ITALIAN POLITICS BETWEEN MULTIPOPULISM AND DEPOLITICIZATION

LA POLÍTICA ITALIANA ENTRE EL MULTIPOPULISMO Y LA DESPOLITIZACIÓN

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to propose an interpretative key to Italy's populist shift in a context of multipopulism. The authors try to analyze the main populist phenomena that have animated Italian politics as variants of the same schema whose point of commonality lies in a shared civil matrix. The hermeneutic thesis is based on the fact that the pattern of multipopulism in Italy has been determined by a succession of populist variants that have only one factor in common: belonging to civil society and, consequently, a marked antipolitical inclination. This anti-political mass attitude and the subsequent cases of populism are associated to the depoliticization process in Italy. By depoliticization the authors mean a set of changes in the ways political power is exercised in the neoliberal era by legitimizing actors less able to witness the presence of the "political".

Keywords

Anti-Politics; Depoliticization; Italian Politics; Neoliberalism; Populism.

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es proponer una clave interpretativa del cambio populista de Italia en un contexto de multipopulismo. Los autores intentan analizar los principales fenómenos populistas que han animado a la política italiana como variantes del mismo esquema, cuyo punto en común se encuentra en una matriz civil compartida. La tesis hermenéutica se basa en el hecho de que el patrón de multipopulismo en Italia ha sido determinado por una sucesión de variantes populistas que tienen un solo factor en común: pertenecer a la sociedad civil y, en consecuencia, una marcada inclinación antipolítica. Esta actitud antipolítica de masas y los casos posteriores de populismo están asociados al proceso de despolitización en Italia. Por despolitización, los autores se refieren a un conjunto de cambios en las formas en que se ejerce el poder político en la era neoliberal legitimando a los actores menos capaces de presenciar la presencia de lo "político".

Palabras Clave

Anti política; Despolitización; Neoliberalismo; Política italiana; Populismo.

1. Introduction

Populism is a component of contemporary democracies, not only in the Western world but also globally. Carlos de La Torre has recently argued for a global populism that involves democracies in the North and the South, both the most stable and the less democratized (De La Torre 2018).This conviction permeates the entire contribution we are presenting here. It is the product of the crisis of liberal democracy, challenged by the dynamics of transnationalization of economic, political and social processes that have contributed, alongside the crisis of the old philosophies of history, to the weakening of national political institutions, reducing the capacity of state political classes to interpret the stratification of interests in rapidly changing societies.

In Italy this phenomenon is particularly striking but almost everywhere the political classes have identified a way out of the crisis by calling, sometimes even through specific measures (i.e. electoral laws), for a radical personalization of politics that, while on the one hand cannot be confused with populism, on the other is undoubtedly one of its major prerequisites. This is because there is no populist phenomenon that does not rely on the ability of a charismatic leader to convey, through specific rhetorical modalities, the populist message.

With this last statement we do not mean that populism is reduced merely to a communicative modality or to a leader's political style (Kazin 1995; Laclau 2005; Panizza 2005). Rather, we believe that a populist leader (micro dimension) could never succeed without the presence of a "populist movement" (meso dimension), which can take different forms, and of a "populist society" (macro dimension), thus receptive to the messages that tend to be anti-establishment. But while populism is not a mere rhetorical strategy, it is necessary to conceptualize it to understand the lens through which we observe the Italian case, which we have already defined as "multipopulist" in the title of this paper.

Scholars have not yet reached agreement on a shared definition (Mény and Surel 2001; 2002). The concept of populism is in fact vague and slippery (Taggart 2000) and in many respects chameleonic (Canovan 1981). There is a wide and complex debate on the theories of populism ranging from the theories of Gino Germani on populism and modernization, through to Pippa Norris and Inglehart (Anselmi 2017). This is why we distrust those who describe it as a sort of ideology, or even a thin ideology (Mudde 2007) borrowing the expression that Freeden applied to nationalism (Freeden 2003).

If we accept the idea that by ideology we essentially mean "Systems of explicit, integrated, and consistent beliefs necessary to justify the exercise of power, explain and judge historical events, identify what is good and what is bad in politics, define the relationship between the political and other fields of activity, and provide a guide to action" (McClosky 1964: 362), or a "set of ethical principles that define the objectives, the organization and the boundaries of political life, offering an interpretation of the past, an explanation of the present and a vision of the future" (Easton 1965: 290), we understand that every populist phenomenon shares only some aspects with ideologies, but not other fundamental characteristics. By accepting the definition of Edward Shils (1968), we can say that an ideology, to be such, needs the following aspects:

a) An explicit formulation; b) A high level of integration and systematicity; c) The claim of a difference compared to other belief systems; d) Some resistance to innovation, therefore a certain dogmatism; e) Some imperativity with which obedience is demanded; f) A strong emotional charge; g) A total consensus; h) The authoritative character that its members give to its every proclamation; i) The strong connection to some form of collective organization (party, movement, group, etc.).

In this article, bearing in mind the existing multiplicity of theoretical approaches to the subject of populism, each of which highlights a functional aspect of the phenomenon, we will use a minimum conception of populism (Anselmi 2017). Our idea is that populism is a specific configuration of political consensus that can take different forms depending on the context but have some common characteristics: the existence of a people's community, a Manichaean communicative structure and a leadership that is directly linked to the people's community. There is, however, a further characteristic that concerns contemporary neopopulisms. As Taguieff has already pointed out, contemporary neopopulisms have spread above all because of the profound change in the structures of politics, which have undergone strong media coverage and an accentuated spectacularization that has led to phenomena of personalization of politics and de-ideologization. The mediatization of public space and politics has produced an epoch-making disintermediation between rulers and ruled, determining the populist configuration as the prevailing political option (Taguieff 2004; 2006).

