populism is democracy at its highest. It

allows proponents of populism to claim that the liberal part of the hyphen limits democracy's endogenous strength—namely, sponsoring the power of the majority. This suits the populist claim rather well. In a speech he gave during the electoral campaign of 1946, Juan Domingo Perón (the father of Argentinian populism) styled himself a *true* democrat, in contrast to his adversaries, whom he accused of being *liberal* democrats: "I am, then, much more democratic than my adversaries, because I seek a real democracy whilst they defend an appearance of democracy, the external form of democracy."³⁷ The problem, of course, is that the "external form of democracy" is essential to democracy. It is not merely "an appearance," and it is not the prerogative of liberalism alone. If one adopts a nondiarchic conception of democracy and stresses the moment of decision (of the people or their representatives) as the essence of democracy, the mobilization and dissent of citizens appears to signal a *crisis in* democracy, instead of appearing as a *component of* democracy. Narrowing the democratic moment to voting or elections alone turns the extrainstitutional domain into the natural site of populism, and in doing so, as William R. Riker wrote years ago, liberalism and populism become the only games in town.³⁸ The diarchic theory of democracy allows us to avoid this pitfall.

As we shall see in this book, populism shows itself to be impatient with the democratic diarchy. It also shows itself to be intolerant of civil liberties, insofar as (1) it defers exclusively to the winning majority to solve disagreements within society; (2) it tends to shatter the mediation of institutions by making them directly subject to the will of the ruling majority and its leader; and (3) it constructs a representation of the people that, while inclusive of the large majority, is *ex ante* exclusionary of another part. Inclusion and exclusion are internal to the democratic dialectic among citizens who disagree on many things, and the democratic dialectic is a game of government and contestation. Democracy means that no majority is the last one, and that no dissenting view is confined *ex ante* to a position of peripheral impotence or subordination merely because it is held by the "wrong" people.³⁹ But for this open dialectic to persist, the elected majority cannot behave *as if* it is the direct representative of some "true" people. (Indeed, at the government level, no decision "can be made without some degree of co-operation with political adversaries"; as such, these adversaries are always a part of the game).⁴⁰ Democracy without individual liberty—political *and* legal—cannot exist.⁴¹ It is in this sense that the term "liberal democracy" is a pleonasm.⁴² It suggests that "democracy is *before* liberalism," in the sense that it is self-standing or nondependent on liberalism, although it has historically profited from some liberal achievements.⁴³ This is not only the case because democracy predated liberalism; more importantly, it is the case

because democracy is a practice of liberty in action and in public that is imbued with individual liberty. “The political practice of democracy requires conditions that map onto core liberal and republican values of freedom and equality.”⁴⁴ This makes it an open game in which a change of government is always possible and is inscribed within majority rule. As Giovanni Sartori writes, “The democratic future of a democracy hinges on the convertibility of majorities into minorities and, conversely, of minorities into majorities.”⁴⁵ As such, liberal democracy is really just democracy.⁴⁶ Beyond this, we get fascism, which is neither “democracy without liberalism,” nor democracy, nor political liberalism. Its early theorists and leaders, of course, knew this well.⁴⁷

Populists attempt to construct a form of representation that gets rid of party government, that gets rid of the machinery that generates the political establishment and imposes compromises and transactions, and that ends up fragmenting the homogeneity of the people. If the principle that rules representative democracy is liberty—and therefore the possibility of dissent, pluralism, and compromise—then the principle ruling populism is the unity of the collective, which sustains the leader in his or her decisions. Seeing this, we can understand how populism in power is a form of representative government that is based on a direct relationship between the leader and those who are deemed to be the “right” or the “good” people: those whom the leader claims to unify and bring to power and whom the elections reveal but do not create.

A further implication of populism’s impatience with partisan division is its transmutation of the procedural conception of “the people” into a *propriator*. This point is crucial, and it has been generally neglected in the massive literature on populism. We must overcome this neglect. Whenever populists come to power, they treat procedures and political cultures as a matter of property and possession. “Our” rights (as we hear from the proclamations of the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, from the proclamations of the Italian minister of the interior Matteo Salvini, and from US president Trump) are the polestar of populism. They epitomize the populist wrenching of the ideas, the practice, and the legal culture that are associated with civil rights—namely, equal consideration and inclusion. The characterization of populism as a possessive conception of political institutions is at the basis of its factional nature. This adds to its impatience with constitutional rules and the division of powers, and casts light on its paradoxical character: populism in power is doomed either to be unbalanced (as in a permanent campaign) or to become a new regime. It cannot afford to be a democratic government among others because the majority it represents

is not a majority among others: it is the “good” one, which exists before and independently of elections.

The policy implications of populism’s possessive nature are also unpredictable. The approach may be cashed out in protectionist ambitions; but it may also be cashed out in libertarian claims, which remain almost unrecognizable as long as we insist on understanding populism as a subset of traditional fascist ideologies, or as a wave of protectionism in the old fascist style. As Rogers Brubaker has written in his perceptive analysis of Dutch populist civilizationism, “Fortuyn’s libertarian anti-Islamism gained traction in a context shaped by the distinctively progressive views of ‘native’ Dutch people on gender and sexual morality, by anxiety in gay circles about anti-gay harassment and violence attributed to Muslim youth, and by the public uproar over the condemnation of homosexuality on a Dutch national news programme by a Rotterdam-based Moroccan imam.”⁴⁸ Leaders like Marine Le Pen of the French National Front, like Austrian prime minister Sebastian Kurz, and like Salvini of the Italian Lega do not (yet) embrace rhetoric that frontally attacks gender equality (although some of them attempt to revoke the laws regulating abortion and same-sex civil unions or marriages). Nor do they reject the individual liberties that civil rights brought to their people (although they thunder against the “inimical” press). But they *do* use the language of rights in a way that subverts their proper function. They use the language of rights to state and reclaim the absolute power of the many over their “civilization,” and thereby over rights, which become a power that only the members of the ruling people possess and are allowed to enjoy. At the very moment they are detached from their equal and impartial (that is, universalist and procedural) meaning, rights become a privilege. They can be inclusive only insofar as they are not conditioned on the cultural or national identity of the persons claiming them. A possessive practice of rights robs rights of their aspirational character and turns them into a means to protect the status that a part of the population has gained. The rebuff of migrants from the Italian shores and the refusal to help them when in need are made in the name of “our rights,” which are superior in value to “human rights.” The suspension of universalism is a direct consequence of a possessive and thus relative conception of rights. We do not see this face of populism by stressing the illiberal consequences of democracy left untamed by liberalism; we see it when we consistently follow the democratic process, in all its diarchic complexity.

As I shall explain in this book, populism is a phenomenology that involves replacing the whole with one of its parts. This causes the fictions

(the guidelines of acting *as if*) of universality, inclusion, and impartiality to fade away. The success of populism in achieving its stated aims would ultimately entail the replacement of the procedural meaning of the people, and the replacement of the principled generality of the law (*erga omnes*), with a socially substantive meaning and law that only expresses the will and interests of a *part* of the people (*ad personam*). In Chapter 3 I propose that this process of solidification or ethnicization of the juridico-political *populus* involves an attempt by populist leaders to claim an identification of “the people” with the part (*méros*) they purport to incarnate. Democracy then comes to be identified with radical majoritarianism, or with the *kratos* (the power) of a specific majority, which purports to be—and rules as if it is—the only good majority (or part) that some election has revealed. This identification, of course, requires one to suppose that the opposition does not belong to the same “good” people. And it requires one to identify the “majority principle” (which is one of democracy’s fundamentals) with “majority rule.” As pure majoritarianism, populism is a disfigurement of the majority principle and democracy (neither its completion nor its norm), whose “illiberal consequences need not necessarily follow upon a crisis of liberalism in a democratic state” but can develop from democracy’s practice and conception of liberty.⁴⁹

Ultimately, populism is not an appeal to the sovereignty of the people as a general principle of legitimacy. Rather, it is a radical reaffirmation of the “heartland that represents an idealized conception of the community.”⁵⁰ This heartland claims to be the true and only legitimate master of the game. It does so either by pointing to its numerical majority or by holding itself up as the mythical popular entity that must translate directly into the will to power. In Chapter 2 I examine this polemical approach, and I propose that—within what I define as a property-like or possessive conception and management of political power—rule by majority ceases to be a procedure for making legitimate decisions in a pluralistic and contested environment, and instead becomes the facticity of power, allowing whatever part of society is seeking *kratos* to make up for its past neglect by elected parties, and allowing it to rule in its own interests and against “the establishment” and the interests of that part that does not belong to the “good” one.

