

# Rethinking Populism in the Digital Age: Social Networks, Political Affects and Post-Truth Democracies.

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Abstract: Although populism is not a new phenomena, its rise in the aftermath of the financial crisis presents some novelties that are worth exploring. Mostly, they refer to the transformation of the public sphere in the digital era, which has changed how political actors and citizens relate to each other and hence the discursive and non-discursive practices chosen by the former. This includes a more direct communication between populist leaders and their base, the creation of channels that sideline those of the mainstream media, as well as the emergence of "post-truth" as a framework that gives new value to narratives as conveyors of political values that disrupt established social conventions. In order to understand these features -which, their novelty notwithstanding, do not change populism's "thin" ideological core- attention is due to the emotional dimension of populist practices. Strictly speaking, they are not new: new are the lens through which we observe them after the affective turn experienced by social sciences in the last decade. Yet social networks are in themselves rather affective technologies, fostering an emotionally charged communication and facilitating the means by which individuals can feel engaged with their "moral tribe" -isolating themselves from other discourses or narratives. This paper will reflect upon these transformations from the vantage point of political theory, emphasizing how the digitization of the public sphere has influenced the way in which populist actors across liberal democracies create their publics and address them, as well as the increasing relevance of affects in explanations about political life.

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## 1. Introduction.

Populism is back -with a vengeance. Suddenly, it is again a powerful political phenomenon, a scholarly topic, even a buzzword. In the aftermath of the Great Recession that began in 2008, populism has returned to political life in a spectacular fashion and, as befits our information age, its has also become a trending topic in the global conversation. Although the tide might be ebbing after a number of poor electoral performances (in France, the Netherlands, UK), its most dramatic achievements (*Brexit*, Donald Trump) are enduring and continue to resonate in national and global politics, while the push towards less liberal democracies in some countries (Poland, Hungary, Turkey, the Philippines) features populist underpinnings. At the same time, the populist strategy has served well a number of political leaders that have defied the establishment within their parties (Pedro Sánchez, Matteo Renzi) or even their national party system (Emmanuel Macron). Hence the notion that we are in a "populist moment" (Mouffe 2016), or that we witness "a populist *Zeitgeist*" (Mudde 2004). But of course populism is far from being a new phenomenon: back in 1969, Ghita Ionescu and Ernst Gellner (1969) opened a seminal volume on the subject claiming that a ghost was traversing the world -the ghost of populism. Half a century ago! Therefore, for all its current political impact, the question about populism that should be answered today is, precisely, what is new about today's populism. And such is the purpose of this paper.

More specifically, I will be looking for such novelties examining two related phenomena: the digitization of the public sphere and the increasing political relevance of emotions. My claim is that these two trends must be taken into account if we are to understand contemporary populism. This is not to say that inherited theories about populism are to be disregarded. On the contrary, they remain relevant -populism is an ambiguous and elusive political phenomenon and in fact its theoretical and empirical exploration is not yet exhausted. However, the new about populism lies less in its ideological content or its ambivalent relationship to democracy than in the way in which

it operates with the help of digital technologies in order to mobilize political emotions. As we will see, populism has become an *affective performance* -without ceasing to be an ideology or a discourse or a political movement. Whether this is a radical novelty or just an intensification of traditional features, is a question to be decided. But if there is some truth to the claim that liberal democracies *themselves* are more populist, it is because those emerging features extend their influence beyond the explicit action of populist parties and movements. Hence the intersection of populism with the digital and the affective is not only interesting for understanding the former, but also for reflecting upon liberal democracy and its future.

My aim is thus to dwell into the digital and the affective turns in order to make sense of the aforementioned populist moment. Naturally, the rhetoric of "turns" in the social sciences is overblown, reflecting as much a genuine belief in the suggested paradigm shifts as a self-serving interest in creating a new academic niche. However, there are reasons to believe that these two particular turns -the digital and the affective- are not bogus. In fact, the phenomena they bring forward are hard to ignore when dealing with political life in our times either from a scientific or a lay perspective. Whereas the digital turn refers to the impact of new information technologies in social and personal lives, including politics and democracy, the affective turn underlines the hitherto underestimated influence of emotions in individual and even collective perceptions, reactions and decisions -encompassing, again, *political* perceptions, reactions and decisions. These two phenomena are not unrelated. On the contrary, they reinforce each other -and both reinforce populism or at least populist tendencies. This link is made explicit in the case of the so-called post-truth or postfactual, terms that describe the cognitive self-isolation in which individuals find themselves when relating to others and to information within digital bubble (see Sismondo 2017).