In this regard, the Italian case is undoubtedly emblematic since there are in fact no parties that cannot be traced back to the category of populism. Since the first half of the '90s, with the collapse of the old party system due, above all, to corruption scandals (della Porta and Vannucci 1997; 1999), new actors have appeared on the Italian political scene (primarily Forza Italia and Lega Nord), triggering a long populist season the influence of which on all the other movements and parties of the constitutional framework justifies our idea of the Italian situation as a multipopulist one.

In our paper we will focus on the three best known cases, the "ethnopopulism" of the Northern League,

the "telepopulism" of Forza Italia and the more recent "webpopulism" of the Five Star Movement, inserting them within the wider framework of de-politicization that we believe to be one of the processes that have most contributed to the weakening of the traditional political classes in Europe and in Italy. This justifies, on the one hand, a growing anti-political sentiment (macro-social dimension) in society and, on the other, the tendency of some actors to obtain consensus through the construction of populist practices and strategies in politics. As we will see in the next two sections, when we talk about depoliticization we mean the transformations of public action and the dynamics of governance in the neoliberal era. In many respects, depoliticization and neoliberalism are two concepts that often overlap. Obviously, here we cannot support the thesis that populism is the consequence of depoliticization. It would be a false assumption, also because populism in its variants is an ancient phenomenon that historically precedes neoliberalism. We assert instead that the crisis of the classical ideologies, depoliticization (or neoliberalism) and economic crisis (hence social malaise) together produce a mixture that intensifies the distance between civil society and political classes and the development of an anti-political sentiment on the part of society that is the fundamental social ingredient of every populist phenomenon.

Our attempt is thus to propose an interpretative key of the Italian shift to populism in a context of multipopulism. We will therefore try to analyze the main populist phenomena that have animated Italian politics as variants of the same schema of which the point of commonality lies in the shared civic matrix. Our hermeneutic thesis is in fact based on the fact that the pattern of multipopulism in Italy has been determined by a succession of populist variants that have only one factor in common: belonging to civil society and, consequently, a marked antipolitical inclination.

2. DEPOLITICIZATION AS THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY POPULISM

When we talk about depoliticization, we are not referring to the various theories about depoliticization on the part of society and citizens, described in terms of individualization and atomization. In this paper, by depoliticization we mean a set of changes in the ways political power is exercised in the neoliberal era (Burnham 2001; 2017; de Nardis 2017), by legitimizing actors less able to witness the presence of the "political". Nowadays, representative politics appears less responsible for the choices, with the related costs and failures that influence the regulation of society, since economic and cultural processes acquire the characteristics of necessity or "inevitability". Depoliticization is affirmed in various ways. In

particular, in the European context, we can observe a "governmental", a "discursive" and a "social" depoliticization (Hay 2007).

Governmental de-politicization itself has various faces that mainly concern the polity aspect (Jessop 2014) and the relationships between government and governance. It consists of shifts in decision-making from elective arenas and offices to settings presented as neutral and objective because they are distant from institutional politics (Flinders 2008): central banks, independent regulatory authorities, various agencies (Burnham 1999; Hay 2007; Kettel 2008), as well as public service companies that have been privatized and made dependent on the market and the interference of politicians and their short-term optics dictated by electoral rhythms (Flinders and Buller 2006a). These slippages define depoliticization as one of the effects of a meta-governance which re-regulates governance (Jessop 2011; Fawcett and Marsh 2014).

Another power shift, implemented through decisions by governments and national parliaments, benefits actors of a higher and non-elective scale, such as strong (intergovernmental) bodies and European Union procedures (i.e. Fiscal Compact) and produces various forms of compliance with international agreements and standards, whose enforcement is the task of technical agents and tools. Some examples: the obligation for EU governments to have public finance decisions approved by the Commission in its dual technical and political capacity before presenting them to their parliaments (Cavatorto and Ferreri 2015); for other regions of the world, the conditionalities of IMF and WB, the constraints coming from WTO agreements (Flinders and Buller 2006b) and its "courts", as well as from other sources of legal regulation deriving from bi- or multi-lateral forms of international agreement, often implemented through expertise (Huggins 2015); the technocratic fine-tuning and the imposition of good governance regulatory models on, among others, the countries of the Eastern-European transition; the sanctions indirectly imposed by rating agencies and operators of global financial speculation in relation to public finance policies. These shifts concentrate powers outside state politics and also urge a de-empowerment of the political actors affected by them (Burnham 2001; Kettel 2008; Wood and Flinders 2014).

Another side of the phenomenon is the adoption of meta-decisions that make it impossible to take other decisions later, tying the hands of decision makers (Flinders and Buller 2006a; 2006b). For example, constitutionalizing the budget balance obligation depoliticizes national economic policies, whose task is reduced to monitoring and adjusting the route with measures that fall within pre-set standards.

The technicalization of political processes is another important part of depoliticization, with the assignment of

regulatory effects and allocation of resources to technologies such as evaluation, with its "primacy of numbers" or technical procedures to support political action that make the choices evidence-based and divorced from ideologies and social pressures, such as Regulatory Impact Analysis, mandatory in Italy for every law, or "data driven decision making", based on the idea that those who make decisions in the public sphere cannot ignore the movements [data driven innovation] taking place in the commercial sector (Bove 2014).

The "technicians" become the protagonists, sometimes called on to perform functions of "depoliticized politics" directly, as in governments of national unity, legitimized in the name of emergencies and exceptionality, for which representation and consent have no relevance, while the professional skills and reliability of supra-national markets and institutions are important.