This possessive conception of politics runs the risk of arriving at “solutions” that are dangerously close to being fascist. Thus, while I treat populism as a democratic phenomenon, I also claim that it stretches constitutional democracy to its limits. Beyond these limits, another regime could arise: one that might well be authoritarian, dictatorial or fascist. From this perspective, populism is not some subversive movement but is rather a process that appropriates the norms and tools of representative politics. As

we see today, populists exploit the dysfunctions of constitutional democracy and sometimes attempt to refashion the constitution. Hence the novelty of contemporary populism as it has developed within constitutional democracies. This novelty speaks to the fact that populist forms precisely mirror the political order against which they are reacting.

I argue that populism is structurally marked by a *radical and programmatic partiality* in interpreting the people and the majority. This is the case whether the appeal to “the people” is made in the ideological terms of the Left or of the Right. As such, if populism comes to power, it can have a disfiguring impact on the representative institutions that make up constitutional democracy—the party system, the rule of law, and the division of powers. It can push constitutional democracy so far that it opens the door to authoritarianism or even dictatorship. The paradox, of course, is that if such a regime change actually happens, populism ceases to exist. This means that the destiny of populism is tied to the destiny of democracy: “The *never quite* taking place [is] part of its performance.”⁵¹ As such, some scholars have compared populism to a parasite in order to explain this peculiar relationship.⁵² Having no foundations of its own, populism develops from within the democratic institutions it transforms (but never wholly replaces). Democracy and populism live and die together; and for this reason, it makes sense to argue that populism is the extreme border of constitutional democracy, after which dictatorial regimes are primed to emerge.

Whatever analogy a particular populist movement uses, its manifestations will be contextual and dependent on the political, social, and religious culture of the country at hand. But populism is more than a historically contingent phenomenon, and more than a movement of contestation. It pertains to the *transformation of representative democracy*. This, I claim, must be the reference point for any theoretical approach to populism. It makes things easier, too, because although “we simply do not have anything like a *theory* of populism,” we can profit from its endogenous link with representation and democracy, whose normative foundations and procedures are very familiar to us.⁵³

I make a distinction between *populism as a popular movement* and *populism as a ruling power*. This distinction encompasses populism in its rhetorical style; in its propaganda, tropes, and ideology; and finally in its aims and achievements. The distinction maps onto the diarchic character of democracy I outlined earlier. We need a way to understand populism both as a movement of opinion and contestation and as a system of decision making. My earlier book *Democracy Disfigured* analyzed populism in terms of the first authority, and this book analyses it in terms of the second.

With respect to the authority of the opinion, I argued in *Democracy Disfigured* that it is inaccurate to treat populism essentially as identical with popular movements or movements of protest.⁵⁴ Taken alone, popular movements may involve populist *rhetoric*, but not yet a project of populist *power*. Recent examples of such rhetoric include the popular horizontal movements of contestation and protest that used the dualistic trope of “we, the people,” against “you, the establishment”—like the Girotondi in Italy in 2002, Occupy Wall Street in the United States in 2011, and Indignados in Spain in 2011. Without an organizing narrative, some aspiration to win seats in the parliament or the congress, and a leadership claiming that its people are the “true” expression of the people as a whole, popular movements remain very much what they have always been. They are sacrosanct democratic movements of contestation against some social trend that the mobilized citizens perceive to be betraying basic principles of equality (and that society, they think, has promised to respect and fulfill). This is very different from populist approaches that seek to conquer representative institutions and win a governing majority in order to model society on its own ideology of the people. Examples of these sorts of approaches appear in the majorities that have emerged in Hungary (2012), Poland (2014), the United States (2016), Austria (2017), and Italy (2018). These cases, and older ones in Latin America, show that even if a populist government does not outright change a constitution, it can nonetheless change the tenor of public discourse and politics by deploying daily propaganda that injects enmity in the public sphere, that mocks any opposition and seminal principles like judicial independence. A populist government relies on, but also reinforces and amplifies, a strongly opinionated audience that clamors for the direct translation of its opinions into decisions. This audience becomes intolerant of dissent and disparaging of pluralism; and, in addition, it claims full legitimacy in the name of transparency, a “virtue” that is supposed to expunge the “hypocrisy” of pragmatic politics. Thus, the populist leader’s move to offend adversaries and minorities in public speeches becomes a mark of sincerity against the duplicity of the politically correct. This was also the style of fascism, which translated that candidness directly into punitive and repressing laws. This is precisely what makes populism in power different from fascism in power, although populism may sponsor ideas and propagate views that are just as insufferable as those of fascism. Nonetheless, to understand the character of a populist democracy, we should not concern ourselves only with what the leader says and the audience echoes. We must also analyze the ways in which populism in power *mutates* existing democratic institutions and procedures.

Contexts, Comparisons, and the Shadow of Fascism

Populism is a global phenomenon.⁵⁵ But it is almost a truism that any “definition” of populism will be precarious. The phenomenon resists generalizations. As such, those scholars of politics who wish to study it must become comparativists, because the language and content of populism are imbued with the political culture of the society in which the specific instance has arisen. In some countries, populist representation takes on religious traits; in others, it takes on more secular and nationalist ones. In some, it uses the language of republican patriotism, while in others it adopts the vocabularies of nationalism, indigeneity, and nativism and the myth of “first occupants.” In some, it stresses the center-periphery cleavage, while in others it stresses the divide between city and countryside. In the past, some populist experiences were rooted in the attempts that were made by collectivist agrarian traditions to resist modernization, westernization, and industrialism. Others embodied a “self-made man” kind of popular culture, which valued small-scale entrepreneurship. Still others reclaimed state intervention in order to govern modernization, or to protect and succor the well-being of the middle class. The variety of past and present populisms is extraordinary, and what may be right in Latin America is not necessarily right in Europe or the United States. Equally, what holds true in North and Western Europe may not do so in the eastern or southern areas of the old continent. Isaiah Berlin’s comments about Romanticism could equally have been made about populism: “whenever anyone embarks on a generalization” of the phenomenon (even an “innocuous” one), “somebody will always be found who will produce countervailing evidence.”⁵⁶ This should suffice to guard us against *hybris definitoria*.

