

Populism, the Kingdom of Shadows, and the Challenge to Liberal Democracy*

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I.

In a previous article, I have defined populism as an intractable, unmanageable notion. This is so – I believe – because populism as a notion is often called to cover phenomena that are loosely connected, and also because it is generously used as a polemical label in political fights and parlance. There is a further reason for its intractability, and this has to do with the different levels of discourse where the notion is employed. There are basically two ways in which populism is used as a notion in literature and academic debates. There is a more or less descriptive use of the term, but there is also ‘populism’ as a political theory or, in a few versions, as a ‘true’ political philosophy. The two levels, however, are not congruent and do not really have a common referent.

What Yves Mény and Chantal Mouffe, two of the most prominent scholars in the field, say about populism is developed at two distant ‘tables’ of discourse. One of them is where the term ‘populism’ is adopted to understand what is going on in recent politics, especially in the post-1989 political landscape. The other is rather a prescriptive doctrine of how a political programme of redistributive justice could once more have a chance to get hegemony over society. The former deals with ‘is’, the latter with ‘ought’.

Professor Mény is mostly interested in explaining what is happening to liberal democracies, once these lose their grip on civil society, no longer being channeled through traditional representative government and its art of keeping separate and independent distinct political roles and functions. Professor Mouffe’s attention instead is directed to a possible new mode of doing politics in an age where class conflicts are blurred and seem to become obsolete because of de-industrialization, of a society increasingly mediatized through images and screens and because of consumerism. Labour as a source of identity is now replaced by the enjoyment of oneself and one’s own pictures and feelings are projected as special.

Chantal Mouffe tries to envisage and propose a theoretical scheme to enable the use of images and feelings as political arguments. These affections might be instrumental to revive class struggle and give it a chance again to move and offer success to people’s subversive aspirations. This way the people would not be assembled through class functions and class identity, but rather through an investment of images and iconic ideals, elaborated by an impending and decisionist political

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actor. Such an actor should be attempting to become an object of desire and enjoyment for citizens, and thus to offer them an identity through a reflected, aggrandized and socialized picture of himself.

There is indeed very little room for an overlapping of these two distinct perspectives. We may thus be forced to choose which of these two ‘tables’ we would like and consider to be most enriching in order to play our intellectual or scholarly game and approach populism as a relevant topic of discussion. We might pursue an ‘ought’ approach, and then a ‘populist’ normative theory might be of some help to correct several deficiencies of political liberalism and its emotional abstinence. ‘Populism’ of this sort would support a republican agenda, giving it a more robust scheme of existential motivation. We will thus be following in Professor Mouffe’s steps.

But we may also assume the other, alternative, perspective, taking side with Professor Mény, and try to assess whether it might be true what many commentators claim, that we are facing the emergence of a new, not yet clearly understood political phenomenon, ‘populism’ as a distinct ideal-type of approach to power, which can be defined by specific descriptive properties. At present, I believe that it is this second approach that looks more promising for research and for a contribution to the understanding of our world. This is in particular confirmed by the new unexpected social situation we are currently confronted with because of the present pandemic.

It is of course difficult to assess what the pandemic is and means while we are severely hit by this plague. In a nutshell, we could summarize our present predicament in the following way. Confronted as we are with the extreme danger of infection brought about by physical contact with other people, and with the categorical imperative of *noli me tangere*’ (do not touch me) we are radically eschewing such contacts; we avoid human vicinity. For several months we have been living in a secluded, isolated situation, locked down. To enable us to somehow enjoy a more or less normal work day, electronic devices have been introduced on a massive scale and these presently occupy our everyday life. Our isolation is somehow filled through the Internet and computers.