A discursive depoliticization results in the convergence of preferences (Flinders and Buller 2006a) towards a single cognitive construction of reality (frame for public actions). It is no coincidence that the prevailing paradigm in the contemporary liberal political economy has been narrated in the form of "single thought" [there is no alternative], demonstrating the cultural hegemony of financial capitalism. Policies become inevitable responses without rational alternatives. Especially in Europe, the fading of programmatic differences between the right and the left is a consequence and evidence of this type of depoliticization. The convergence is aided by the communication of imaginaries and knowledge brands (Jessop 2009; Sum and Jessop 2013) endowed with high valence, a sort of influence of pre-rational emotional states involving individuals, political decision-makers and epistemic communities on the acceptance or refusal of an idea relating to a policy and seductiveness, i.e. a specific normative force, exercised by indicating what to aspire to. These are forms of communication and construction of meanings based on appeals or slogans (Wood 2015), which refer to (good) common sense imbued with moral or ethical values.

Consensus is mobilized around assumptions whose social acceptability cannot be questioned, thus legitimizing unquestionable paradigms. The prevailing ones highlight various aspects of the primacy of regulation throughout the market. For example, everything is narrated as efficient, flexible, innovative, smart. These lures can guide, legitimize and incentivize both public actions and individual and social behaviors, such as sustainable lifestyles and consumption patterns, which represent depoliticized responses to collective developmental challenges (Hay 2007). Conversely, this also is applied to what is unacceptable and subject to stigma: first and foremost, everything - debt, expenditure, administration, social conflict - is public.

With depoliticization the contradictions of regulation are reduced to policy problems managed by experts and participatory processes with a predefined outcome (Swyngedouw 2007; Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014). Actions are addressed through the construction of meaning horizons and the indication of collective goals in the form of "public truth" by non-political actors (Jessop 2014, 2011).

The governance season initiated at the same time as the orientation of public policies to the market has seen the formal inclusion of companies in cooperative processes and public-private partnerships (Willems et al. 2017). These have produced both business-friendly regulations and isomorphism of depoliticized public action with the market and its actors. It is perceived above all by focusing on the local scale. The representation of cities as actors endowed with a system of collective decision-making, common interests, mechanisms of integration, and capacity for innovation, translated operationally into the regulatory framework underlying the reforms of metropolitan governance, is shaped around the company model.

Companies, including "social" ones, in seeking and nurturing new markets and assuring them through relations with local governments, try to guide collective action through a specific capacity for ideas. The pro-business regulations aim at acquiring consensus and legitimacy by presenting themselves as capable of defining patented solutions through the market and technologies for collective problems (environment, quality of life, economic development, participation, mobility, social inclusion, etc.). These are placed within broader meaning systems, often designed by world-renowned gurus and processed in ITC transnational corporations, adapted to local retail markets and recognized and institutionalized by transnational and national policies. The sense of inevitability and naturalization of these technical solutions resides in their being manifestly rational and preferable to ineffective models and sources of waste and malaise, both individual and collective.

The messages are transmitted through advertising and seductive representations of a desirable society (intelligent, sustainable, supportive, happy). The hegemonic functionality of these imaginaries is expressed in a preference-shaping in which the interests of the business, or the organization of community action in the form of a company, allow the achievement of general environmental and social objectives. In this way, it is possible to bring back within the horizons of market sense the reformulation of rights that in the past was the focus of conflicting demands in civil society. The frame tends to overlap and mutually reinforce that of the European scale: the issues are of collective interest, defined as factors of productivity, competitiveness and social cohesion, and resilience in crisis.

Reducing complexity through this win-win imaginary forms an original mediation between general

and private interests, citizenship and profits. In this way, the depoliticization of government is fueled by new forms of politicization of market actors, who present themselves as being also capable of solving social problems, or by making sure that those who want to face social problems take the form and culture of a market player. The companies are politicized, since they play a role that is not only complementary to politics, but also a substitute. For example, in the Smart City, companies do not only provide ways to establish how to deal with individual and collective needs, but also managerial models of strategic management to coordinate the optimization of local resources and the allocation of community funds.

3. Depoliticization and populism in Italy

With depoliticization, the space of politics and state intervention does not vanish. However, government processes become less transparent (Burnham 2017; Foster et al. 2014) and, at the same time, more rapid and less expensive for the elites. If science or technology say that there are no alternatives, it makes no sense to negotiate in parliaments with organized interests, so the variety of subjects removed from the risks of the assembly ballot and the electoral judgment grows. In the public sphere, this makes processes of depoliticization a matter of naturalization, presented by many institutional actors as forms of rationalization that are partly inevitable and partly desirable (Hay 2007). This is especially so in times of crisis, since they are associated with the reduction of political conflict (between parties and coalitions) and social conflict (capacity for pressure and access to specific interests), factors that make public action slow and uncertain, something that is not well tolerated by the markets and their interests.

Eliminating or reducing the political character of actions or establishing a governance "in which political decisions are made without the impression of doing so" (de Leonardis 2013: 138) does not mean reducing regulatory needs, but rather producing them in new ways. In fact, the effects of the actions do not cease to be political, since they consist of the selective allocation of material and immaterial values. Just by considering these effects, we can hypothesize an answer to the question of why the contemporary forms of depoliticization have succeeded. It would be difficult to understand why this is a dominant model today, without relating it to the hegemony created by the economic elites through the system of values and beliefs of the neoliberal paradigm (Foster et al. 2014). Depoliticization is in fact the result of a coherent and functional meta-governance of a political strategy (Jessop 2014) and the market-oriented public action that uses it as a specific institutional and discursive resource that allows the shaping of strategies of wealth accumulation as a hegemonic political project (D'Albergo 2016; Moini 2015: 37; Moini 2016; Peck and Tickell 2002; Jessop 1997; Burnham 1999).

In Italy these dynamics have been widely analyzed with a focus on specific processes, with respect to the dynamics of welfare restructuring (Caselli 2016; D'Albergo and Moini 2017; D'Agostino 2017; Di Chio 2017), privatization of policies (Colombo and Gargiulo 2016; Ricotta 2016; Busso 2017), and also with a specific focus on urban policies (Iacovino 2016).