But populism’s importance does not spring from our (in)ability to render it in one clear and distinct definition. Its importance comes from the fact that it is a “movement” that, even though it escapes generalizations, is very tangible and is capable of transforming the lives and the thoughts of the people and society that embrace it. As the scholars at a 1967 conference at the London School of Economics showed with their pioneering interdisciplinary analyses of global populism, populism is a component of the political world we live in, and it signals a transformation of the democratic political system.⁵⁷ Perhaps Berlin’s other comments about Romanticism do not apply: that it is “a gigantic and radical transformation, after which nothing was ever the same.”⁵⁸ But we *can* say with some confidence that populism is part of the “gigantic” and global phenomenon called democratization. And we can also say that its ideological core has been nourished by the two main entities, *ethnos* and *demos*—the nation and the

people—that have fleshed out popular sovereignty in the age of democratization since its beginning in the eighteenth century. Populism is “always one possible response to the crisis of modern democratic politics” because is premised upon “claims about” the interpretation of popular sovereignty.⁵⁹ The things populism *does* to a democratic society, and the traces it leaves on that society, are primed to change both the style and the content of public discourse, even when populism does not change the constitution. This transformative potential is the horizon for my political theory of populism.

Since populism cannot be rendered as a precise concept, scholars are rightly skeptical about whether it can be treated as a distinctive phenomenon at all, rather than as some ideological creation or even simply “another majority.” In many countries, populism goes together with citizens’ critical attitudes toward elections—which are rooted in a belief that elections simply reproduce the rule of the “establishment”—and this makes scholars talk of populism as a “crisis of democracy.”⁶⁰ I don’t use the language of crisis and don’t flirt with apocalyptic visions. There is nothing “undemocratic” about electing a xenophobic leader; nor is there anything “undemocratic” about the rise of antiestablishment parties.⁶¹ Democracy is not in crisis because, or when, it gives us a majority we do not like or that is despicable.

Why, then, should we bother with populism? My answer is this: the simple fact that the term “populism” now appears so persistently, both in everyday politics and in academic publications, is reason enough to justify our scholarly attention. We study populism because populism is transforming our democracies.

To study populism, we must be attentive to context without being locked within it. When populism was just beginning to be studied, scholars identified it with a reaction against the processes of modernization (in predemocratic and postcolonial societies) and with the difficult transformation of representative government (in democratic societies).⁶² The term emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, first in Russia (*narodničestvo*) and then in the United States (the People’s Party). In the first case, it was a label for an intellectual vision; in the second case, by contrast, it was a label for a political movement that idealized an agrarian society of communitarian villages and individual producers, thereby standing against industrialization and corporate capitalism. There were other differences, too: in Russia, the populist voice was first of all the voice of urban intellectuals, who imagined an ideal community of uncontaminated peasants. In the United States, on the other hand, it was the voice of those citizens who contested the ruling elites in the name of their own

constitution.⁶³ The US case, therefore, not the Russian one, represents the first instance of populism as a democratic political movement, proposing itself as the true representative of the people within a party system and a government.⁶⁴

It is important to remember, though, that in the United States—and also in Canada, when the Canadian populist movement got under way—populism did not bring about regime changes but developed along with a wave of political democratization and the impact of the construction of a market economy on a traditional society. This wave of democratization spoke of ways to include much larger sections of the population, at a time when the polis was really still an elected oligarchy.⁶⁵ In the context of democratization, indeed, populism can become a strategy for rebalancing the distribution of political power among established and emerging social groups.⁶⁶

Several other important historical cases of populist regimes emerged in Latin American countries. Here, populism was capable of becoming a ruling power after World War II. It was met with mixed feelings at different historical phases, depending on whether it was evaluated at the beginning of its career or at its apex, whether it was evaluated as a regime in consolidation or a regime facing a succession in power, and whether it was evaluated as an opposition party mobilizing against an existing government or as a government itself.⁶⁷ As in Russia and the United States, in Latin America populism emerged in the age of socioeconomic modernization; but much like fascism in Europe's Catholic countries, it led toward modernity by using state power to protect and empower popular and middle classes, to dwarf political dissent, and to tame the liberal ideology, all while implementing welfare policies and protecting traditional ethical values. Finally, in Western Europe, populism made its appearance with predemocratic regimes in the early twentieth century. Here, it coincided with colonial expansionism, with the militarization of society that occurred during World War I, and with the growth of ethnic nationalism—which, in response to an economic depression, unraveled existing ideological divisions under the myth of an encompassing Nation.⁶⁸ In predemocratic Europe, populism's response to the crisis of liberal representative government ultimately manifested in the promotion of fascist regimes.

Populism only became the name of a form of government after the collapse of fascism, primarily in Latin America. Since that time, as a political form located between constitutional government and dictatorship, it has displayed family resemblances to political systems that sit at opposing ends of the spectrum. Today, populism grows both in societies that are still

democratizing and in societies that are fully democratic. And it takes its most mature and vexing profile in constitutional representative democracies. If we seek to draw a general trend out of these many different contexts, we can say that populism challenges representative government from within before moving beyond denunciation and seeking to substantially reshape democracy as a new political regime. Unlike fascism, though, it does not suspend free and competitive elections, nor does it deny them a legitimate role. In fact, electoral legitimacy is a key defining dimension of populist regimes.⁶⁹

Interestingly enough, though, we see frequent accusations that populists in power are “fascist.” This is particularly common today, given that Salvini shows sympathy with the neo-Nazi movements infesting the streets of Italian cities and beating and terrorizing African immigrants; and given that Trump’s aides have explicitly admitted to finding inspiration in the books and ideas of Julius Evola, an obscure and esoteric fascist philosopher who argued that official fascist ideology was too dependent on the principle of popular sovereignty and the egalitarian myth of enlightenment to figure as genuinely fascist. Other European populist leaders have also made alarming declarations about the ways in which the Christian roots of their nations have been “contaminated” by Islamic ideas, or about the way immigration contaminates the ethnic core of the people. These claims are striking and alarming. But I continue to resist the idea that the new form of representative government initiated by populism is fascist. As I shall explain in Chapter 3, where I discuss the similarities and differences between populist antipartyism and fascist antipartyism: it is true that fascism is both an ideology and a regime, much like populism is; and it is true that fascism emerged as a “movement” and militated against organized parties, much as populism did.⁷⁰ But the two should remain conceptually separate, because a fascist party would never give up on its plan of conquering power to construct a fascist society—a society that would be deeply inimical to basic rights, political freedom, and, in effect, constitutional democracy. It was for precisely this reason that Evola criticized readings of fascism as a version of absolute popular sovereignty in which fascism was derivative of the French revolution (and thus basically popular and “populistic”). In contrast, he conceived of fascism as a view of politics and society that was radically hierarchical and holistic, one that was wholly opposite to liberalism and democracy because of its radical denial of a universalist view of human beings,⁷¹ and one that was not parasitical on democracy but was instead a radically antidemocratic project.

Fascism in power is not content to achieve a few constitutional amendments and to exercise its majority *as if* it were the people. Fascism is a re-

gime in its own right that wants to shape society and civil life according to its principles. Fascism is the state and the people merging.⁷² It is not merely parasitical on representative government, because it does not accept the idea that legitimacy springs freely from popular sovereignty and free and competitive elections. Fascism is tyranny, and its government is a dictatorship. Fascism in power is antidemocratic all the way through, not only in words but also *de jure*. It is not content with dwarfing the opposition through daily propaganda: it uses state power and violent repression to *silence* the opposition. Fascism wants consensus but will not risk dissent, so it abolishes electoral competition and represses freedom of speech and association, which are the pillars of democratic politics. Where populism is ambiguous, fascism is not; and like democracy, fascism relies on a small nucleus of unambiguous ideas that make it immediately recognizable. Raymond Aron was already gesturing at this interpretation at the end of the 1950s when he tried to make sense of “regimes without parties,” which “require a kind of depoliticization of the governed” and yet did not reach the pervasiveness and intensity of fascist regimes.⁷³

