



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI TORINO



UNIVERSITÉ
SAVOIE
MONT BLANC

***Democratic Populism in the Margins: Countering anti-immigration populism
through democratic praxis***

Workshop: Université Savoie Mont Blanc, Chambéry, 23rd-24th June 2022



This project takes as a starting point the need to adopt a ‘reinvigorationist approach’ as opposed to an ‘insulationist/elitist approach’ to populist trends (Copson, 2016). Whilst the latter entails insulating policy-making from the public and confining it to the ‘experts’, the former entails taking populism seriously and opening up democratic debate to popular deliberation. Reinvigorationist democratic politics reject populist politics that oppose democratic pluralism and personalise power, yet they take seriously the demands inherent in the ‘populist moment’ (Mouffe, 2018). Whilst these demands may be heterogeneous, just like those making them, they commonly focus on greater representativity and accountability in politics. Rather than taking these demands seriously, populist politicians (including those who are often regarded as ‘mainstream’ or ‘centrist’) use populist tropes as a cynical tactic to win votes by appearing to respond directly to public concerns and insecurities. It is a form of discourse that denigrates the opinion of experts in favour of what is claimed to be that of ‘the people’. Yet, ‘the people’ are routinely misinformed, and they are not incorporated in public debate or involved in the policy-making process in any meaningful way. As such, populist *politics* as they are most commonly practised are a real threat to democracy. By adopting unduly harsh penal and immigration policies (today often one and the same), they have a negative effect on ‘political participation, the formation of civic identities and the associational life of impacted communities’ (Dzur, Loader and Sparks, 2016, p.8). Indeed, whilst left-wing populists exist, populist politics today tend to be dominated by the Right and centre-right and are characterised by their exclusionary rather than their inclusionary nature, seeking as they do to exclude certain groups of people from the democratic polity, and often disregarding basic human rights in the process. The normalisation of anti-immigration populism needs to be understood in this context.

Indeed, by instrumentalising popular concerns about immigration, populist politicians tend to fuel sentiments of ‘placeism’, associated with ‘a fierce sense of territoriality and.... a generalized suspicion of outsiders of all kinds’ (Evans, 2017, 217). It is a sentiment which has been effectively exploited by right-wing parties on the margins and then repackaged by mainstream parties keen to present themselves as being more ‘in tune’ with popular concerns and simultaneously to stave off the electoral threat from the extreme right. Yet, in doing so, they promote a ‘descending’ nationalism (Hall 1993, 355) defined from above which excludes ordinary people from the democratic process of defining the contours of national identity, despite appearing to be responding directly to their concerns.

Those interested in reinvigorationist politics should take placeism seriously, as it is inextricably linked to populist concerns about sovereignty – about reasserting territorial control as a means to promote representativity and accountability. A focus on ‘place’, particularly on the marginal or rural place that is often considered to be ignored by national and supra-national politics, might promote a radically different form of nationalism to anti-immigrant cultural nationalism commonly promoted by populist politicians. This would be an ‘ascending’ nationalism (Hall 1993), defined from below and associated with the everyday practices of ordinary people rather than with the institutions of the State. Democratic involvement can itself become a way of expressing one’s identity and pride in the nation. Yet, such involvement is meaningless if confined to voting every few years in elections or in a referendum. It must be something that is integrated into people’s daily lives, that starts at the level of community and works upwards to the level of national institutions. Indeed, feelings of identity and belonging have always been rooted in the

community first and in the nation second. This is not about rejecting existing institutions – that is the stuff of anti-establishment populism – but rather about transforming them from below so that they can work better in the national interest. Such thinking draws on Raymond Williams who believed that nationalism did not have to be about the nation state – which he considered as essentially regressive. For Williams, a positive nationalism is linked not to the unitary state but rather grounded in the ‘politics of place’ (1984). The sentiment of ‘placeism’ identified by Evans (2017) does not therefore have to lead to negative, nativist nationalism. Attachment to place can encourage new forms of democratic participation aimed at tackling issues which affect the locality, whilst participation in local politics can help to reinforce attachment to place. Thus, there exists a positive symbiotic relationship between a locally-based nationalism and reinvigorationist politics. Given that localities – cities and regions – are ‘natural units of government’ (Williams 1984, 372), what happens there necessarily relates to wider issues that affect the nation as a whole. In this way, local politics necessarily impact upon the national, potentially challenging anti-immigration populism from the ground up.