The process of depoliticization in Italy is in part associated with a populist turnaround connected to the transition from a political and social system based on a strong mediation between rulers and ruled – the so-called First Republic (1945-1994) – to a very different context – that of the so-called Second Republic (1994-present) – based on a drastic decrease of the intermediate bodies, on a marked weakening of the political parties, and on a weakening of the trade unions and associations.

Immediately after the Second World War in Italy, a complex system of political and social representation was established, consisting of a strong partitocracy, very deep-rooted unions and a constellation of associations of different ideological orientations. All of this characterized Italian society as a "political society" because it was strongly based on political mediation. With the turnaround of 1992 many of the social and political mediation devices lost their function, leaving a vacuum of representation, but at the same time laying the foundations for new forms of more direct, personalized, and populist representation (Urbinati and Ragazzoni 2016).

In the following sections, we will illustrate the characteristics of the Italian populist change in terms of "multipopulism", i.e. the coexistence of several populist actors in a single country. Our attempt is to provide a single frame in order to explain the profound transformation of the Italian political system in recent decades: depoliticization and multipopulism seen as competing populisms. This is indeed the peculiarity of the Italian system. While in most cases, from Peron in Argentina to Chavez in Venezuela, populist forces appear as the only subjects in a context where the other forces in opposition are not populist, in Italy we have witnessed the emergence of various populist forces in competition: from Lega Nord, to Forza Italia, to MoVimento 5 Stelle through to the mid-populist transformation of the Democratic Party under the leadership of Matteo Renzi.

4. From ethno-regionalist to Lepenist-nationalist populism: the case of Lega Nord

The Lega Nord (Northern League) is a very special case on the international panorama of populism, because it is perhaps the only movement that, in

the space of about thirty years, has moved from an ethno-regionalist populist movement to a Lepenist right-wing one.

The birth of the Lega Nord at the end of the '80s was a novelty in the Italian political scene although, in the European context, it was part of the wave of populist forces in which we can count the political experience of Haider in Austria and the Front National of Jean Marie Le Pen in France (Mudde 2012). The first Lega Nord was characterized by a marked ethno-regionalism, aimed at promoting the "Northern Question" in the Italian debate (Diamanti 1996; 2013). It came after the experience of the Autonomous Leagues and was able to interpret the growing resentment that the civil society living in the most industrialized regions of Italy began to express with the weakening of the traditional parties that, for decades, had played a role of mediation and political representation, such as the Christian Democrats, the Communist Party and the Socialist Party.

Umberto Bossi's leadership was crucial. It determined the near disappearance of the other leagues and started a winning strategy for the whole North based on the promotion of an antistatalist ethno-regionalism, polemically oriented against the central government, with a rhetoric that indicated the national government as the main cause of the social and economic crisis. The slogan "Roma ladrona!" (Rome thief!) was emblematic of this.

Bossi's leadership style constituted a break with the widespread leadership style common throughout the so-called First Republic. In fact, until then the politicians had resorted to a communicative register aimed at marking the difference between ruler and ruled, using a language often hardly comprehensible by the popular classes and aimed at emphasizing that they belonged to an elite. With Bossi a new language was imposed. This communicative style was simple, often using dialect and foul language. Bossi's communication strategy was therefore based on a form of direct identification between him and his political community, demonstrating the popular and regional nature of his movement (Dematteo 2011).

In this first phase, the Lega's political aim was to create an interclassist Northern movement whose polemical objectives were immigration, the corruption of the Italian state, anti-centralism and anti-meridionalism. In line with the European neo-populisms of that period in Europe, the Lega Nord has succeeded in transforming a phenomenon of local protest into an identity-based political actor pitted against the adversaries of the establishment and the partitocracy, which are held responsible for the general social and political crisis (Mény and Surel 2001; Taguieff 2004).

From an electoral performance point of view, the Lega Nord has had some ups and downs, with fluctuations ranging from 8-10%, with peaks of 20% in Northern regions, up to 4% nationally, in the most difficult moments. The first striking electoral success took place at the 1992 general elections, which crowned the Lega Nord as the first party in Milan with 18% of the votes (Diamanti 1996). Subsequently its fortunes alternated, with moments of real electoral failure, as in 1994 when it stood in a coalition with Forza Italia which absorbed most of its electorate. In order to avoid a fatal loss of votes in favor of Berlusconi's party, the Lega broke up the alliance, leading to the fall of the first Berlusconi government. Then in 1996 it recovered many of the previously lost votes and relocated around 8% of the votes. This experience led to a change of strategy in the movement consisting in the accentuation of the independentist themes to the detriment of the federalist ones, which on a symbolic level became a communicative campaign based on the theme of the "Padana Nation" and the secession from the government of Rome. At this stage, the symbolic ceremonies recalling the legends of secession - such as the marches on the river Po - intensified. The aim was to reinvent the Padana tradition and consolidate an ethno-regionalist symbolic apparatus.

The period from 1996 to 1999 was marked by a drop in support. In 2000, in an attempt to mark a new phase on national level, the Lega became allied again with Forza Italia, obtaining a new electoral success that allowed it to return to a government coalition. In this period, the Lega program insisted on the issue of immigration, intercepting the national discontent that was beginning to grow in public opinion.

This new phase of electoral expansion was to last until 2008. In this period the Lega acquired broad support among the popular classes. The Northern workers, now disengaged from the historical forces of the left, found in the Northern League the closest political referent because of its populist rhetoric.

During those years, the populist schema in the League began to prevail over the ethno-regionalist one, and an anti-establishment community schema developed within the movement, independent from the local, anti-meridionalist and anti-centralist themes. The Northern League rhetoric moved in the direction of a broad front whose polemical targets were Europe, globalization and above all the influx of migrants. The long experience in national governments was influential in this new approach, which would be decisive for the change introduced by the new leader Matteo Salvini in the following years.