I invoked the metaphor of parasitism to characterize situations in which populism grows from within representative democracy. In order to represent the ambiguous nature of populism, and its relationship with both fascism and democracy, I propose that we should also employ the Wittgensteinian metaphor of “family resemblance.”⁷⁴ This metaphor captures the borderline identity of populism. “Rather than dealing exclusively with the most evident traits found in all photographs” of the members of a family, “Wittgenstein took into account the presence of blurred edges, related to uncommon or even exceptional traits. This shift led him to reformulate ‘family resemblances’ in terms of a complex crisscross of similarities between the members of a given class.”⁷⁵ The evolution of the composite method of portrait making “helped to articulate a new notion of the individual: flexible, blurred, open-ended”: the result of a work of comparative analysis that reveals the blurred edges that make contours appear out of focus.⁷⁶ The notion of a family resemblance, which materializes through the blurred edges that populism shares with both democracy and fascism, is a useful metaphor for us to position the phenomenon of populism in relation to modern popular regimes. To give just one example: in 1951, Argentina’s Perón talked proudly about his regime as an alternative to both communism *and* capitalism. A few years later, he was stressing links with Francisco Franco’s dictatorship in Spain and had started to represent his third position as a new, supranational resistance to “*demoliberalismo*.”⁷⁷ Perón’s populism was similar, but never identical, to fascism, because he did not eliminate elections, nor deny them a legitimate role. In

fact, electoral legitimacy was a key defining dimension of Perón's populist sovereignty, although he used elections in a way that resembled a plebiscite on his party list, not a reckoning of individual preferences taken after open competition between a plurality of parties.⁷⁸ In sum, fascism *destroys* democracy after having used its means to strengthen itself. Populism *disfigures* democracy by transforming it without destroying it.⁷⁹

As the metaphor of a family resemblance implies, fascism and populism share important, recognizable traits. "Fascism has proposed itself as anti-party, opened the door to candidates, allowed an unorganized multitude to cover with a patina of vague and cloudy political ideals the savage (*selvaggio*) overflow of passions, hatreds, and desires."⁸⁰ If we set aside the reference to violence (*selvaggio*), this description of Italian fascism that Antonio Gramsci gave us in 1921 can be used to describe populist phenomena today. Contemporary populism is also marked by a "negativist" approach, which I discuss in Chapter 1. Populism sets itself up against the establishment not merely to oppose existing rulers but also to give organized passions the chance to rule for their own good. I explore how this happens in Chapter 2. Populist governments can—and often do—devise policies that are rhetorically violent, that attack their adversaries, and that exclude foreigners and immigrants. Populists in power can—and often do—target and reject noncitizens: we see this taking place in almost all countries in which they rule. But from the moment the government starts to use (unconstitutional) violence against its *own* citizens, from the moment it starts to repress political dissent and prevent freedom of association and speech, its so-called populist government has become a fascist regime.

Even acknowledging this important distinction, the descent into fascism is always just over the horizon. The history of democracy in the last century has been characterized by many persistent attempts to separate itself from, and actualize itself as an alternative to, fascism.⁸¹ This divorce became permanent at the moment that democratic governments embraced the idea that no holistic representation of the people corresponds, in effect, to democracy, and that one party alone can never represent the various claims of the citizens. In this sense, the division of "the people" into partisan groups was democracy's most powerful break with fascism. The implication of that division was that "the people" is both a criterion of legitimacy and the mark of an inclusive generality that does not coincide with any particular social group or elected majority. Postfascist democracy undoubtedly values free political action, pluralist party competitors, and alternation in government. It renounces the mixing of power with possession (by the many or the majority, for instance) and keeps its procedures independent of the political actors who use them. Fascism, on the other hand,

is a regime in which appeals to the people by the leader cannot be contested or confronted with opposite appeals. This is true even if the government rests its legitimacy on some kind of orchestrated consent. (Not even the most violent dictatorship can survive if its power relies exclusively on repression.) The real legacy of the divorce between democracy and fascism is the dialectic between the majority and opposition, rather than the celebration of the collective unity of the masses.

Fascism testifies, in reverse, to the trickiest problem of democracy: not the problem of *how to decide* in a collective, but the problem of *what to do* with dissent, and with dissenters. As I explain in Chapters 1 and 2, the democratic process does not exclude the provision of a place for leadership, but the leadership it breeds is fragmented. For this reason, elections are the site of a radical difference between democracy and populism. The unification of all the people under one leader is a true violation of democracy's spirit, even if the method used to reach that unification (elections) is democratic. This suggests, finally, that representation alone is not a sufficient condition for democracy. (Indeed, it can be used by autocratic leaders, as history quite clearly shows.) As I explain in Chapter 3, in order to understand the populist transformation of democracy, we must consider *how* representation is practiced.

We must also unpack the same ambiguity with respect to the principle of majority; I do this in Chapter 3. It is well known that the Gran Consiglio, the fascist government, was a collegial organ that adopted majority rule to make decisions.⁸² But democracy's principle of majority is not only meant to regulate decision making in a collective composed of more than three people. More importantly, it is designed to ensure that decision making happens in the open, and to ensure that dissenters always remain part of the process, not silenced and subjected, not concealed from the eye of the public. Populist leaders and parties are certainly interested in achieving an absolute majority, but as long as they keep the possibility of elections alive, and as long as they refrain from suspending or curtailing liberty of opinion and association, their attempts to achieve such a majority remain merely an unfulfilled ambition. This is why populism lies halfway between democracy and fascism.

To summarize, if we consider the two corrupt forms of power that qualify fascism—demagoguery and tyranny—we see that populism involves the former, but not the latter. Populism remains a democratic form as long as its latent fascism remains unfulfilled, a shadow. Fascism, too, used to claim a legitimacy derived from enthusiastic mass support. But it would be completely wrong to classify fascism as a form of democracy, because fascism consists not solely in the demagogic mesmerizing of the masses but

most radically in the rejection of a kind of consent that presumes that individual citizens can express themselves autonomously, associate and petition freely, and dissent if they should like. Democracy presumes a majority that is only ever *one possible* majority, permanently operating alongside an opposition that legitimately aspires to, and knows it may well be able to, displace the currently existing majority.

Instead of using fascism as my reference point, therefore, the guidelines I follow to decipher the dynamic of populism in power are inspired by Bernard Manin's account of the historical stages of representative government. Manin outlines three stages in the evolution of representative government:⁸³

1. Government of notables: involves restricted suffrage, a slim bill of rights, constitutionalism, parliamentary party and politics, and centrality of the executive.
2. Party democracy: involves universal suffrage, parties outside and inside the parliament as organizations of opinion and participation, a media and communication system connected to partisan affiliations, constitutionalism, and centrality of the parliament or congress.
3. Audience democracy: involves the citizenry as an indistinct and disorganized public, horizontal and floating opinions as an authorized tribunal of judgment, the decline of parties and partisan loyalties, media with an status autonomous from partisan affiliations, citizens who are not involved in the making of political agendas and party life, the personalization of political competition, centrality of the executive, and decline of the role of the parliament.

