


BOOK REVIEW

## Popolo ma non troppo. Il malinteso democratico

By Yves Mény, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2019. 210p., €15 (paperback)

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Over the past two decades, probably no topic in the field of political science has received as much attention as contemporary populism. From general theoretical essays, to contributions on populist parties, especially in European political systems, as well as studies focusing on populist leadership, communication or style, we now have impressive literature devoted to the description and interpretation of this phenomenon. Yves Mény, former lecturer at SciencesPo and President of the European University Institute in Florence and then of the Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna in Pisa, has in fact inaugurated this prolific line of research by publishing, together with Yves Surel, *Par le peuple, pour le peuple. Le populisme et les démocraties* (Paris, Fayard, 2000), a milestone text for the scientific study of populism. In short, the latter suggested that the causes of the 'populist mobilization' affecting European democracies should be sought in the factors that shaped their construction after World War II, especially in the 'imbalance' between the 'constitutional' (rule of law, checks and balances) and the 'popular' (popular sovereignty lightened by the principle of representation) pillars.

*Popolo ma non troppo* can be seen both as a reprise and an extension of this general reasoning, mainly focused on democracies themselves: indeed, the study does not start from the observation of the success of populist parties and movements, in order to then simply search for the explanatory factors in the structural characteristics of democratic regimes. Rather, the analytical trajectory set out by Mény aims first of all to specify the developments (historical, socio-economic, political) that have forged the 'democratic bricolage' (Chap. 2), emphasizing the hybrid character of the political systems that, in both Europe and the United States, have gradually replaced the *ancien régime*.

The structure of the book fully reflects this research agenda. From the point of view of the topics addressed, it can be roughly divided into two parts. The first (Chapters 1–4) portrays the stages that marked the advent of mass democracy, particularly the differentiation of two paths of integration of the 'people' – a concept that is polysemic by nature – in the democratic project, a perennial 'work in progress'. The path typical of the Anglo-American systems could be defined as 'realist-pragmatic'. Here, the 'people' means a collection of citizens and social groups, who must be guaranteed the freedom to pursue their legitimate interests and exercise their rights, including sovereignty. These actions lead to accentuated social and political competition. Instead, the 'Franco-continental' path constitutionalizes the 'abstract' myth of the (sovereign) people, which, at a certain point in history, the convenience of the political elites will conduct to identify as a 'nation'. This second development confers inalienable rights on the people but severely limits their actual exercise, thus creating a 'gap' between the solemn proclamation of the principle of popular sovereignty and its practical realization – the French and Italian constitutions show emblematic illustrations of this evolution. In the countries where the Franco-continental path has reached more advanced levels, the gap thus created between the mythical image of the

sovereign people and the real (constitutional) powers attributed to citizens by representative democracy will be at the origin of the most enduring success of populist parties and movements.

For scholars interested in populism, the second part of the book offers the most stimulating and original insights. Here, first of all (Chap. 5) Mény confronts the relationship between liberalism and democracy, which defines a theoretical space where confusion often reigns supreme – as an uncritical employ of the concept of ‘illiberal democracies’ seems to certify. The point is that the 20th century has shown that the economic success of political systems no longer is a consequence of the inseparable connection between market economy and democracy. Moreover, the uncomfortable question that Mény asks is: if liberalism was incorporated into the democratic project as a stronghold against tyranny and discrimination of minorities, to what extent has this incorporation led to some ‘exaggerations’? Here we go back to the imbalance between the constitutional and popular pillars in contemporary democracies: paradoxically (but perhaps not), the building of mass democracy brings to increasing production of legislation to protect minorities, which is likely to limit the sovereignty of the ‘people’ on an ever-larger set of issues. Combined with the process of EU construction, which shows non-negligible signs of coming to a halt (see Brexit), these developments tend to pave the way for the success of populist parties and leaders. Mény draws two conclusions from the increasing spread of ‘illiberal democracies’. The first: in front of globalization and Europeanization ‘deve essere compiuto un formidabile sforzo concettuale, ideologico e istituzionale per “democratizzare” il piano sovranazionale’ (p. 151). Although it enjoys a good reputation especially among populists, the alternative is completely unrealistic and consists in bringing powers of government entirely back within the confines of the (nation-) State. Both options signal that mass democracy at the dawn of the 21st century has not only failed to deliver on all its promises, but has been hit by changes (mediatization, globalization, Europeanization) that have profoundly transformed its profile.

So, it becomes interesting to explore the reasons for the ‘populist explosion’ (Chap. 6). Mény singles out three types of factors: structural, substantive and procedural, thus broadening the spectrum of analysis compared to the volume written with Surel. Among the first, the decline of ideological politics stands out, which in Europe led to a rapprochement between right-wing and left-wing parties, often in the form of a ‘grand coalition’, well before the collapse of the Berlin Wall. This created a political cleavage between mainstream (right and left) parties and outsiders, from which the populists have undoubtedly benefited electorally. The main consequence is that ‘la competizione politica, che dovrebbe essere centripeta, spinge la battaglia politica a svolgersi secondo i termini e i modi definiti dagli estremi’ (p. 169). In addition, there are the substantive causes, mainly the detachment between supranational policies (especially at the level of the EU) and national politics, which fuels populist mobilization. Finally, procedural factors refer to the rules of the electoral game and, in particular, to the opportunities that each political system offers for the expression of populist protest. In this respect, the mid-term elections in the United States, the elections for the European Parliament, the mechanics created by electoral systems and the institution of the referendum offer voters as many opportunities to articulate discontent with traditional politics, that often takes the form of a ‘negative vote’ that populists are the best to seize.

Shortly, the ‘misunderstanding’ of which the title speaks, regarding the space occupied by popular sovereignty within representative democracy, facilitates the integration of populism into the democratic systems, often on the right-wing side of the political spectrum (Chap. 7). This outcome, which has now been achieved in both the United States and Europe, does not stem from simple incorporation of populist parties and leaders into the structure and processes of nowadays democracies. Rather, and this is the most interesting analytical result of the volume, it derives from a twofold movement: on the one hand, populists exhibit altered rhetoric and vision with respect to the mainstream imagine of democracy; on the other hand, traditional parties have come to accept part of the populist rhetoric and manifestoes, which have therefore become mainstream in certain respects – think, for example, to the regulation of migratory flows.

Owing to these considerations, Mény leaves unanswered the most intriguing question for scholars of populism: is it a reforming phenomenon, which helps democracies in order to ‘regenerate’? Or is it an anti-system phenomenon, dangerous for the maintenance of democratic rules? What is certain is that it is not possible to formulate a universally valid answer: precisely for this reason, the ‘democratic misunderstanding’ seems to remain an unavoidable fact when examining the role of populist parties and movements within the framework of contemporary democracies.