On the one hand, our body, our material life, has been further abstracted through a radicalized use of online devices and screens, electronic means by which our contact with people and reality is mediated by images and technical representation. But on the other hand, our body increasingly gets unbound from this ‘kingdom of shadows’ (the representative materiality taking place on screens) through the illness, the pain and sufferance brought about by it. *Noli me tangere* seems the ground rule of our life in these months afflicted by the pandemic, at the same time producing an acute awareness of our existence, rooted in our and others’ bodies. We are not touching other people, because we are dangerous to them and reciprocally others might endanger our health. We approach and ‘touch’ them in a surreptitious way through online devices, through screens, images, by shadows.

Massimo La Torre

However, the illness or its threat puts our body, and the feeling of it, once again in the centre of our existence. The reality of the illness cannot be mediated. We feel bad because our body is hit by the virus. It is not an electronic virus endangering our lives, but unfortunately a ‘real’ one, a living entity, attacking our immunity systems. There is no screen available for this. We are directly exposed to it. The ‘shadow’, the image, becomes a brute fact, and eventually the brutest possible fact, death. The pandemic thus has a double and ambiguous effect on what we are used to call ‘populism’. On one side, it exacerbates it, since the mediation of our public space is made extreme through the *noli me tangere* ground rule. But on the other side, since our body becomes again a central part that is basic for our life and our survival; mediation and images are much less important. We need *care*, and what is central to care cannot be mediated through screens. Care is not fully amenable to representation. Care is a direct action, and a democracy of care should necessarily continue to refer to a sort of direct, not representative democracy, at least at its core.

The previous argument is based on the presupposition that ‘populism’ is a specific way of performing in the political arena, a phenomenon strongly rooted in the ‘kingdom of shadows’, *Heimat der Schatten*; a term and an idea actually firstly coined in Joseph Roth’s visionary essay *Der Antichrist* (1934). One could try to explain the rooting of populism in such a ‘kingdom’ by deploying ideas and arguments elaborated especially in the work of three authors, firstly the already mentioned Joseph Roth, secondly Günther Anders (see his thesis of the ‘phantom and its matrix’), and finally Guy Debord (see his seminal pamphlet *La société du spectacle*).

My basic idea is that ‘populism’ is a way of doing politics that is congruent with a society mainly taking place in the form of a ‘shadow’, of iconic representation and visual mediation. It is not theatre; we are not dealing with ‘theatrocracy’ here. This is an expression coined by Plato in his last work, the *Laws*, *Nomoi* (III, 693A ff.).¹ There he criticizes music and tragedy as perverting the taste of people by giving them a chance of expressing their preferences. In this way, taste is democratized. Ordinary people decide about the merits of a piece of music or a play performed at the theatre. Theatrocracy means that the audience decides, not the stage. The rule givers are ordinary people, consumers of music and tragedy, not the competent musicians and playwrights. Thus, the rule of theatre audience reflects and symbolizes the rule of the people in a democracy, and for Plato this is an object of criticism and rejection.²

Theatre is fiction, and the audience, though it is given the power and the competence to evaluate the merits of the piece represented before them, is moved by the stage. The relationship remains asymmetrical, top-down. An audience enjoys what

1 A recent interpretation and discussion around this issue is the one proposed by A. Greppi, *Theatrocracia. Apología de la representación* (Madrid: Trotta, 2016). See also *Contro la democrazia. Platone*, a cura di F. Ferrari (Milano: Rizzoli, 2019), 97 ff.

2 For a suggestive and sympathetic literary elaboration of democracy as theatrocracy, H. Mann, *Die kleine Stadt* (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1909) makes good reading.

is done and said on the stage, but it does not have the chance, the power, to direct the event taking place on the stage. The destiny of the figures and the fictional lives that actors impersonate remain outside the scope of intervention from below. The script has already been written and the action is only rehearsed just one more time.