Manin's stage 3 contains the conditions in which populism can grow and achieve power. As I explain in Chapter 4, the massive usage of the internet—which is an affordable and revolutionary means of interaction and information sharing by ordinary citizens—has supercharged the horizontal transformation of the audience and made the public into the only existing political actor outside institutions born from civil society. This public is radically opposed to the party form of organization or any “legacy organization” that relies upon a structure of decision making that is not direct.⁸⁴ I call this phenomenon of disintermediation a “revolt against intermediary bodies,” and I argue that it facilitates the direct representation held by the leader, who interprets and embodies the multiple claims springing from his or her people.⁸⁵ Although it claims to be an advance toward direct participation, audience democracy is the form of representative government in which populism can, and often does, find oxygen. A populist democracy is

an antiparty democracy but is not necessarily rearranged so as to be a more direct and participatory democracy.⁸⁶

Of course, the diarchic processes of democracy—like representative government—are not static or frozen in time but rather go through distinct stages. Populism also goes through distinct stages, and its different manifestations through history seem to mirror the transformations of representative government. With Manin, we can say that representative government has been through several metamorphoses since its inception in the eighteenth century, and populist contestations and mobilizations occurred mostly during the times of transition from one stage of representative government to another. I do not intend to propose a grand “philosophy of history of representative government” (and populism). Nor do I intend to develop a historical overview of the several forms populism took within the transitional moments that occurred in the history of representative government. My concern and interest are with twenty-first-century populism.

I propose that we should situate the contemporary success of populism within the transition from “party democracy” to “audience democracy” (or “democracy of the public”). The shattering of partisan loyalties and memberships has been to the benefit of a politics of personalization, or candidates who court the public directly through personal ties. As I explain in Chapters 3 and 4, representation as embodiment (of the people and the leader) resists relying on intermediary collective actors, such as parties. Hence, a contemporary populist democracy looks like a democracy that pivots on leaders far more than structured parties; and it looks like a democracy in which parties are both more elusive and more capable of expanding their attraction because they depend less on partisan claims than on an emotional identification with a leader and his or her messages. As I shall explain in Chapter 3, populist parties are holistic movements with loose organization. As such, they are capable of drawing many different claims together under one representative leader. An undifferentiated public—the audience—is the humus in which a populist form of democracy takes root. New or changed partisan forms are already emerging in party democracy, as political scientists have documented. These new forms utilize poles of attraction that can enlarge consensus, thanks to a popular leader who is no longer fully entrenched within the party’s structure and who is uninhibited by the party’s institutions and willing to use the party machine in order to court an audience (and an electorate) that is not only broader than the party’s membership (as in electoral democracy) but also somehow *unpartisan*, in the sense that it is capable of catalyzing many different interests and ideas under the people’s leader.

In the last pages of his book, Manin suggests that the kind of representative democracy that would develop when the public sphere is no longer made of political parties and their partisan newspapers would be more in tune with the metaphor of the theater (the staged performance) than with the metaphor of the parliament (the talking assembly). In this new public sphere, proposed laws would no longer be the outcome of the art of coalition, compromise, haggling, and opposition among representatives of the majority and the minority. Manin confesses he does not know what to call this “new form of representation,” which he describes as being centered on representative personalities, instead of being centered on collective parties representing partisan lines. He sees that it involves representatives who are “no longer spokesmen” for ideas or classes or political programs but rather “actors seeking out and exposing cleavages” beyond and outside parties and partisan lines.⁸⁷ I propose we name this new form of representative government *populism*.

Interpretations

How does my interpretation of populism as a new form of representative government relate to existing scholarship on the phenomenon? The quantity and quality of scholarship recently produced on populism is intimidating for anyone who decides to embark on writing a book on the topic.⁸⁸ Things are made still more complex by the context-specific character of populist movements and governments, and by the variety of past and present populisms, which is extraordinary, and which goes beyond any individual’s capacity to subsume them into a general theory. With the exception of two pivotal global research projects dating back to the late 1960s and the late 1990s, and some later monographs, populism has generally been studied in relation to its specific contexts.⁸⁹ Contextual variations among countries and within countries, along with the polemical uses of the term in everyday politics, have hindered academic attempts to come up with conceptual definitions. Nonetheless, some basic agreement has now emerged about the ideological and rhetorical character of populism, about its relation to democracy, and about its strategy for achieving power.⁹⁰ I presuppose, and profit from, this rich body of scholarship in this book, but my explorations will be essentially theoretical. I will refer to concrete populist movements and regimes only for the purpose of illustration.

Contemporary scholarship on populism can be divided into two broad domains. The first is the domain of political history and comparative social

studies; the second is the domain of political theory and conceptual history. Work in the first domain attends to the circumstances or social and economic conditions of populism. It is concerned with the historical environment and specific developments of populism, and it is skeptical of the reliability of theorizing from empirical cases.⁹¹ Work in the second domain, by contrast, is mainly interested in populism itself: in its political nature and characteristics. It accepts with the first domain that sociohistorical experience is essential for understanding different varieties of populism, just as it is for understanding different varieties of democracy. But unlike studies of democracy, work in this first domain struggles to come to an agreement about what exactly the category of populism consists of because, as I have noted, populism is an ambiguous concept that does not correspond to a specific political regime. This means that the subtypes of populism that are produced by historical analysis risk locking scholars into the specific context they are studying, and risk making each subtype into a case of its own. The end result is many *populisms*, but no *populism*. Everything that sociohistorical analysis gains in its depth of study of specific experiences, it loses in generalization, and in normative criteria for judging those experiences. This means that we need a theoretical framework into which we can incorporate these context-specific analyses. Otherwise, we are stuck with contextual analyses that merely end with “half-hearted nods” to the idea of an exportable concept of populism.⁹²

One early attempt to combine contextual analysis and conceptual generalization appears in the taxonomy of the variations of types and subtypes of populism in relation to cultural, religious, social, economic, and political conditions, produced by writers including Ghița Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, and also by Canovan, who was a true pioneer in the study of populism.⁹³ Canovan used a broad range of sociological analyses inspired by Gino Germani and Torcuato di Tella, two Argentinian scholars (the former an exile from fascist Italy), who aimed to devise a descriptive category of populism.⁹⁴ Political sociologists Germani and di Tella argued that societies that lack a nationalist core, and that consist of heterogeneous ethnic groups, give rise to a need to “construct the people.” From their perspective, it is this task that makes populism into a functional project of nation-state construction and makes it the site of the “paradox of politics”: the challenge of constituting the subject of democracy—the people—*through democratic means*, or, more simply, the challenge of “determining who constitutes the people.”⁹⁵ Canovan took these two factors—the relation to political regimes and the conception of the people—to be the basic reference points that scholars would need if they wanted to interpret the conditions and circumstances of

specific populisms. She brought sociohistorical scholarship on populism into an exquisitely theoretical and normative domain and related it to issues of political legitimacy.

The theories of populism that currently dominate the literature fall into two main categories: *minimalist* theories and *maximalist* theories. Minimalist theories aim to sharpen the tools of interpretation that will enable us to recognize the phenomenon when we see it. They aim to extract some minimal conditions from several cases of populism for analytical purposes. Maximalist theories, by contrast, want to develop a theory of populism as representative construction that has more than a merely analytical function. Such theories claim to offer citizens a template they can follow to put together a collective subject that is capable of conquering the majority and ruling. This maximalist project, particularly in times of institutional crisis and declining legitimacy among traditional parties, can play a political role and help to reshuffle an existing democratic order.

I classify as minimalist all those interpretations of populism that analyze its ideological tropes (Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser), its style of politics in relation to rhetorical apparatus and national culture (Michael Kazin and Benjamin Moffitt), and the strategies devised by its leaders to achieve power (Kurt Weyland and Alan Knight). The goal of these endeavors is to avoid normative judgments for the sake of an unprejudiced understanding, and to be as inclusive as possible of all experiences of populism. Mudde has contributed the most to defining the ideological frame of this nonnormative minimalism. He argues that a Manichean “moral” worldview is what gives rise to the two oppositional camps of populism: the people, associated with an indivisible and moral entity; and the elites, conceived of as an entity that is unavoidably corrupt. Populism looks like “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups . . . and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people.”⁹⁶ Populist movements are capable of straddling the Left–Right divide and are populist because they make a moral appraisal of politics that elevates *la volonté générale* and demotes liberal respect for civil rights in general, and the rights of minorities in particular. Beyond the presence of this ideology opposing the “honest” many to the “corrupt” few, however, populism has few defining aspects. Indeed, for Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, populist parties do not even require specific leadership: “An elective affinity between populism and strong leaders seems to exist. However, the former can exist without the latter.”⁹⁷ Moreover, neither representation nor majority radicalization figures in their minimalist rendering of populism. The first step of the approach I adopt in this book consists in a critical reflection on this

minimalist rendering. There are three sets of critical observations that I make about this minimalist approach: two pertaining to its inability to distinguish populism from other political forms, and one pertaining to its normative implications.

