Marina Calloni

Alexander Bodini Fellow in Transitions from Globalism to
Nationalism and Populism,
Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America - Columbia
University.
Professor in Social and Political Philosophy, University of
Milano-Bicocca.

What do the people want?
The clash of irreconcilable populisms in Italy.
The case of the Five Stars Movement and of the Lega

Abstract

In recent years, globalization processes have left room for both nationalist tendencies and populist trends, casting the people in opposition to the power of the ruling elites. In the context of the international debate on populism and democracy, the aim of this paper is not only to indicate the existing varieties of different forms of populism, but to make their irreconcilable and contradictory nature emerge. In this regard, two Italian parties--the Five Stars Movement (M5S) and the Lega--will be examined in relation to the use and abuse of the ideas of "the people" and of "the Italians" as being too generic and diffuse. The failure of the national governmental coalition they initiated will be analyzed in light of the fragility of their common program, which revealed the generic character of the propaganda-slogan "what the people want," which was reinforced by sophisticated algorithms and rising social media. The national emergency of the Covid-19 pandemic has radically changed the Italian political, social and economic scenario, of course, highlighting not only the emptiness of previous political frameworks and the crisis of

populist demagogic propaganda, but also the need to rethink democratic legitimacy. What do the Italian people really want? The answer is: "the truth." Yet what does truth mean in a pandemic crisis? Despite the uncertainty and different kinds of scientific, health, social, economic and political interventions at both national and international levels, there is, because of this still little-known virus, one indubitable radical truth: the death and sickness of thousands of people.

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"No matter how large the tissue of falsehood that an experienced liar has to offer,
it will never be large enough, even if he enlists the help of computers,
to cover the immensity of factuality."
H. Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 1972, p. 7

Introduction

In my long life as a researcher I have never had to modify research questions so many times as in the case I am about to analyze. Abrupt historical-political transformations have forced me from time to time to integrate analytical perspectives and information: radical changes which occurred in the real world have become so rapid that theories seem to be inadequate to grasp them.

I started from trying to understand why forms of nationalism and populism had replaced globalization so quickly. Since the field was too vast, I focused my attention on the Italian case and in particular on two parties, the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S, 5 Stars Movement) and the Lega (League), which I defined as populist parties because of the continuous propaganda over the years, with words like *il popolo* (the people) and *gli Italiani* (The Italians). The two parties decided to form a national governing ("yellow-green") coalition, so that I had to consider their common political program. While I was getting ready to organize the work, the M5S - Lega government (with Giuseppe Conte as Prime Minister) fell after only 15 months, so my interest had to shift to the analysis of the reasons that caused the clash within the government because of the irreconcilability of the two populist conceptions and parties. In order to understand possible developments of populism, I started to study the program of the new center-left coalition which replaced the yellow-green government (with Conte, again, as Prime Minister). The M5S remained in power and the Lega shifted to the parliamentary opposition. Finally, while I was finishing this work, the epidemiological catastrophe of Covid-19 broke out, disrupting the previous programs of both government and parties. The question

initially raised became: What could the populist national slogan *Italians first* mean, in a global tragedy? What could the "will of the people" mean practically, in the face of a tragedy which is radically changing our lives as a result of the constant danger of being infected?

The pandemic crisis determines the need for rethinking new forms of democratic legitimacy in the face of a changing epochal paradigm in Western civilization. Fear is real, while until a few months ago it was fictitiously represented as a reaction against invading migrants. Security cannot be reduced to a matter of closed borders. It relates to the necessity of reinventing democratic politics based on the concrete care and psycho-physical well-being of any person. Very different from referring to 'de-substantialized' fake people.

This paper tries to reconstruct these complex interconnections with the aim of underlining that--in the case of real emergencies--populist parties are unable to support propaganda-imaginaries or to destabilize the structures of liberal constitutions unless they become illiberal and authoritarian. What the people want in cases of emergency is simply the truth, along with real measures for the protection of health, political strategies, economic measures, scientific evidence and cultural interventions.

In order to support this thesis, the main topics at the core of this paper are: I. A brief reconstruction of the international debate on populism. II. Origin and transformation of the Lega. III. The political novelty of the M5S. IV. The fragility of pluri-mixed populisms. V. The role of propaganda via social media. VI. Anti-populism in the epidemiological emergency.

The Italian case, therefore, fundamentally contributes to political theory not only because it offers the opportunity of understanding the reasoning which determined the failure of a multi-populist experiment based on propaganda in the first place with meetings and via social media, but also because it shows the necessity of verifying the consistency of political legitimacy against fake populisms as a result of the resilience of people in times of emergency, who demand truth and factual transformative actions.