A difference between the two turns must be noted, though. These theoretical frameworks can be said to have a different quality: whereas the digital turn conceptualizes a new reality, the affective turn amounts rather to a new way of looking into a pre-existent reality. In other words: despite the cultural-cum-historical dimension that they possess, emotions (in a wide sense) and political affects (more narrowly) have always existed, no matter how poorly or badly we understood them or how little attention we paid to them. Its new currency has also to do with the rise of the neurosciences and its impact on a number of disciplines, from behavioral economics to social psychology -social theory is far from being the only game in town. Contrariwise, digital technologies did not exist just a few years ago: their social implementation and diffusion is a recent event that creates new social realities to which the social sciences react. Psychologists are also involved, since it remains a mystery whether human cognitive abilities are changing -for good or worse- due to the massive usage of digital tools, among them mobile devices and social networks. Additionally, digital technologies are helping to decode individual emotions, for instance through facial recognition.

The paper is organized as follows. Firstly, a brief discussion of the nature of populism will be presented, at the end of which its conceptualization as a *political style* will be defended as the framework that most helps us to understand this elusive subject in the digital age. Secondly, the relationship between populism and the affective turn will be elucidated by emphasizing those aspects of the latter that helps to understand the former: from moral tribalism to motivated reasoning. Thirdly, digitization will be brought about in order to shed light on the operations of contemporary populism, which takes advantage of the way in which both the public sphere and individual subjectivities have been disrupted by social media and other related phenomena, among which post-truth -connecting in a remarkable way connection and affection- features prominently. Finally, a conclusion will bring together these different perspectives, so that the new in the old about populism can be discerned.

## **2. Populism: from thin ideology to political style.**

Dealing with populism requires an understanding of what populism is, i.e. a conception of populism. The term has been used so many times to label so disparate phenomena, that it represents a case study of "conceptual stretching" (Sartori 1970) that has led to an "awkward conceptual

slipperiness" (Taggart 2000: 1). Some claim that populism as such does not exist, but rather its heterogeneous manifestations (Werz 2003: 13). It is thus an essentially contested concept -so contested that many doubt that it exists or is something else than a *Kampfwort* to demonize political enemies. After all, populist parties seldom admit that they are so. Besides, it is difficult to find an agreement about a number of questions that surround populism -the reasons for its emergence, its ambiguous relationship to democracy, the methodological issues concerning its study. As with democracy, there is an acute contrast between the simplicity of the slogan -"power to the people"- and the complexity of its underpinnings.

Analytically speaking, I would suggest a distinction between substantive and adjective elements: the former amount to the basic core of populism, whereas the latter are often present but are not enough to define it, since they can also be at play in other political phenomena (see Arias Maldonado 2017). Another way of putting this is to separate ideational and stylistic features: those are essential, these are formal attributes of populism. Although this is not the place to give an extensive account of such conceptualization, a concise one will help to grasp later aspects of my argument.

As for the substantive elements of populism, four interrelated features can be pointed out: the existence of two homogeneous units of analysis, the people and the elite; an antagonistic relationship between them; popular sovereignty, translated into the preference for the general will as a mechanism for democratic decision-making (see Stanley 2008: 102). Key is thus the moral -or political insofar as it is moral- contrast between a virtuous people and a parasitic elite. This "people" is presented as an homogeneous and indivisible bloc, although the *authentic* people is but a part of the *whole* of the people -the rest being the enemies of the people, i.e. the elite. In fact, populists do not say "we *also* are the people", in order to include those who had been excluded, nor "we *are* the people", but "*only* we are the people" (Müller 2016: 44). That said, the people of the populists varies from one country to another depending also on the ideological leanings of the populist movement in question: leftists populists usually integrate indigenous minorities, whereas right-wing populists gravitate towards a nationalist idea of the people. This variation reflects how the idea of a "natural" people that is independent from its representations or discursive constructions makes little sense. And the same goes for the elite: it can comprise not just politicians or businessmen -usual suspects of populist worldwide- but also journalists or experts.