To begin with, the ideological contraposition between the “honest” many and the “corrupt” few is not unique to populist parties and rhetoric. Certainly, it comes from an influential tradition that dated back to the Roman Republic of antiquity, the structure of which was based on a dualism between “the few” and “the many,” the “patricians” and the “plebeians.” This tradition was fueled by popular and proverbial mistrust in the ruling elites, with the people playing the role of a permanent check on them. The same ideological contraposition then became a central theme in republicanism, and we hear an echo of it in the writings of Machiavelli and other humanists.⁹⁸ But the minimalist reading of populism does not help us understand why populism is not simply a subspecies of republican politics, even though it is structured according to the same kind of binary logic.

Second, the dualism of “we are good”/“they are bad” is the motor of all forms of partisan aggregation, albeit with differing intensities and styles. But we cannot register all partisan aggregation as a subspecies of populist action unless we want to argue that all politics is populism. As I shall explain in Chapter 1, mistrust and criticism of those in power are essential components of democracy. In democratic contexts, majority rule and regular changes in leadership entail that parties in the opposition can (and actually do) depict the currently governing parties as corrupt, out-of-touch, and nonrepresentative elites. Stressing populism as a “political style,” as Kazin and Moffitt do, does not solve the problem. Even if this approach allows us to cross “a variety of political and cultural contexts,” it does not allow us to detect what is peculiar to populism vis-à-vis democracy.⁹⁹ The key limitation of the ideological and stylistic approaches lies in the fact that they are not sufficiently attentive to the institutional and procedural aspects that qualify democracy and within which populism emerges and operates. These approaches diagnose the emergence of the polarization between the many and the few; but they do not explain what makes the antiestablishmentarian focus of populism any different from what we find in the republican paradigm, or in traditional oppositional politics, or even in democratic partisanship.

The third objection I propose points to the untold (normative) assumptions that sustain this purportedly nonnormative approach. These assumptions pertain to the interpretation of democracy itself. The ideologically minimalist frame wants to avoid being normative—that is, defining populism as necessarily good or ill—so that it can be receptive to all empirical

instances of populism.¹⁰⁰ In order “to come to a non-normative position on the relationship between populism and democracy,” and to “argue that populism can be both a corrective and a threat to democracy,” Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser base their descriptivism on the assumption that there is a distinction between democracy and *liberal* democracy. This allows them to conclude that populism entertains an ambiguous relation with liberal democracy, but not with democracy in general. “In our opinion, democracy (*sans* adjectives) refers to *the combination of popular sovereignty and majority rule*; nothing more, nothing less. Hence, democracy can be direct or indirect, liberal or illiberal.”¹⁰¹ I propose that this definition is not, in fact, bias-free, because it suggests that—if not amended by liberalism—democracy is open to all the risks we attribute to populism. This assumption is made for the sake of a purely descriptive approach, but it necessarily has a normative effect because the “liberal” conception it attaches to the body of democracy has the task of making sure that democracy protects and fosters the good of liberty (individual liberty and basic rights), where this is understood as a function that liberalism can perform but democracy cannot. The decision to ascribe the value of liberty to liberalism, rather than democracy, fails to explain the democratic process itself. Moreover, the minimalist theory of populism presumes a view of democracy that includes a split between freedom and power. It claims that democracy is not a theory of freedom but only a theory of power: the power of the majority exercised in the name of popular sovereignty, whose control and containment come from outside—that is, from liberalism (which is a theory of liberty). On this account, democracy is an unconstrained system of people’s power, much like populism, and the real difference and tension are thus between populism and liberalism.

The last variant of the minimalist approach reads populism primarily as a strategic movement: populism is but a chapter in the ongoing strategy to substitute elites, and political content becomes much less relevant. So understood, populism is capable of varying from neoliberal to protectionist, and so attracting leftist as well as rightist ideologies, at least in theory. However, in his seminal article “Neoliberal Populism in Latin American and Eastern Europe,” Weyland demonstrates that what holds in theory may not hold in practice. Indeed, populist policies vary according to circumstances, so that populist leaders (e.g., Alberto Fujimori and Carlos Menem in Latin American, or Lech Walesa in Europe) occasionally use their popular support to enact painful, neoliberal reforms. The problem is that populism may be unsuitable for consolidating neoliberalism because, as Knight observes, populist leaders who are engaged in efforts to maintain their ruling power rarely delegate to the institutions that would allow neoliberalism to endure.¹⁰²

On this basis, Weyland argues that populism is “best defined as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers.”¹⁰³ Despite its grassroots discourse, for Weyland populism boils down to the manipulation of the masses by the elites. Moreover, even though it is held up as a blow against the corruption of the existing majority, it may well end up accelerating, rather than curing, corruption once in power because it needs to distribute favors and use the state’s resources to protect its coalition or majority over time.¹⁰⁴ According to this reading, populism in power turns out to be a machinery of corruption and nepotistic favors that deploys propaganda showing how difficult it is for it to deliver on its promises because of the ongoing conspiracy (both international and domestic) of an all-powerful, global kleptocracy. The most important aspect of this strategy-based reading consists in its observation that personalist politics mirrors populist parties, which are therefore primed to function more as movements than as traditionally organized parties. It is this feature that makes them more amenable to manipulation by the will of the leader, who is “a personal vehicle with a low level of institutionalization.”¹⁰⁵ This characterization takes a significant step in the direction I shall take in this book. It stresses the role of strategic organization—organization that above all serves to satisfy a new elite’s desire for power and, in so doing, transforms the institutions and the procedures of democracy into property-like instruments in the hand of the winner or the majority. The classic works of Gaetano Mosca, Robert Michels, Vilfredo Pareto, and C. Wright Mills offer us additional insights into the way populism works, into what it aims for, and into its results once it achieves power—in short, insights into its effects on representative constitutional democracy.

The strategic rendering may be persuasive and capacious, but it does not link populism directly to a transformation of democracy itself. Populism’s self-professed criterion for success is its ability to deliver what it proposes; but the strategic argument does not say much about how its possible success will affect democratic institutions and procedures.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, since electoral success is part and parcel of democracy, and since all parties aspire to a majority that is large and long lasting, the strategic rendering fails to make clear why populism is so different from, and so dangerous for, democracy more broadly. As I have suggested already and will reiterate throughout the book, in order to understand populism, we must recognize that democratic proceduralism is not merely a set of rules that defines the means and channels for achieving any kind of power. Nor is it merely a formalistic guide to victory (any kind of victory). Once we recognize this fact, we are able to see

the possessive approach that populism takes to power and the state, and to evaluate whether populism is compatible with the normative foundations of democratic procedures and institutions—the foundations that make these procedures and institutions function legitimately through time, and equally for all citizens.