Nonetheless, theatre is direct experience; it is direct action. Images in theatre have a material referent. True, theatre is a represented event, but not in the sense of mediated through icons. Representation here means ‘presented before’ an audience. As a matter of fact, actions that are performed in drama are real enough, though they are representative. But they are such without being iconic and based on screens and their brightness. Theatre is almost a face-to-face relationship; the fiction is openly exposed and reshaped and offered as a real physical conduct. The stage is part of a common space where the audience finds its proper place. The dramatic situation is not thought of as an entirely fake experience. The experience of the drama performed by actors is real and lively, and this is the reason why it can help us rethink our own role of actors in real life, to find a catharsis, a moment of purification, of a collective, emotive reflexivity in which we together with others understand what we really are, and grasp our sins and guilt as actors in factual life.

Quite distinct is the case of what we receive and ‘enjoy’ by watching a movie or a TV show, or, at present, more and more often a clip or image on a computer or smartphone. Figures’ faces projected on the screen are ‘made up’, but here the entire action is a fabrication. Pictures are manipulated, staged, taken and then cut, re-coloured and reproduced from a certain angle. Words are pronounced but then dubbed by a different voice. In such an enterprise we ourselves are not part of the show production and space. We are and remain distant; we do not have eye contact with the actors and the showmen on the screen. We do not really see what they are doing. But, paradoxically, such made up reality of show and images transmitted by the screen as experienced by consumers is received with a force of persuasion that can render true what would otherwise be evidently false. What is true becomes a part of what is fake, and is assumed to be a component of this, but will thus be reinterpreted in a way that is no longer falsifiable. To quote Guy Debord: ‘Dans le monde réellement bouleversé, le vrai est un moment du faux’ (*La société du spectacle*, I, 9). The reality projected through icons is a kind of post-truth, but nonetheless truer than truth itself. What is here consumed by our eyes before the icons in which we are immersed, assumes the character of a strict positivity that is not open to contestation: ‘Le spectacle’, says Debord, ‘se présente comme une énorme positivité indiscutable et inaccessible’ (*La société du spectacle*, I, 12). The audience does not really decide here: what matters, the image, the ‘idea’ and the message projected, is already decided. In the fictional, iconic, digital society people do not rule; the show and the showman rule them.

A movie or a show on a screen is a mode of production taking place entirely in the mode of fiction, of a fake reality, in an imaginary dimension. Even when backstage pictures or videos of what has ‘really’ happened are released, what is absent is the sense of a direct, lived experience. The represented reality in any case assumes the quality of a show and is no longer responsive to moral judgement. Indeed, this

Massimo La Torre

centrality of the show in our perception of what is real is, I believe, the main source of what political scientists now call ‘populism’. This, in fact, is politics by a people that is not a real people, but an imaginary one, a phantasy. The people of populism are a political phantom. And of such phantom the matrix remains hidden to our eyes and minds, and thus to our possible scrutiny.

At present, such phenomenology of a political phantom is radicalized by the pandemic. It pushes the political phantom to the extremes of its possible realization and once again ‘unbinds’ the body politic, cancels its internal mediations and separations, and exacerbates the phantom’s feelings and dreams of sovereignty. While our physical body is locked down and increasingly bound by this pest and its state of exception, while our private spaces are minimized, that same exceptional state aggrandizes politics as a phantom with a hidden matrix, by giving up the argumentative public space and transforming it in a visual experience, by monopolizing and confining publicity into the tiny space of a screen. Politics is reduced to a phantom by transforming it in a practice of a distant, made up performance passively enjoyed by spectators, and, consequently, by cancelling political institutions’ internal mediation based on intersubjective conversation and discourse, offering pictures instead of reasons.

II.

The main subject of this article is more general and deals with the challenge and dangers posed by populism to liberal democracy. Let us start with a few preliminary remarks about liberal democracy. This is a political regime produced by modernity, a society in which the community for its management is referred to the supposed agreement and certification of all individual citizens. Modern individuals intend to take control of their lives by conceiving collective rules and government as directly or indirectly produced by their own decision.