To such core other elements can be added -those which are not exclusive of populism but often accompany it. Among them are to be found a charismatic leader around which the movement is organized, an anti-intellectual stance, an emotional communicative register, the identification with an idealized homeland, as well as a repertoire of action that features polarization, provocation, and protest. Although populist organizations usually exhibit most of these characteristics, the latter can be said to *facilitate* rather than to *define* populism (Van Kessel 2015). Whereas the antagonistic opposition between people and elites is inherent to populism, for instance, populist parties are not the only ones that feature a charismatic figure. Often, this leader presents herself as an *outsider* to the political system.

Yet however much we may debate about what populism *is*, the disagreement about the *form* under which it presents itself is no less deeper. It is a persistent problem in the literature, ranging back to the aforementioned volume edited by Ionescu and Gellner, where Worsley (1969) opened up new conceptual possibilities by suggesting that perhaps populism is not an ideology or a movement, but a dimension of political culture. Let us briefly review the possibilities on offer.

(a) *Populism as ideology*. As such, following Freedman's (1998: 750) typology, it would be a "thin" ideology. This is the case since it lacks a detailed program about how to deal with social problems widely understood -thus it can coexist with more comprehensive ideologies: populist parties can lean to the left or to the right. It is thus "chameleon-like": it can adopt different ideological colours (Taggart 2000: 4). This ideational approach allows us to explain its political promiscuity, as well as making sense of the citizen demand for populist attitudes (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 20; Elchardus and Spruyt 2016).

(b) *Populism as strategy*. Namely, a political strategy whose goal is to gain or retain social support and/or political power. To some, it is a rhetoric that aims to exploit the resentment created by social crisis (Betz 2002: 198); others describe it as a political operation that tries to achieve power or to exert it through a charismatic leadership and the non-institutional yet direct support of its disorganized supporters (Weyland 2001: 14). From this angle, populism would be a means to an end instead of an end in itself. The problem with this approach is that by focusing on strategies we lose sight of that what is specific about populism, first and foremost the category of the "people".

(c) *Populism as discourse*. That is, a discourse that pits the people against the elite. Populism would then not be a group of political beliefs, but a particular kind of political expression that makes itself explicit in texts and speeches (De la Torre 2010). Unlike previous approaches, this one makes it possible to see populism as a gradable and measurable propriety -one can be *more* or *less* populist. Whereas ideology and strategy incorporate a political program, a discourse can lack it: see Hugo Chávez, whose socialist ideology went side by side with a populist discourse (Hawkins 2010: 30-31).

(d) *Populism as a political logic*. According to Ernesto Laclau (2005), populism must be understood as a particular type of political logic: that which operates wherever a populist movement or leader creates a chain of equivalent demands from different social groups whose common feature is the opposition against the same enemy or system. Instead of disparate and fragmented demands, an unified one in the name of the people and against the elite. Moreover, as the people is *the* basic political subject, populism is not *a* political logic but *the* logic of the political. It must be noted that the political is not politics: it refers to the foundations of society, to the only-apparent consensus upon which a given social order rests. Yet the key contribution of Laclau is arguably the idea that the people is *made* and in fact it is the populist who *constitutes* it. The people, indeterminate as it is, does not exist prior to populism: the populism is a performative operation by which the people is named, and acted upon.

(e) *Populism as a political style*. Taking into account the medialization of contemporary life, this approach emphasizes those performative aspects of populism that goes beyond discourse, including its aesthetic and dramatic qualities. Populist leaders and movements create or disturb the public's subjectivity through a number of discursive and non-verbal tools, thus giving shape to the people (Moffit and Tormey 2014). From this point of view, populism is a communicative repertoire that anyone willing to *do* populism can employ. It can manifest itself in many different contexts and featuring different organizational forms, which helps to explain the populist contamination of the political mainstream (Pappas 2014). The decay of traditional cleavages and the greater volatility of the electorate increase the importance of such instruments: the pervasiveness of media forces political actors to act and to project themselves through media channels in the public, private and institutional spheres (Corner 2003). For proponents of this view, populism is a political style that employs the antagonism people/elite, exhibits "bad manners" and stages a crisis or a threat to acquire public support (Moffit 2016: 45).