The workshop aims to explore and test the validity of this hypothesis. Drawing on recent research into the foundational economy (Barbera & Jones, 2020), it is postulated that favouring democratic praxis through participation in citizen collectives will encourage a moral approach to citizenship that does not just treat citizens as mere consumers of basic goods and services – or of politics, for that matter. This might in turn lead to a new conception of the public interest over that of the individual. Rather than regarding migrants as competitors for scarce public resources, they might instead be regarded as fellow citizens with human needs and agency. Reciprocal recognition could be fostered whereby moral authority is invested in all citizens, regardless of status, to shape communal life (Honneth, 2020; Barbera, 2021).

The reinvigorationist response to populism might be regarded as just another reiteration of populism, albeit in a progressive, inclusive, liberal and democratic guise. Certainly, it does hark back to early notions of populism such as that found in the late 19th century People’s Party in the United States (Jäger, 2018). Yet, contrary to most contemporary populist parties, it aims to be pluralistic, finding ways of incorporating *all* members of a polity in local associational politics. It also necessarily avoids the personalisation of power, dispersing power as far as possible throughout civil society rather than concentrating it at the centre. It is democratic populism in the sense that it harnesses the demands of the populist moment to foster radical democratic renewal.

Participants in the workshop are asked to submit a short abstract for their papers (300 words) by **1st April 2022** to Emma.Bell@univ-smb.fr and Filippo.Barbera@unito.fr. Once accepted, they will then be asked to submit full papers (of approximately 6,000 words) by **9th June 2022**. It is hoped this organisation will facilitate informed discussion among those present at the workshops. 6-7 papers (finalised version of which will need to reach us by 1st September) will be selected for publication in the journal *Sociologica* in January 2023. Papers not selected for publication in *Sociologica* will nonetheless lay the groundwork for a more long-term collaborative project on how democratic praxis may be used to enrich the public debate on immigration in marginal areas.

References

- Barbera, Filippo (2021) 'Polycentric Voices: Call for a European urban/rural balance', *Eurozine*, 24 March 2021 (<https://www.eurozine.com/polycentric-voices> : accessed 08/12/2021)
- Barbera, Filippo and Rees Jones, Ian (2020) *The Foundational Economy and Citizenship: Comparative Perspectives on Civil Repair*. Bristol; Policy Press.
- Copson, L. (2016), 'After Penal Populism: Punishment, Democracy and Utopian Method', in Dzur, A. W., Loader, I. and Sparks, R., *Democratic Theory and Mass Incarceration*. Oxford. OUP: 162-186.
- Dzur, A. W., Loader, I. and Sparks, R. (2016), *Democratic Theory and Mass Incarceration*. Oxford. OUP.
- Evans, Gillian (2017) "Brexit Britain: Why we are all postindustrial now." *American Ethnologist* 44(2): 215-219.
- Evans, Gillian (2012) "'The aboriginal people of England': The culture of class politics in contemporary Britain", *Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 62: 17–29
- Hall, Stuart (1993) "Culture, Community, Nation". *Cultural Studies* 7(3): 349-363.
- Honneth, Alex (2020) *Recognition: A Chapter in the History of European Ideas*. Cambridge University Press.
- Jäger, Anton (2018) "The Myth of 'Populism'", *Jacobin*, 3 January.
- Mouffe, Chantal (2018) *For a Left Populism*, London, Verso.
- Williams, Raymond (1984) "Decentralism and the Politics of Place: An interview with Raymond Williams." Interviewer: P. Cooke. *Environment and Planning, Society and Space* 2: 369-74.