The corruption scandals that involved Bossi and his family and a large part of the party's leadership group in 2012 accelerated the change. The continuation of the investigations led to Umberto Bossi's resignation as general secretary of the party and the rise to power of Matteo Salvini in December 2013, after the brief interlude of Roberto Maroni. Since the first days of his mandate Salvini has expressed a new line based on the national-populist values of the Front

National of Marie Le Pen, where xenophobic and anti-EU themes become central, while the independentist and federalist themes are almost completely attenuated. Also on the symbolic level, opposition to Rome has been replaced by opposition to Brussels, with a view of promoting an alternative Europe of common people (Biorcio 2015). In a context of economic crisis and general social malaise, this new course of the League has proved to be profitable. In fact, in the political elections of 2018 Salvini's party achieved its historical maximum obtaining 17.62% of the vote and becoming a government party in an unprecedented alliance with the Five Star Movement.

5. The experience of Telepopulism: The case of Forza Italia

Silvio Berlusconi's entry onto the scene in January 1994 opened a new phase in the populist change of direction in the Italian political system. From an analytical point of view, Berlusconism as a political player is indirectly linked to the Lega Nord experience. Obviously not in terms of real emulation, but Forza Italia can be considered the media variant on a national scale of the anti-political sentiment springing from the collapse of the old party system. The methods of gaining approval implemented by Berlusconi are largely a refinement and adaptation of the methods anticipated by Bossi and his movement a few years earlier, in a stylistic key, however, dominated by the novelty of the television register and corporate marketing applied to politics. Berlusconism can be considered the second phase of Italian populism in which the process of social disintermediation and the crisis of party politics has exploded strongly. Silvio Berlusconi's "descent into the field" must be read in light of a unique and very rare structural aspect on the international scene: the fact that Silvio Berlusconi was a tycoon of the TV industry allowed him to develop the first form of media populism in Italy (Poli 2001; Biorcio 2015).

We think it may be useful to examine the electoral fortunes of Forza Italia. First of all, the victory with 42.8 percent of the center-right coalition, called the Polo delle Libertà, based on an alliance between Forza Italia and the Lega Nord in the northern regions. This first success marked the real turning point between the politics of the so-called First and Second Republics. The government experience lasted only eight months, when the Lega Nord, fearing a loss of consensus in favor of Forza Italia, abandoned the government and brought about its fall.

In 1996 the entire center-right coalition, led by Berlusconi, won 42%, losing the electoral battle with Romano Prodi's center-left. The reaction to this defeat led to a restructuring of the party, and triggered a membership campaign and a new territorial organization. The party-on-the-ground and the strengthening of membership became the new organizational challenge of Forza Italia. In spite of the real increase in bottom-up opportunities to participate, the top-down management and the almost monarchical leadership of Silvio Berlusconi were strengthened in an increasingly charismatic and personalistic perspective. In those years the aim became admission to the European People's Party, which was achieved in 2001. The rhetoric of the Liberal Revolution was supplanted by a new Christian and neo-conservative rhetoric. In 2000 there was a second pact between the Lega Nord and Berlusconi that led to victory in the 2001 elections, initiating a long government cycle that lasted until 2011. During this period the transition from Forza Italia to the Polo delle Libertà was decisive (2008), a formation that was born from the alliance with the post-fascist right of the National Alliance.

Berlusconi's last years in power were marked by numerous judicial problems and scandals also of a sexual nature, which complicated government action, especially because they occurred in conjunction with the escalation of the economic crisis (Campi and Varasano 2013). This led to the break with the leader of the National Alliance Gianfranco Fini who, in 2010, formed an autonomous parliamentary group, effectively leaving the Polo delle Libertà and voting on a motion of no confidence with the opposition. In the following days Berlusconi resigned.

Since its beginning, Berlusconism has manifested itself as a telepopulism, in line with the famous definition of Taguieff (2004), that is to say, a political subjectivity founded on a direct relationship between leader and people mainly based on the television medium. Indeed, the first public speech that announced the famous "descent into the field" by Silvio Berlusconi was a direct appeal to the Italian citizenry, with a videotaped message aired simultaneously on his television channels. Berlusconi presented himself to the public in a persuasive but artificial way. The goal was to put forward an image of himself as a subject coming from civil society and not from politics, the image of a foreigner to the sphere of politics. This direct communication system based on television broadcasting was structured in the early months of the 1994 election campaign, remaining active for more than twenty years. It consisted of an apparatus made of television programs, newscasts and famous personalities, clearly pro-Berlusconi. Not only was the campaign particularly intense in the electoral phase, but many of those television stars and known faces were recruited as candidates for parliament. From a content point of view, Berlusconi identified some constant themes that led to characterize him as a break with the past in the traditional political landscape and an alternative element to the establishment of the first republic. In particular, his communication focused on proposing a new politics against the old politics dominated by the ex-communists.

From an organizational point of view, Forza Italia appeared immediately with a completely new and alternative configuration compared to the past. Not a party organized in a classical sense, with a vertical structure, made up of leader and local offices (party-in-central-office), but rather a fluid movement, made up of groups of citizens who are active especially during electoral campaigns. Berlusconi, on a national scale, created a "light" or "personal party", which seeks not to appear to be rooted in everyday life through any bureaucratic organization, but finds its strength by reiterating the image of the leader with highly public media events. Leader and movement are identified to the such an extent that, more than the symbol, it is the name and face of the leader that identifies the political force in communication campaigns and electoral lists (Calise 2010; Bordignon 2014).