It is not easy to say which of these approaches tells us the truth about a phenomenon so rich in empirical expressions as intricated in theoretical meanings. Actually, nothing forces us to choose just one of them. Populism has been described as a discourse *and* a strategy (De la Torre 2010: 7); it has also been argued that it can operate in several ways, for instance as ideology and strategy (Van Kessel 2015). Therefore, nothing prevents us from seeing populism as a thin ideology that, through a performative political style, exhibits substantial and adjective elements as well as discursive and non-discursive ones, operating *de facto* as an strategic political mobilization whose goal is to shift the public discourse and/or to conquest power in a democratic fashion. That said, understanding populism mostly as a political style -a definition that does not prevent it from being also a thin ideology- presents a number of advantages when dealing with the affective and digital dimensions of contemporary populism. Let us turn our attention to them.

### **3. Populism in a sentimental democracy.**

Populism is an intensely affective phenomenon. Juan Perón, the successful leader of Argentine's *peronismo* said it himself: "Populism is a matter of the heart rather than the head". Yet it is now that the affective core of populism can be underlined more confidently, thanks to the progress made in the study of emotions. In other words, to recognize the emotional quality of the populist style is one thing, to understand how such technique can be politically effective -mobilizing enough popular support- is another. Obviously, it would be absurd to suggest that populism is the only political movement that employs an emotional language or tries to elicit emotions in the public in order to realize its ends. Whatever can be said of *populist* emotions, then, can also be said of *socialist* or *liberal* or *conservative* ones: every ideology deploys an affective regime and mobilize particular emotions, thus investing certain words (equality, freedom, tradition, womanhood, nature) with special affective qualities. After all, if emotions play a larger role than previously thought in how individuals perceive public issues, appraise them, and make political decisions -such is arguably the key insight of the whole affective turn (see Arias Maldonado 2016)-, this cannot happen *just* to populist followers but to all of them. Still, populism stands out in this respect for a number of reasons.

Crucially, populism is the political ideology -or style- that most openly challenges the idea that democracies are rational constructions or are conceived of as heading towards social rationality (see Villacañas 2015: 15-16). According to populism, society cannot rely upon a rational foundation -hence its frontal attack on liberalism and the vindication of an emotional social bond. Populism can be said to share that belief with conservatism or communitarism, which however retains a faith in social consensus that populists -especially contemporary ones in their alignment with agonist democrats- tend to abhor. The affective core of populism reveals itself in the display of an emotional language that is both verbal and non-verbal, in the relationship between the leader and the followers, as well as in the make-up of a collective subject (the people) that stands against its enemies (the elite, or the establishment).

The populist leader is central to the populist affective strategy. On the one hand, the leader makes it possible for the follower to identify herself with the movement (Villacañas 2015). The leader *embodies* the abstraction that the "people" is -moreover, he comes to *personify* the people upon which the entire populist building rests. Hugo Chávez expressed it impeccably: "I am not an individual. I am the people". Likewise, the French National Front played with its founder's surname in order to suggest the same idea: "Le Pen=Le Peuple". Thus the charismatic leader provides some solidity to the people that is *created* by uttering it, turning the negative feelings aroused in the public against the elite (to be blamed for the unmet social needs) into positive feelings towards both the leader and the communitarian project that she represents. For Laclau (2005: 131, 142), who dwells upon psychoanalytic theory, the "people" is created through an investing operation that belongs to the emotional realm: we provide it with symbolic and affective force. This means that in a perception that is *saturated* with affect and is thus far from objective or neutral (see Kahneman 2003), we will make an spontaneous and positive appraisal of both the populist leader and the people he names -and to which we feel thus attached.