In the modern human condition law is constrained by citizens’ agreement and in addition by a system of separation of powers. Liberalism is an art of separation, first of all between the community and the individual citizens, then between government and civil society, and finally between distinct powers and competences. A democracy is a self-managed legal system, and a liberal democracy is an example of such a regime, with the addition of an internal, somehow disconnected rule of law system, guaranteed by a separation of powers. Liberal democracy, therefore, is a somewhat dysfunctional political regime. Decisions are taken by all through representation. To achieve this, these decisions need to be based on arguments and discussions and approved by a formal vote of consent. This is a process that needs time and space. It needs mediating bodies, bargaining, conflicts, compromise. The ‘general will’ of democracy is necessarily plural and divided. The law that is the outcome of this self-reflective exercise is then processed by agencies which are distinct in competence and constitution from the lawmaking bodies. There is a judiciary, but this institution also needs attorneys, advocates and a large number of other legal and non-legal professionals to operate, and then it must rely on the

support of countless executive bodies. Administrative agencies implement the government's policies but they also depend on special monitoring moments and supervisory bodies.

The liberal democratic state machine does not run by itself. If it does, it has a problem. Not that much is needed to induce the collapse of the art of separation that gives it its liberal character. A liberal democracy cannot tolerate and resist 'too much people' (to use an expression by Professor Mény and the title of his latest book)³, that is, a people that is too big with regard to its members aggregately considered. Once the people is referred to as a collective un-differentiated social actor, there is an actual risk that individuals are taken into account only as aggregated molecules of this big overwhelming entity, and as a consequence their singular specificity and importance might be lost.

A 'too much' people as such can hardly take any direction and decision; it is too heavy to move, since it has – metaphorically – 'eaten' its own elements: the individual citizens as single persons. They have all been digested by the 'too much people's' too fat body without leaving traces of their particular autonomy and will. But a direction should be taken, the fat body should be moved, and only individuals can do that. The 'too much people' will then need to embrace a special individual that might be considered equally fat, a 'too much individual' indeed, to show the way and push the 'too much people' forward. The 'too much people' requires a soul, a 'too much leader'. Superman shall then be equated with everyman.

A people that is 'too much people' is the fully imaginary matrix of the phantom leader purporting to be a direct emanation from the people itself and showing its same omnipotency and overarching identity. In such case there is, alas, no room for opposition or contradiction. This is due to at least two reasons.

- i First, everything that is relevant for politics is taking place on a stage that is made up, a fake experience, not open to be contrasted with real truth and argumentative discourse. This is due to the new general addiction populations in many countries are currently victims of: *iconomania*, *Bildsucht* – to use terms of Günther Anders⁴ – a deep dependence on images and screens. The show or the iconic spectacle we permanently consume on our multiple screens is opaque to any discursive demand. To repeat Debord's words: 'il est le contraire du dialogue' (*La société du spectacle*, I, 18).
- ii Second, the phantom is considered to impersonate the entire people, which does not allow for a disaggregation of identities, since individuals are just considered in terms of organic parts of the big fat body of that 'too much' that is people. To quote Debord once more: 'L'agent du spectacle mis en scène comme vedette est le contraire de l'individu' (*La société du spectacle*, III, 60).

The liberal character that protects democracy from its own demons, in order to be further empowered, appeals to individuals to act as fragments of a sovereign, as

3 Y. Mény, *Popolo, ma non troppo. Il malinteso democratico* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2019).

4 G. Anders, 'Über prometheische Scham', in *Das Günther Anders Lesebuch*, ed. B. Lassahn (Zürich: Diogenes, 1984), 16.

Massimo La Torre

sovereigns in miniature and in a conflictual concert. And this is done by making them holders of legal rights, sometimes of substantial fundamental rights, and these are further developed in judiciable legal titles. Through fundamental rights democracy as an expressive manifestation of will by the people is checked and reaffirmed at the same time in its liberal core, especially when those rights are reassessed and operationalized within the process of judicial review of legislation.