Berlusconi, for the first time in Italian history, resorted to a massive use of advertising strategies and marketing in politics, applying the logic of image positioning, symbolic presence, motivation of supporters typical of commercial strategies. This serves to embody a sort of "populism from above" (McCarthy 1995).

As the first national neopopulist, Berlusconism brought about a change in the balance of Italian political forces, forcing a reconfiguration of the other parties as well. In particular, the birth of a movement of liberal and centrist inspiration like that of Berlusconi has led to the transformation of the historical party of the extreme right - Movimento Sociale Italiano, of fascist inspiration, into a more moderate force that was Alleanza Nazionale, whose leader Gianfranco Fini had long been considered the possible successor of Berlusconi. Moreover, as we have already explained, Berlusconi's party, in seeking alliance with the Lega Nord and letting it participate as a government force, has induced a profound transformation of this movement, stimulating the transition from an ethno-regionalist scheme to a nationalistic one. Finally, if we consider the non-homogeneous alignment of the opposition, constituted by the Democratic Party (and previously by the Left Democrats) and other minor parties, it must be underlined that the presence of Berlusconi strongly influenced the action and programs of these actors who developed a strong anti-Berlusconi rhetoric.

6. The triumph of Webpopulism: the case of MoVimento 5 Stelle

The appearance of the MoVimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement) is a novelty on the Italian political scene, but also a qualitative novelty for the forms of populism known so far. The centrality of the web in the structuring of the movement and of the forms of political socialization of the activists is unique on the international scene (Corbetta 2013). Since its inception, scholars have spoken of web-populism - that is,

a media populism built around the internet and social networks (Mazzoleni 2003).

Located specifically in the Italian populist shift, the M5S is the most sophisticated variant of Italian multi-populism, as it was created in opposition to other forms of populism, and in opposition to the classical political system against which the previous neo-populisms were pitted. Nevertheless, the M5S shares some themes with other forms of populism: the aversion to party politics; an anti-establishment sentiment, which specifically expresses itself in the rhetoric against the "caste"; the anti-political exaltation of all that is civil society; a marked anti-Europeanism, against austerity and German domination. The M5S is one of the first movements that proposed the abandonment of the Euro and the exit from the European Union (Biorcio 2015).

In studying the origin of this movement one cannot ignore the characteristics of its founder and leader: Beppe Grillo, a well-known television comedian who had left television due to his conflicts with the political class, and chosen to work in theaters. He began with a campaign show in which he was the "megaphone" of social and economic scandals hitherto not familiar to the public. Decisive for the birth of a real political movement was the creation of the website, where Grillo found a way to spread his denunciations to the internet audience, but above all the meeting with Gianroberto Casaleggio, an expert in marketing and the internet, which led to an acceleration of media success through the social networks. In 2005, in parallel to the site, the Meet Up project was launched, inspired by the US electoral campaign carried out by Howard Dean. Meet Ups are discussion platforms, similar to a social network, capable of creating thematic groups. Throughout Italy there are various Meet Ups that replace the old party-on-the-ground locations. They became a useful instrument of political socialization for the activists, where local and national political and social issues were dealt with.

From this experience it is clear that the M5S is characterized by offering not so much an opportunity for initial political socialization, but rather a new socialization involving many former activists from different camps, especially the supporters of the disappointed center-right. In fact, the M5S succeeded, more than the parties on the left, to intercept the disappointment of the center-right supporters.

But the strategy of the M5S was not just focused on media. In fact, some street events were crucial for the construction of the movement and, consequently, for the media effect of these on a national scale, in particular the mobilizations of the so-called V-Day of 2007 and 2008 ('Vaffa-Day', that is 'Fuck-off-Day' against the political class and the establishment). Events of mobilization that among the activists strengthened the idea of the possibility of a national movement able to move at different levels and able to offer a real alternative.

The democratic ideal of the Five Star Movement has been assimilated to that of the new social movements of the Seventies and Eighties (Biorcio and Natale 2013) with their emphasis on direct democracy and on leaving behind the organizational models of classical political parties. Opposition to political professionalism and representative democracy is clearly expressed by the two leaders of the Movement:

> We would like the parties to disappear radically, that there should be new rules of community and that at the end of this process the MoVimento (M5S) will no longer be necessary, because there are citizens. But how can a parliament exist without parties? There will be movements, committees, all expressions of needs that come from the civil society (Casaleggio and Grillo 2013: 79).

The overt purpose is to eliminate all forms of mediation between politics and society. The emphasis on leaving behind the left/right dichotomy and any ideological discourse is also associated with the criticism of party politics. The internet and information technologies are presented as the solution, allowing free participation by citizens. The M5S does not provide venues for coordination and the only organizational areas are the local Meet Ups. In this way the decision-making node, that in actual fact is entrusted to the leader, remains unresolved. Beppe Grillo is also the owner of the movement's logo and the blog. This produces some contradictions. In the absence of formal structures, the role of coordination from the outset has been played by Beppe Grillo and the staff of Casaleggio&Company (which is a private company that edits Grillo's Blog). Although the Movement formally assigns primary importance to direct participation, in addition to Grillo and Casaleggio, the parliamentary groups have a primary role. The FSM proposes going beyond representative politics but actually its actions are based on the centrality of parliamentarians.

Also on a programmatic level, the electoral dimension plays a pre-eminent role. Only the elected representatives in Parliament can take on the role of spokesperson and most of the actions of the militants are aimed at supporting the work of the elected representatives. In practice, the structure of the FSM is essentially configured as a top-down participation, a mixture of Bonapartism and direct democracy (Caruso 2015: 324). Populism is not the only dimension of the WSF. As often happens, the populist dimension resembles other party models such as the "personal party" and the "corporate party" since the modalities of member participation are set by a private company (Casaleggio& Company). In this sense there are some elements in common between the FSM and Forza Italia, the party of Silvio Berlusconi. In this regard, Bordignon and Ceccarini (2013) compare this model to the franchise, where a certain autonomy is guaranteed at the local level, but it is bound by criteria established by the ownership.