Admittedly, political science has a problem with the notion of "charisma". Despite its Weberian genealogy, it must be accepted with caution -mostly because it is hardly a "scientific" concept due to the difficulties encountered when trying to measure it. After all, there are not universal charismatic features: different societies will be sensitive to different charismatic styles (contrast Donald Trump with Angela Merkel) depending on their histories, political cultures, and contemporary predicaments. Besides, the image of the charismatic leader is also the outcome of a construction and staging process. And yet charismatic leaders cannot be manufactured at will, so that there remains some truth to the category. In any case, populist movements tend to depend on their founding leaders and it is reasonable to affirm that they play a key part in setting up the emotional regime of their movements. In this connection, it has already been mentioned that the mark of the outsider is probably the most commonly shared feature of the populist style of leadership. This provides the latter with a solid confrontational narrative -an anti-establishment one- that chimes well with voters in turbulent times. This is hardly surprising: another insight from the affective turn concerns the key

role of stories and frames in provoking an answer on the part of the voter's "emotional brain" (see Westen 2007). Populists are not necessarily master storytellers, but their narrative is powerful because it is based on the human propensity to tribal identification, an emotional phenomenon if there ever was one.

In this case, the tribes in question are the people and the elite, i.e. the people *against* the elite. But a similar mechanism is operating in the workings of ethnic nationalism when the nation is pitted against its external -or even internal- enemies. Then again, the nationalist overtones of right-wing populism are clearly visible. This sense of belonging is a key aspect of political emotionality: we tend to identify ourselves with one group as opposed to the others. Greene (2013) explains it as an evolutionary response: the very same mechanisms that have facilitated social intra-group cooperation complicate inter-group cooperation, thus separating human beings in different moral tribes attached to different values and worldviews. Paraphrasing Kahneman, he distinguishes between a *slow* morality and a *fast* one: the former is linked to cognition and the latter to intuition; one is flexible and the other efficient. In adhering to our group -as in the people of populism- we use the fast one. Moreover, as Haidt (2012) points out, tribal instinct not only facilitates intra-group cooperation, but also conditions our very perception of facts and values -so that we overestimate our group's virtues and underestimate those of others, normally without being aware of such bias. Yet the insight here is that the *content* of beliefs is less important than the *feelings* that we experience. Beliefs would rather be a pretext, a rationalization of those emotions that determine our attachment to the group we belong to.

Now, the "people" is not only defined by whom belongs to it, but also by whom is excluded from it: there is no *we* without *them*. As Reinhart Koselleck has shown in his semantic history of the concept, the people is defined according to two axis: above/down within the political community, inside/outside regarding its outline (Koselleck 1978: 145). In the case of populism, ethnicity is often a defining feature of their people, but there are other possibilities. The elite can comprise rich citizens, bankers, experts, journalists, politicians. It is even possible that the elite be accused of cooperating with some subaltern classes against the interests of the "real" people -as with the gypsy minority in Eastern Europe or the black community in the US (Müller 2016: 43). Very often, populism creates an enemy that helps to create a cohesive people united in this antagonism. But Laclau is right when he claims that people and elite are "empty signifiers", i.e. containers that can be filled with different contents depending on the type of populism involved or the political culture of a society. In any case, moral tribalism seems to have a biological basis that can either be softened or reinforced by cultural means -populism choosing to do the latter for its own political advantage and developing its particular political style.

The performative aspect of such style can also be related to the realm of affects. To begin with, the simplistic and politically incorrect language used by populist leaders must be understood as expression of the antagonism people/elite. Canovan (1981) speaks of a "tabloid style", whereas Moffit (2016: 55) alludes to the wider idea of the "bad manners" that pervades the whole performance of the populist leader, whose goal is to find a balance between looking both ordinary and extraordinary -since only by doing so can she be *like* the people and *unlike* the people. Clothing plays also an important role in differentiating the populist leader, be it through the indigenous attire of some Andean politicians or the rejection of the tie in the case of European neopopulist leftists. If we follow Ostiguy's (2009) distinction between the "high" and "low" in politics, populism embraces the latter. But the relationship with citizens, it must be insisted, is not set up only through discourse but with the help of a global *performance* that includes ideas, vocabulary, accent, corporal language, attire, even cultural taste. Thus it becomes clear how important the aesthetic (and hence perceptual) dimension of populism is, helping decisively to shape its particular "political style" (Hariman 1995, Pels 2003).