Now, all this – liberal democracies' core – is well known, and it is part of the legal culture of our constitutional democratic regimes. It is a normative scheme, and as such consigned to a high degree of ideality. Reality can contradict such an ambitious ideal dimension: there are liberal democracies that do not fulfill their promises of rule of law and human rights. An unresolved problem in such regimes is the permanent tension between the rationale of the public, common good and the rationale of private property and the free market. A 'terrible right' (*il diritto terribile*) is the qualification the famous Italian enlightened political thinker Cesare Beccaria, used to give to private property. There is indeed a permanent gap between the claim of private property on the one hand and the claim of a common good that is necessarily projected into plans of redistribution of common resources on the other. Not to speak of the somehow anti-democratic content of *dominium*, of absolute control, enjoyment and possible disruption, *jus utendi ac abutendi*, right of use and abuse, that property claims to offer to its holders.

On the other side, a free market operates through profit in terms of egocentric preferences, of riches and private enjoyment, and through competition, that is, the struggle to knock out the other in terms of capacity of occupying sectors of the market. In a free market competition – this was once forcibly underlined by George Orwell reviewing a book by Von Hayek – unfortunately there are losers and winners, and winners are deemed to be somehow morally superior. If you are a loser, it might mean that you were not good enough. More than a century ago, Max Weber rightly identified the connection between puritanism and capitalism. Competitions may indeed sometimes be based on the equality of opportunities; in any case they are not constructed and used according to the principle of equal concern. In this arena, what is mine concerns me much more than the entitlements of others. Right or wrong, my business.

We should not therefore forget the basic tension between democracy, and indeed liberal democracy on the one hand and capitalism on the other. We cannot, and should not, be so blue-eyed to ignore the deficiencies, problems and tensions originating from a permanent inadequacy deriving from this tension. There was perhaps a time when one still could believe that liberal democracy was compatible with capitalism, but the recent emergence of illiberal and antidemocratic capitalisms, paradigmatically the Chinese model, not to speak of the Russian oligarchy, does not allow for such an optimistic assumption any more. We should sadly conclude that there is no necessary connection between liberal democracy and capitalism. This is, I believe, a proven fact, which in turn makes populism and its presence in our societies especially dangerous.

Capitalism could re-emerge after a long period of stress and public state control, during the *Trente Glorieuses*, the period of strong economic recovery of western countries following the end of the WWII in 1945 up until 1973. It strengthened further in the 1980s and 1990s, not only because of a specific internal development of western liberal societies, but also because of the evident, and somehow dramatic failure of the so-called 'real socialism' in Eastern Europe. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 certified that bankruptcy in a definitive way. Such failure was immediately interpreted as giving new force to capitalism and to a form of liberalism based not so much on rule of law and democracy as rather on private property and the free market (private enterprise led economies). The clocks of history then were somehow put back to the time of Manchesterian capitalism. This time however the state was meant not just to act as a night watchman, to use Adam Smith's well-known words, but as a pro-active agency in the protection and promotion of a free market. This was the agenda of a new kind of political economy and ideology, neo-liberalism, a free market doctrine where property and competition are designed to take place under the umbrella of state management and supervision. This appeal to the state as a regulator of free markets is one of the reasons for the success of this new ideology, since neo-liberalism could easily be coupled with managerialism and the bureaucratic spirit of the age.

There are two main versions of neoliberalism. One is based on law as monitoring the competitive structure of the market, known as the continental European, mostly German *ordo-liberalism*. And then there is a somehow more radical and more political version. This is the Anglo-American one, which reshapes the state as an occasionally decisionist agency, catering to the needs of the market in its restructuring and deregulating strategies. Law in this second version is much less useful and central as a device to deplo. What is mostly needed is politics, translated into direct governmental and punctual measures.

In both versions of neoliberalism the market is supported by a myriad of state interventions which are somehow preemptive with regard to democracy. In the European continental model this is done by referring decision-making with regard to political economy to administrative bodies which legally operate at a distance from the main seats of democratic deliberation. In the other, Anglo-American version it is politics itself which is disconnected from citizenship and its public deliberation in the form of political activism within the executive branch of government. Here, political leadership is reshaped in terms of strong charismatic power, which pretends to be able to circumvent any parliamentary perplexity and opposition. Populism, as described above, is the political phenomenon that aligns itself perfectly with this second version of neoliberal hegemony. The amalgam between strong leadership and personal charisma is made possible by recent transformations of modern societies in which traditional public medias and discourse have been vampirized, first by television and subsequently by digital machines and gadgets.