Turning to the maximalist theory of populism, we see that it is driven by the move that explicitly connects populism to democracy. The maximalist theory, as I mentioned, offers not only a conception of populism in theory but also a practical template for populist movements and governments to follow. It proposes a discursive, constructivist conception of the people. The maximalist theory overlaps with the ideological conception insofar as it stresses the rhetorical moment; but unlike the ideological conception, it does not take populism to be based on a Manichean moral dualism between the people and the elite. Ernesto Laclau, who is the founder of the maximalist theory, makes populism the very name of politics and of democracy. For him, it is a process by which a community of citizens constructs itself freely and publicly as a collective subject (“the people”) that resists another (nonpopular) collective and opposes some existing hegemony so that it can itself take power.¹⁰⁷ Laclau sees populism as *democracy* at its best, because it represents a situation in which the people constructs its will through direct mobilization and consent.¹⁰⁸ He sees it also as *politics* at its best, because—as he shows, building on Georges Sorel’s voluntarism—it is constructed of myths that can mesmerize the audience and so unite many citizens and groups (and their claims) with nothing more than the art of persuasion. Voluntarism is the audacity of mobilization and a recurrent factor in moments of political transformation, and it can be both anarchical and oppositional, and power oriented.¹⁰⁹ Following Laclau, theorists of radical democracy base their sympathy for populism on the force of the popular will; they see populism as an answer to a formal conception of democracy, with its universalistic interpretation of rights and liberty, and as a rejuvenation of democracy from within that is capable of creating a new political bloc and a new leading force of democratic government.¹¹⁰ Political voluntarism (of a leader and his or her movement) is directed toward achieving victory; and government is the measure of its reward, once political action is not subjected to a formal conception of democracy. In a way, Vladimir Lenin’s *narodničestvo* is the underlying model of Laclau’s interpretation of modern populism as political voluntarism. It serves as evidence that “the people” is an entirely artificial entity. (Lenin forged the first definition of populism, which would become paradigmatic; traces of his ideological interpretation are detectable, for instance, in Berlin’s studies on Romanticism, nationalism, and populism.)¹¹¹ “The people,” Laclau writes, is an “empty

signifier” that has no grounding in any social structure and that is based exclusively on the leader’s ability (and the ability of his or her intellectuals) to exploit the dissatisfaction of many different groups and to mobilize the will of the masses, who believe that they lack adequate representation because their claims are going unheard by the existing political parties. Populism, then, is not simply an act of contesting the methods that the few are using to rule at some particular moment in time. Rather, it is a *voluntarist quest* for sovereign power by those whom the elites treat as “underdogs,” who want to make the decisions that shape the social and political order by themselves. These underdogs want to exclude the elites, and they ultimately want to win the majority so they can use the state to repress, exploit, or contain their adversaries and enact their own redistributive plans. Populism expresses two things at the same time: the denunciation of exclusion, on the one hand, and the construction of a strategy of inclusion *by means of* exclusion (of the establishment). It thus poses a serious challenge to constitutional democracy, given the promises of redistribution that the latter inevitably makes when it declares itself to be a government based on the equal power of the citizens.¹¹² The domain of generality as a criterion of legitimacy disappears in the constructivist reading of the people. Politics becomes essentially power seeking and power shaping; a phenomenon for which legitimacy consists simply in winning the political conflict and enjoying the consent of the audience. Laclau claims that populism demonstrates the formative power of ideology and the contingent nature of politics.¹¹³ On his reading, populism becomes the equivalent of a radical version of democracy: one that pushes back against the liberal-democratic model, which it sees as enhancing mainstream parties and weakening electoral participation.¹¹⁴

This radically realistic and opportunistic conception of politics, combined with the trust in the power of collective mobilization and political voluntarism, allows us to see that populism is artificial and contingent by nature. It also allows us to see the way in which the nebulous concept of “the people” is ultimately constructed, and to see how it is highly dependent on the leader and his or her knowledge of the sociohistorical context. This last factor cannot be overlooked: the leader’s knowledge (or lack of knowledge) and strategic skill (or lack of it) are the only limits on his or her ability to “invent” the representative “people.” The leader plays a demiurgic role. In stressing this radically open potential of populism, Laclau depicts it as the authentic democratic field in which a collective subject can find its representative unity through the interplay of culture and myth, sociological analysis and rhetoric.

But the problem with the linguistic (or narrative) turn in the theory of hegemony is that the structure of populism does not, by itself, incline toward

the kind of emancipatory politics that a leftist like Laclau would like to promote. Because it is so malleable and groundless, populism is just as well suited to be a vehicle for rightist parties as for leftist ones. Because it is so detached from socioeconomic referents, it “can in principle be appropriated by any agency for any political construct.”¹¹⁵ In the absence of any specific ideological assumptions about the social conditions, and in the absence of any normative conception of democracy, populism boils down to a tactic by which some leader can bring together a disparate set of groups in order to achieve a sort of power whose value is both contingent and relativist. Victory is the proof of its truthfulness. If we characterize democracy as essentially a consent-based strategy for gaining power, then Laclau’s characterization of populism (as a contest between coalitions that are knit together by a powerful leader and that compete for hegemonic control) ends up encompassing democratic politics in general. And yet anything can happen in the zero-sum game that is hegemonic politics. Assuming strategy without any social, procedural, or institutional limitations—because all that counts is victory—leads us to a situation in which all outcomes are equally possible and therefore equally acceptable. If we assume that democracy and politics both consist essentially of constructing the people through a narrative and the winning a majority of votes, we lose access to the critical tools that would lead us to judge a leader most effectively. In effect, what a successful leader does once in power is correct and legitimate insofar as and until the public is on his or her side.

As we shall see in this book, an agonistic view of politics—one that assumes politics is simply an issue of conflicting relation between adversaries—does not tell us much about what conflict delivers, nor about what happens once conflict is over and a populist majority rules. Laclau and Mouffe have provided the following definition of antagonism in one of their early writings on hegemony (which form the template for their later theory of populism):

But in any case, and whatever the political orientation through which the antagonism crystallizes (this will depend upon the chains of equivalence which construct it), *the form of the antagonism as such* is identical in all cases. That is to say, it always consists in the construction of a social identity—of an overdetermined subject position—on the basis of the equivalence between a set of elements or values which expel or externalize those others to which they are opposed. Once again, we find ourselves confronting the *division* of social space.¹¹⁶

This position amounts to a nonnormative realist account of politics and democracy. But it has some daunting questions to answer. What exactly does it mean to “expel” and “externalize” the adversary? Talk of “con-

fronting the *division* of the social space” does not tell us what will happen to those who end up on the outside of the victorious political configuration. From here, further questions arise. How does a populist regime make the legal condition and the social condition relate to one another? Do populist constitutions of democracy remain the same—and, crucially, do they include things like civil liberties and the separation of powers? Will the victory of the populist constellation be all that different from the victory of, say, a centrist constellation in terms of constitutional guarantees? If it will, once the establishment elites are “expelled” from the winning hegemonic collective, where are they supposed to go? If they are simply “sent to the benches” but retain the liberty to reorganize and take the majority back, then how is populism any different from Schumpeterian democracy? If we are going to see populist movements or parties conquer the majority within constitutional democracies, will we also see changes in the rules of the game, designed to make the populist majority last as long as possible? These are relevant questions that a theory of politics and democracy like Laclau and Mouffe’s must answer if its claim that populism is politics at its best is to be credible and warranted.