Let it be noted that for some authors even sensations can have a political meaning. If by sensation we understand a set of heterogeneous impulses that affects us without residing in a particular bodily organ, a sensational impact may suspend our way of looking at the world and hence become political

moments that invite us to renew the associations that shape our regime of perception. That is what Davide Panagia (2009), among others, claim. Subjectivity is thus dislocated due to an activity that takes place below and beyond discourse, as something separated from language -language being, in fact, a taming machine: a convention that de-activates the creative forces that operate in our pre-conscious life. Oddly enough, the political space where we can still be *affected* is beyond consciousness, since the body and the brain given an answer to the external stimuli before we are aware of them and can hence assign a meaning that is culturally inherited. Preconscious affects represent the possibility of difference for thinkers like Brian Massumi (1995), who are fascinated by the half-second which seems to pass between an electric stimulation on a patient is practiced and the individual experiences it subjectively. That reduced unit of time escapes to norms and conventions: sensations, thus, count. This framework can be used to understand the impact of populist performance, although it should be noted that these accounts are not entirely attuned to what contemporary psychobiology is saying (see Whetherell 2012: 62). Although the preconscious dimension of affect is chronologically prior to its cognitive assimilation, it does not exclude it. To say that meaning and language do not play a role in affective responses is mistaken -affect shows elements that are conscious and unconscious, bodily and cognitive, interrelated in complex ways. In any event, both language and sensations are relevant: we are perceptive beings endowed with senses that mediate our relationship to reality. We are sensitive to what we see, smell, touch. Such perceptions are not unknown to consciousness, but then again reactions to external stimuli cannot be controlled either.

#### **4. The digitization of the public sphere: post-truth, affective publics, and populism.**

Following the conceptualization of populism as a political style, it has been emphasized that it is the populist performance what most counts in the search for public support. Again, this performance does not only include verbal communication and the usage of words that possess a strong symbolic and affective power -such as "people" and "democracy"- but also non-verbal aspects of communication. They all contribute to the construction of a public image of the populist leader, which in turn is a magnet for the eyes of the people in a democratic society where such gaze is becoming much more relevant than people's voice (see Green 2015). Whence the increasing appeal of plebiscitarian answers to popular discomfort, which in turn helps populism to make its case regarding the dismantling of liberal-democratic intermediate bodies and guarantees and the advancement towards a "postrepresentative democracy" (see Urbinati 2014: 171). Of course, there has been populism since the nineteenth century -even before television existed. And for even a longer time there has been demagogues and prophets and charismatic leaders: all you need is a person and a crowd. But the digitization of the public sphere is a revolutionary phenomenon that seems to favour the kind of political performance that populism excel at *and* to facilitate the deployment of affective strategies: political emotions, populism, and new information technologies seem to converge in the new public sphere.

Needless to say, transformations in the public sphere must be watched closely -its key role in the functioning of contemporary democracies does not have to be stressed. But now that societies are increasingly medialized, democratic communication is at the center of politics as never before. There is a permanent war for winning over public perception in whichever issues are at the front of the public agenda, while at the same time fringe groups attempt -often successfully- to push their concerns just there. There is a paradox at work: governments must be persuasive in order to govern, but consent is harder to obtain than ever. One thing is to be elected, another to pass legislation: veto actors can be organized very easily and usually succeed in blocking positive governmental initiatives. Thus also the talk of a "permanent electoral campaign" (see Elmer *et al.* 2012) in which both governments and opposition find themselves to be. Rather than acting first and waiting for the electorate's judgement before the elections, all acting is now subordinated to the creation of the right effects among the public -being "right" those that provide an advantage in the polls. The populist leader, who is a natural contrarian and sees herself as leading a "movement" rather than a party, finds herself in a favourable situation.

Do social networks, through which most the digital public conversation takes place, makes political communication more emotional? Or does it rather reinforce its rational components and hence foster its deliberative functions? And how does it contribute to the workings of populism? Such questions must be answered without falling into the retrospective fallacy that idealizes the past use of public reason: the truth is that there is not, there has never been, a fully rational democracy.