The M5S has grown rapidly in electoral events over the past decade. The regional elections of 2010, where they took a considerable 5% in Piedmont and 7% in Lombardy, were decisive. In the local elections of 2012 the movement obtained important results, as in Parma where the new mayor Pizzarotti distinguished himself on the national level, but was soon in collision with Grillo, eventually leaving the movement. In the national elections of 2013, coming after the end of the Berlusconi government and the "depoliticized" experience of the Monti government, the M5S had its first big national success, reaching 25% of the votes, and recently, after the national elections of 2018 in which it became the biggest party in Italy with 32.66% of the votes cast, M5S is a ruling party in an anomalous alliance with Matteo Salvini's Lega in its new guise as a right-wing Lepenist party.

As Biorcio pointed out, it is interesting to analyze the configuration of the so-called Grillo-people, identifying three types of voters: the "identified", who feel part of the party; the "sympathizers" who support, but are not real activists; and finally the "occasional" ones, who choose to vote for the movement in protest against the other parties (Biorcio 2015: 109).

The growth and institutionalization of the M5S has involved many organizational problems (de Nardis and Medici 2015), still unsolved today. Firstly, the private nature of the Internet platform, which has become in fact the structure of the webpopulist party, has aroused numerous criticisms from detractors about the quality of democracy within the M5S. Secondly, the selection mechanisms for candidates have raised many doubts. The selection of candidates is in fact carried out through a voting system on the internet, where the candidacy is open to all citizens but the number of voters is very limited.

In this and in many other activities of the movement there is often the contradiction between the claims to a system of direct democracy and the difficulties in achieving it (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013; Lanzone and Woods 2015). From the beginning, the M5S motto was "One is worth one", which explains well the perspective of individualistic participation of the supporters, based on a plebiscitarian vision of democracy, for which popular sovereignty must be expressed by the people almost without intermediation, neither internal to the party, nor external. Nevertheless, many of the decisions are taken by the closed circle of Grillo and Casaleggio (and, after the death of Gianroberto, by his sons).

Also in the relationship between charismatic leader and community of people, the M5S constitutes an original variant. In fact, Grillo often appears and intervenes to direct the action of the ruling groups or to resolve crises of an administrative and political nature, but his leadership does not coincide with the figure of a strong and charismatic man. Grillo's charisma is rather expressed by an image of a mentor, older than the average of his supporters, who, with his frank-

ness and courage to denounce, reaffirms the values of the movement and indicates the right direction.

The experience of Grillo, as a comic founder of a political movement, recalled the previous French experience of Coluche, the Parisian comedian who, in the Eighties, decided to participate in the presidential elections, securing the support of famous intellectuals and capturing percentages above 20% in surveys. Coluche gave up his candidacy, urging his supporters to vote for Mitterand, due to the numerous tensions aroused, but especially after the killing of one of his close collaborators (which later turned out to be a crime of passion).

Another structural innovation represented by the M5S is the party-movement configuration. In fact, unlike the classic development from movement to institution, the M5S has so far maintained a hybrid structure, where many movement elements remain despite the experience of government and of parliament. This novel configuration is also possible due to the substitution of a rigid party organization and internal representation systems with a set-up based on a direct relationship between the base and the leader.

To date, the M5S is a phenomenon that also divides analysts, because, while on one hand it can be criticized for the rigid vertical internal organization strongly dependent on the leader, on the other hand, it is judged by some as a postmodern form of democratic populism, according to the famous definition of Canovan (1981).

Considered as part of the whole scenario of Italian multipopulism, the M5S is undoubtedly the variant that better than any other expresses the schema of civil society as the sole matrix of the politician. It is also the form of neopopulism that is closest to certain characterizing factors such as interclassism, post-ideological and postmaterialist system of values, and a community oriented against the establishment.

7. Renzi and the institutional populism

Renzi's leadership in the Democratic Party represents the last variant of the populist schema of which we are trying to give a unified interpretation in the reading of the Italian change of direction.

We are aware that in the panorama of the typologies of Italian multipopulism this is probably the least clearly populist. However, it is a typology that is explained in a functional way with respect to other existing and more markedly evident populisms. The Renzi option arrives as a populism from above, strongly linked both to the establishment of the Democratic Party and to the Italian financial economy. However, it has used a highly populist communication style to gain support, through direct, disintermediate procedures, based on the person of the leader and in clear opposition to the communication modalities of the old party politics. The main characteristic of Renzi's populist style, which distinguished him from the others, is his strong institutionality. In this sense he anticipated the style of Emmanuel Macron in France.

Renzi, former president of the Province of Florence and then mayor of the city of Florence, is a professional politician who, from a very early age, was a member of the Italian Popular Party (one of the parties born from the ashes of Christian Democracy) and finally of the Democratic Party. In 2010 he promoted a conference launching a renewal movement of the elite of his party, summarized by the catchword "scrapping".

Renzi's movement achieved great national resonance because it was based on two aspects: the emphasis on novelty (the old/new cleavage) and a clever political marketing strategy.

On the one hand, Renzi presented himself as a catalyst leader of innovative energies, proposing himself as attentive to the needs of modernization of the economy, of the state bureaucracy and of social communication. Being only forty, Renzi challenged the establishment of his own party and most of Italian politics, characterized by the presence of elderly and long-term politicians. On the other hand, he has pursued a skillful strategy that we could call "in & out", consisting of the ambiguity of being a historical member of the PD, but at the same time acting in the eyes of the public as a wrecker, external to his party.