Populism is the political regime and the political movement that is congruent with *la société du spectacle*, intelligently thematized by Guy Debord, anticipated by the so-called 'kingdom of shadows', depicted by Joseph Roth, and identified as the

Massimo La Torre

'Matrix phantom' by Günther Anders. Populism is a form of theatrocracy ruled by one great imagined actor. What characterizes the show society, the kingdom of shadows and screens, is the complete absence of contact to any physical, real truth. Fiction is everywhere. What we watch is fake, 'made up', constructed and designed to fill our eyes with images, inviting us to believe to be enjoying something special and fully ours. The image we see on the screen becomes our life and lived reality, which in this way also acquires the character of a show: 'La réalité vécue est matériellement envahie par la contemplation du spectacle, et reprend en elle-même l'ordre spectaculaire en lui donnant une adhésion positive' (*La société du spectacle*, I, 8). We can identify ourselves with it without the need of special justification and without giving it explicit assent. We just desperately want to be like that image. We reshape our preferences and lifestyle to be as similar as possible to the screened image. We even try to remodel our bodies accordingly. In short, the phantom, the showman, the big man or big woman, is us. Indeed, he or eventually she, is not just a representation of us, but what we by desire want to be and actually become.

It might even be the case that we are before an anthropological mutation. From the human being as *animal rationale* (as hatched and nurtured by the classical philosophical tradition) we may now be mutating into a new, different kind of living being, the *homo videns*, to accept a suggestion by Giovanni Sartori, a distinguished Italian political scientist.⁵ *Homo videns* is a human being that approaches the world and seeks to get information about it only by a visual, passive practice, without elaborating its sense data (the pictures enjoyed) in a synthetic act of understanding by interpretation and analysis. Reasoning and understanding are yet fully absorbed by watching.

Bio-politics, a politics that invests our bodies and transforms them, appears to be driven by such an anthropological mutation, for it is fed by the many pictures that fill our imagination in the 'kingdom of shadows' of which we are subjects. We transform society by artificially readjusting our physical image and being. The making up that is the action on the screen, the fashionable but empty Very Important Persons we are watching in a reality show, are inscribed on our bodies. Tattooing is just one widespread way of turning our bodies into *loci* for screens and icons. Once we are not given the chance to change the world, what we can do is change our haircut, purchase body parts via plastic surgery, or to adorn and paint our skins through tattooing or piercing.

A populist politics is produced on the screen by icons. By means of simplification and an appeal to our feelings and affections the projected image claims an absolute legitimacy, the legitimacy of being a Very Important Person in the eyes of virtually everyone. No arguments, no substantive virtues are needed for such a pretension to legitimacy and its connected messages and injunctions. Nor could one claim any rights against such image, since the phantom pretends to be the embodiment of all our possible goods and rights. Rights are projected as objects of enjoyment in the shadow of the screen. This is currently the real matrix of what we are and such a

5 See Giovanni Sartori, *Homo videns* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2000).

projected picture is the present source of our dignity. Populism is radically fed by the present phenomenology of our visual experience.

III.

What are the current dangers of populism for liberal democracy? I believe we can identify at least five problems or issues that liberal democracy is traditionally confronted with.