A Map of the Book’s Chapters

As I have said, in this book I assume a distinction between populism as a movement of opinion or protest and populism as a movement that aspires to and achieves power. I concentrate on the latter, and I study it by comparing it directly with representative democracy. My thesis, as I have already explained, is that populism in power is actually a new form of mixed government in which one part of the population achieves a preeminent power over the other(s). As such, populism *competes* with (and, if possible, modifies) constitutional democracy in putting forth a specific and distinctive representation of the people and the sovereignty of the people. It does so using what I call direct representation: the development of a direct relationship between the leader and the people.¹¹⁷ Direct presence, then, does not refer to the people ruling themselves (because populism is still a form of representative government); rather, it refers to an unmediated relationship between the people and the representative leader. The populist “mix” is based on two conditions: the identity of the collective subject, and the specific traits of the representative leader who embodies that subject and makes it visible. These two conditions confute the electoral conception of representation (understood as a dynamic and open combination of pluralism and unification). It turns out, though, that this populist mix is very

unstable, because it weakens the connective and power-checking functions of intermediary actors (such as political parties and institutions) and makes them dependent on the leader's will and exigency.

Taken together, the four chapters of this book trace out how populism in power transforms and, indeed, disfigures, representative democracy. In Chapter 1 I analyze the category of "antiestablishment" as the "spirit" of populist rhetoric and goal, and I map out the transformation from a position that is antiestablishmentarian to one that is *antipolitics*. I show how this remains the central content of populism whether it is oriented in a left- or right-wing direction. And, borrowing Pierre Rosanvallon's opportune terminology, I show how populism takes advantage of the mechanisms of "negative politics" or "counterdemocracy" that constitutional democracy guarantees.¹¹⁸ I propose that populist rhetoric and movement develops essentially in the negative. Its content includes several "antis," held together by the category of "antiestablishmentarianism," which populism renders and uses in quite a different way from democracy (even though democracy also contains an antiestablishment drive). Populism accumulates these negatives not simply to question an existing government or a corrupt elite and achieve a majority but to attain the more radical outcome: that of expelling the "wrong" part completely and installing the "good" part in its place. From this perspective, populism is really a chapter in the broader issue of a political elite's formation and substitution.

In Chapter 2 I analyze how populism in power is primed to transform the two fundamentals of democracy: the people and the majority. The meaning of the people for populism is quite different from the general, indeterminate meaning of the people that belongs to constitutional democracy. The democratic meaning of the people includes all citizens, and it is not identified with any part of society in particular. The meaning of the majority for populism is also different from its meaning for democracy. Populism does not use the majority as a method to detect the victorious part of a competition for government and the size of the opposition. Instead, it uses it as a force that claims to be the expression of the right people—and that is legitimized to dwarf and humiliate the opposition. This means that changes in power become difficult—a situation that is, indeed, a central goal of populism in power. I argue that populism identifies the people with "a part" of society, making the majority the ruling force of that part against the other part(s). This is certainly a radical disfigurement of representative democracy, because it violates the synecdoche of *pars pro toto*, pitting one part (which is assumed to be the best one) against the other(s). The logic of populism, indeed, is the glorification of one part, or *merelatria* (from the Greek words *méros*, or "part," and *latreía*, or "cult"), with no pretense of universality or

generality. It occupies the institutions in order to further the interests of a part, which does not act “for” and in the name of the whole but in its place; the part erases the whole and makes politics a question of partiality. Populism is an essentially *factional* government, the government by a part of society that rules for its own good, needs, and interests. As such, populism in power becomes a radical contestation of party government and mandate representation: in a word, a contestation of representative democracy as party democracy. It ascribes a radically relativist stance to politics, one that justifies (via majority consent) the *reductio ad unum* of populism with politics and ultimately with democracy in general. This identification can materialize in the celebration of the total creative power of rhetoric (of the “good” people), which is conceived of as the essential means for the construction of a collective subject under the banner of one representative leader, who claims to be the mouth of “the will of the people.”

In Chapter 3 I turn to examine this disfigurement of the procedural conception of “the people” into a possessive conception of that people. I analyze the ways in which a populist system comes to be constructed through the leader, the elections, and the party—categories that become so transformed that “representation” plays a role in populism that is very different from the one it plays in constitutional democracy. In populism, representation unifies the collective under the figure of the leader. Unlike the mandate representation that appears in electoral democracy, it does not look out for advocacy (of interests or ideas or preferences), and it is not concerned with accountability. By representing the people in the body of the leader, populism aims to unify multiple groups, and multiple claims, in order to achieve a strong, large consensus, in both the state and society. It does not merely want to give voice to diverse groups and their claims; rather, it wants to use as its issues whatever the voice of the leader embodies. Populism is a form of antipartyism. It turns representation into a strategy for creating a centralized authority, which claims to speak in the name of a holistic people while being inclusive of some and dismissive (and at times repressive) of those who are at the margins (either because they do not consent or because they belong to a culture, class, or ethnic group that does not conform to the one being represented in the populist government and its majority).

Chapter 4 brings the main arguments of the book to their conclusion. It defines and illustrates the *direct representation* that populism fosters in its attempts to go beyond partisan oppositions and to reaffirm a unitary representation of the people. This chapter explores two contemporary cases of populist movements, both of which purport to be, and were born as, anti-party movements, and both of which framed themselves as existing outside the traditional Left–Right distinction: the Italian Five Star Movement (M5S)

and the Spanish Podemos. These are very different political groups with almost opposing projects and narratives and very different political trajectories. Yet what interests me here is to examine their foundational moments: moments when both of them projected themselves as existing beyond the Left–Right divide and envisioned something they considered to be postparty democracy. These cases serve to test populism’s ambitions to confirm and solve Michels’s disillusionment with party democracy. Populist movements practice adversarial politics so they can form a government that promises to administer the people’s true interests, beyond partisan divisions. Populism in power looks like a postpartisan government, one that claims to serve the interests of the ordinary many and promises never to produce an establishment of professional politicians. Its ambiguity lies precisely in this ambition. Populist movements manifest in intense partisanship while they are rallying against existing parties, but their inner ambition is to incorporate the largest possible number of individuals in order to become the only party of the people and so dwarf all partisan affiliations and party oppositions. Chapter 4 explores the fact that, even weakening organization in this way, the people still do not receive any guarantee that they will be able to check their leader.

I am skeptical about the palingenetic promises of populism as much as I am skeptical about the apocalyptic prophecies about the destiny of democracy. In the Epilogue, I clarify the political motivations behind my research and skepticism, which are connected to a recent wave of sympathetic interest in populism: one in which populism is seen not simply as a sign of troubles that belabor contemporary democracies but as an opportunity to make democracy better, or to regenerate it. I explore it as a potential “advanced trench” in fights by citizens to reappropriate their power, to influence the distribution of income, and to redress inequality. In short, I examine it as an attempt to redesign representative democracy in order to rid it of its more or less inexorable slide into elected oligarchy. I take these populist aspirations seriously and examine the aims they have to give priority to the majority in order to demote the power of parties and economic minorities. But I conclude that if we conceive of the battle between the many and the few in this way, we risk ending at precisely the point that Aristotle warned his contemporaries about: with the creation of a factional government that is no more than an arbitrary expression of the will to power of the ruling force (whether that force is controlled by the many or the few). Paradoxically, the populist ambition to transcend Left–Right divisions is an indication of this process of factionalism, not a reversal of it. Analyzing populism in power, I conclude that populism is by no means a neutral strategy. As such, it cannot be a tool whose use may be curbed as one pleases, toward reformism and conservatism, Left and

Right. It is not simply “a style of politics,” either, because in order to be successful, populism has to transmute the basic democratic principles and rules. And in so doing, it leads politics and the state toward outcomes that citizens can hardly control. The path that populism takes is inevitably a path toward the exaltation and entrenchment of a leader and his or her majority, and this for the simple reason that its success is contingent on the leader’s authority over the people and its parts. This may set populism on a collision course with constitutional democracy, even while its main tenets remain embedded in the democratic universe of meanings and language.