Yet it is hard to claim that the digitization of the public sphere has so far *improved* public debate. If John Rawls (1993) could still invoke in the early nineties that there exists a duty to be civil when exchanging views with other citizens in the public sphere -a moral duty that can certainly not be enforced by the courts-, such civility seems to be more absent than ever in contemporary democracies. Things have certainly changed a lot very quickly. Now citizens are co-protagonists in the creation of opinion: vertical mass communication has given way to mass self-communication, where citizens create and distribute content that can be instantaneously discussed in both directions (Castells 2009). As for *how* these instruments -from blogs to social networks and comment sections in webpages- are used to debate political topics, it can be argued that "rhetorical rationalism" has been weakened while a more "authentic" language that privileges an emotional register, personal experience, and a suspicious attitude towards elites is becoming prevalent: a narrative rather than an argument (see Thompson 2016).

By providing each individual with a device from which to broadcast opinions in interaction with other opinions, social networks makes it easier for them to make a fetish of their opinions, which are affectively invested. So that personal opinions becomes a way of reinforcing our subjectivity, in that we try to differentiate ourselves from others by holding them (Vallespín 2012: 108). Thus the idea that we inhabit a "swarm democracy", a space populated by reactive crowds that move around propelled by a binary logic that either rejects or accepts what is found at social media: a white noise that hinder any mutual understanding (Han 2013). Social media do not foster a rational, informed deliberation -they modulate and amplify an atmosphere, a public mood. Persuasion is less usual than contagion and hence the strength acquired by the virus as a metaphor. Likewise, the public is more fragmented than in the past due to the sheer volume of platforms and channels on offer: profusion has reached a peak and makes it more difficult for different social or political groups to share a common space. Social networks and even blogs become "echo chambers" where we interact in isolation with those who already think what we think (see Sunstein 2008, Reese *et al.* 2007). A polarizing effect in the audience and thus in public conversation is warranted, which is actually the replication and reinforcement of a natural human propensity to polarization and miscommunication.

Now, online activity facilitates the creation of communities by dropping the costs of cooperation and hence also the creation of new publics (Howard and Hussain 2013). For some, however, they create less communities than "comunitarian feelings" or "the feeling to count" (Coleman 2013). It is a *connective* rather than a *collective* life; an emotionally charged connectivity. This is hardly surprising, given that networked communication "involve the circulation of data and information, but they equally entail a panoply of affective attachments" (Paasonen, Hillis and Petit, 2015: 1). At the same time, as if mirroring the populist leader, individual's participation in social media involve some degree of performativity -insofar as something is done while at the same time the action itself is underlined and decorated by the actor (Schechner 2002). We do, while seeing ourselves doing, knowing that others see us doing. This is not bad in itself, but is certainly far from what classical models of public opinion say about what the public sphere should be and how it should be formed. Papparachissi (2015: 26) is explicit when he says that the classical approach is based upon the idea that democracies are rational, when in fact they are chaotic enterprises trapped in a daily staging where *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* are all mixed up.

In this regard, it has been argued that democratic politics is noisy and cacophonous, so that we can question whether the rational or persuasive way of addressing the others (Panagia 2009: 48). At the same time, although digital pluralization is not inherently democratizing, social networks make it



possible for marginalized voices to be heard (see Bimber 1998, Berry *et al.* 2010). New opportunities for collective mobilization are also apparent, as anti-austerity movements in Europe and the US would show. In view of this heterogeneous landscape, Margetts *et al.* (2016: 206) talk of a "chaotic pluralism" that features a highly reactive public that operates under the influence of social networks, thus far from the Habermasian ideal. Digital technologies, in sum, reinforce the trend through which democracy becomes a battlefield for influence, i.e. influence on the way in which citizens perceive or frame issues, as a condition for political change.