- i There is the question of identity. Liberal democracy tends to be based on a *thin* common identity of its citizens. Here, patriotism is mostly understood in terms of loyalty to the constitution and to laws more generally. Further allegiances and memberships do not seem to be especially relevant. But – we may ask – can a people, or more precisely the class of citizens that are called to abide by the law, acquire a common identity through the mere acknowledgment of the rule of law and the constitution? One could reply that yes they can, because they have commonly agreed so. But why would that particular class of people gather and submit themselves to a common scheme of law in which they mutually recognize each other as equals under the rules? It would seem that this class of people is a group that is necessarily preexistent to the social compact giving rise to the constitution, and whose particular identity is to be found outside that constitution.
- ii Another possibly dangerous issue is related to the question of power. The art of separation typical of liberalism, introducing a myriad of mediating and monitoring agencies and multiplying the levels of competences, seems to relegate the single citizen in a too empty and powerless space. Peter Mair, an Irish political scientist, believes that empty politics produces as collateral damage the marginalization of people who are not given centrality in the political agenda. Colin Crouch, a British scholar, speaks of ‘post-democracy’ in this regard.⁶
- iii A related serious problem is the issue of redistribution of scarce resources. Could this responsibility be left to the solitary game of stock exchange operators and free markets? This game has been intensified in recent decades as a consequence of globalization. Global, practically boundless markets are well equipped to escape state control. In such a situation the citizen will once more have an accrued sense of his or her own impotence. The national public sphere, the traditional arena of politics, seems to have lost all relevance. Markets and its big players, the multinational companies, operate as globalists, cosmopolitans, not as members of a national community. And then they have – as already shown by Karl Polanyi – a proclivity to commit suicide, and to force upon society – see what has happened in our world after the 2008 financial crisis – the cost of rescuing ‘them’ (mostly banks), as proven once and again.
- iv However, citizens need myths and images, examples to follow, icons as models and as points of orientation for their private and public conduct. A grey liberal democracy operating just by law and a separation of competences, based on a

6 See P. Mayr, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso Books, 2013) and C. Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (London: Polity Press, 2004).

Massimo La Torre

thin ‘overlapping consensus’ (to use John Rawls’ notion for political liberalism), does not seem able to fulfill these needs and desires.

- v Finally, what kind of character does liberal democracy produce? Is there sufficient attention to the formation, the *Bildung*, of good citizens, of people with specific character traits and appropriate virtues in such a regime? Could liberal democracy survive without producing individuals endowed with public virtues required for the felicitous running of such a regime? Can we do without virtuous persons? Could a society in general survive without being able to mobilize virtues that support it? Could citizens live peacefully together without mutually offering and recognizing one and another’s virtues? Civic republicanism needs republicans.

Now, in a sense, these five relating problems are the negative result or downside of the very essence of liberal democracy, its epistemic and moral abstinence with regard to the citizens’ good life. Liberal democracy leaves the care of this essential human dimension to the individual’s decisions and deliberations, and rightly so, we could add. Otherwise, it would turn the people into a ‘too much’ entity where real, individual persons will count for very little. But is this done wisely?

Populism seems to somehow solve all the five issues here listed. The looked after identity is offered by the body of the leader and the phantom evocation of an imaginary thick people. Through this phantom the citizen is ‘restored’ in a fictitious idea of wielding immediate and direct power, insofar as he or she has a non-mediated identification, an emotive and visual convergence with the person of the leader and the collective phantom that is looming behind this brilliant big figure. Distribution of resources is guaranteed by the riches that the leader and his phantom are able to evoke and make believe they dispose to the greatest satisfaction of the greatest number. Sense is offered by the permanent representation of a common show and the attached icons and conduct models. Indeed, plenty of sense seems to be offered by the affluence of exemplary pictures which are projected on the screens. And the virtuous character is the one that is preached and exemplified by the leadership and its phantom, its imaginary virtues. In this way populism fills all the gaps left open by liberal democracy. The inevitable turbulence connected with these issues is replaced by the turbulence and the outcry of that acclamation required by the projected phantom.

In conclusion, the danger that populism poses for liberal democracy is the realization of its unfulfilled promises by making it collapse into an entirely fictional people’s compact with a phantom leader. While liberal democracy risks to offer not much more than politics without a people, populism’s efforts tend to implement a people without politics.