Moreover, the great media skills, the highly personalized style, in which some analysts have recognized some typical elements of Berlusconism, allowed Renzi to become a national public figure in a short time. He is a leader with marked populist traits, but with a strong institutional anchorage tied to European and international elites.

In 2012, the nomination for the primaries to elect the center-left coalition leader, against Bersani and other minor figures, saw the mobilization of numerous people both inside and outside the party. Renzi did not win, but collected a substantial 39.1% of support against Bersani's 60.9%. It was an important debut, after which Renzi's faction became the strongest one of the Democratic Party. At the subsequent primaries of 2013 for the election of the Democratic Party secretary, Renzi won with 67.5% of the votes.

Renzi proposed his idea of a light party with a strong leadership. The enthusiastic phase of Renzi's first period was accompanied immediately by a marked progressive decline in membership, fully in line with the transformation into a light party desired by the leader. In February 2014, Renzi approved the immediate replacement of Prime Minister Enrico Letta, who had succeeded Bersani, after the latter had been unable to form the government. The success in the European elections in 2014, where the PD reached 40.8%, consecrated Renzi, who repeatedly flaunted this result as an indicator of his personal political approval rating.

Renzi's government action was in fact characterized by many reforms in different spheres, but they indicated a neoliberal and leaderistic approach, frequently resorting to votes of confidence and personalizing every single issue. Several of these reforms aroused a very strong social reaction, such as the Jobs Act, which in fact profoundly changed the status of workers, a cornerstone of the Italian left, and the reform of secondary education called "Good School", in response to which there was a major mobilization of teachers and students.

However, the reform, whose failure enshrined the end of Renzi's government experience, was the constitutional reform that was to be confirmed with the referendum of 4 December, 2016. Renzi lost that electoral appointment taking 40.88% against a No-vote of 59.12%. His immediate resignation as head of the government decreed the beginning of his decline.

Compared to other forms of populism, Renzi's is a reaction to the spread of the anti-establishment neopopulisms of the Lega Nord and the M5S, and also against the populism of Berlusconi, from which however it borrows many stylistic features, being an institutional populism, that is, from above.

8. CONCLUSIONS

In this article we have tried to give a unified key to interpreting a series of phenomena that have characterized the Italian political system in the last twenty-five years.

The uniqueness of the Italian case is given by two determining characteristics: 1) a strong process of depoliticization that has led to the profound transformation of the structures and political grammar of the Italian political system, thus determining the transition from the First Republic to the Second Republic; 2) the condition of multipopulism consisting of the co-existence of several competing populisms.

The strong connection between depoliticization and populism in Italy shows how the organizational structure of neoliberal governance produces an inevitable weakening of representative institutions in favor of a different mode of government in which the decision-making process is verticalised. This favors the growth of distance between civil society and politics and the development of a strong anti-political sentiment that tends to be re-politicized by populist leaders and movements.

We have presented the development of the different cases of populism in order to demonstrate that populism in Italy is a multi-variant schema, from the Northern League's ethno-regionalism to Berlusconi's telepopulism, to the M5S webpopulism and Renzi's institutional populism, finally closing with the nationalist and Lepenist populism of the current League.

Despite the clear differences, it is possible to highlight at least two specific traits of this schema.

A deconstruction of politics. The concomitance of the action of depoliticization and multipopulism has led to the deconstruction of classical politics, based on highly structured political organizations and very strong mediation mechanisms. The action of the Italian neopopulists examined shows in fact very fluid ways of operating, strongly disengaged from rigid forms of organization, but precisely because of this, liable to reconfiguration based on the people-leader schema.

The overturning of civil society. First, we refer to forms of neopopulism that are generated within the model of civil society in opposition to political society. Bossi, Berlusconi, Grillo, Renzi say they are promoters of a new and alternative movement against the political class and the establishment. The populist shift and multipopulism were possible thanks to the centrality of civil society, which is no longer an alternative to political society as in the First Republic (Farneti 1971), but a civil society that tends to replace political society, playing a prominent political role.

Populist movements are united by a propensity for participation that is configured as "participatory upscaling", a phenomenon that in Italy is evident above all in the case of the Five Star Movement. This is not just an Italian characteristic. The fact is that in Europe, since the 1990s, a significant number of parties have strengthened their formal openness to membership, also identifying apparently democratic decision-making mechanisms, but in reality, alongside an alleged opening towards the activists, there has been a gradual marginalization of membership and middle-level elite (or party-in-central-office) allowing a strengthening of leadership towards the control mechanisms traditionally guaranteed by party bureaucracy (Ignazi 2004).

In Italy this aspect, initially evident above all in Forza Italia, is present today in almost all parties. The populist aspect is combined with other elements that shape the party models considered. In this way, the League is a populist party that, especially in northern regions, has levels of organization and rooting similar to the old mass party; Forza Italia is a populist party with typical elements of personal parties or company parties; the Democratic party during Renzi's leadership presents the features of the populist party with a strong personalistic calling; The FSM is a populist party, but with some features of the personal party and the company party.

The typical element that makes these parties suitable, or even functional, for de-politicized politics lies precisely in the sterilization of conflict, both between membership and leadership within the parties, and between society and politics outside party politics. The conflict becomes superstructural, also mediatized and spectacular, but in fact is not able to condition the decision-making mechanisms. Monism, a-conflictualism, and technicality are fundamental aspects of contemporary populism or post-democracies.

Despite the variegated nature of multipopulism, the Italian case exemplifies a political context with a low level of ideological pluralism. The various populisms differ in structural aspects that concern the way of producing political consensus but not in a different approach to ideas. The Manichaeanization of the political debate produces a reduction in the pluralism of positions to only two polarized opposites, greatly limiting the possibility of expression and representation of intermediate and minority positions. Polarization predetermines political conflict, reducing the chance of having a real democratic dialectic, rich in positions and based on a productive conflict between the different sectors of society.

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