But if rational persuasion is weakened, then we must assume that affective persuasion becomes prevalent. Voters become the recipient -but also transmitters- of deceptively simple messages that invoke political terms heavily invested with symbolic meaning and emotional valence. Now, as Neuman (2016) has argued, all communication is valenced. Yet digital technologies and social networks make it possible to create in voters the feeling that they are themselves directly addressed -an unmediated communication that, as Donald Trump's clever use of Twitter amply demonstrates, create a bond between followers and leaders that befits populist strategies. The reason is simple: while the anti-establishment discourse of populism entails a distrust of mainstream media and conventional politicians, social networks make it easier for populist movements to feed their followers with their own news. Thus the idea that we are in a post-factual democracy where facts have lost their persuasive value in public debate. Post-factualism or post-truth would at the same time be a cause and a consequence of populism: whereas on the one hand populism undermines the trust in experts and rational debate, the discredit of the former and the emergence of "truthiness" facilitate the rise of populism. Facts will not be judged according to their authenticity and the credibility of the source that reports them, but according to whether they *feel* right. How fast conspiracy theories circulate in the digital circuit attests to this worrying development. This is hardly new -the novelty lies in the voluntary isolation of the citizen who inhabit cognitive and affective bubbles where dissent is only too rare. Accordingly, if facts lose value, political performance becomes even more important. The populist style is thus favoured by digitization and while it is propelled by the unrest created by economic turmoil, it is also adopted by non-populist actors as a strategy to conquest or retain power or social influence.

It is still too soon to know whether these apparently substantial changes in the fabric of liberal democracies are also enduring or some kind of new equilibrium will be found after the first wave of social networking. So far, though, technology has made possible a mediated communication that however *feels* unmediated, thus tapping into the belief that we are empowered as citizens. Populism profits from this as well, since this political style relies not only upon the opposition between people and elite, but also upon democracy's ideology as the rule *of* the people *by* the people *for* the people. Such is democracy's ideology insofar as it is the creed that makes the system legitimate, even though democracy can only exist as a combination of democratic and liberal elements, i.e. as the uneasy mixture of popular support/pressure and representative/technocratic government (see Canovan 2005). No direct democracy is feasible in larger, complex societies. Yet populism acts as it were, while at the same time -through its performance- it *creates* the people so addressed. Thus the feeling of being *a* people, which is reinforced by direct communication through social media, is key to the contemporary success of populism. It should also be noted that within the digitized public sphere it is not only the populist leader that communicates with her followers, but also followers communicate among each others -mostly in short, subjective, and emphatic sentences or images that help to create a bond between them that in turn strengthen the people's idea. *Bonding* is the right verb, as it attests to the affective nature of the relationship between the movement's supporters. And this is overall an important caveat, since it adds to the explanation the new nature of the electorate-cum-audience. Paraphrasing Neuman's (2016) choice of words, they are not only *pushed* (by traditional media or the populist leader) because they also *pull* (by engaging actively in digital media or keeping up the digital bonding that expresses support for the populist movement).

## 5. Conclusion: Towards a Populist Age?

This paper has reflected upon the convergence of three related phenomena: the rise of populism, the increasing sentimentalization of democracies, and the digitization of the public sphere. They are related, in the sense that enlightening connections can be found among them -but also in the sense that they reinforce each other. Populism is strengthened by digitization and affectively charged; sentimentalization is facilitated by digitization and expresses itself in populism; digitization shows an important expressive-cum-performative dimension and paves the way for a populist way of communication. If we focus on populism, though, the question is whether this convergence leads less to a populist moment than to a populist age, i.e. a time where the populist style pervades the mainstream and become a permanent feature of democratic life. In that regard, populism has been described as both a thin ideology that rests upon the opposition between people and elite and as a political style where the populist's performance plays a key role in creating the people itself making use of both verbal and non-verbal strategies of representation. A populist age would be one where *most* political actors adopt elements of the populist style.

Admittedly, it is hard to provide a definite answer to that question: insofar as a *sine qua non* of populism is the opposition between people and the elite and the demand for the general will of the people to become the main source of legitimacy for political decisions, not all leaders and parties will go that way. Yet it is becoming increasingly common, at least for now, that an anti-establishment position is adopted by contenders in the name of the people and grassroots democracy, be it against the incumbent government or the party leaders a contender is willing to challenge. Needless to say, the medialization of society is the main driver behind this trend, which in turn is turbocharged by the unrest unleashed by the financial crisis, increasing inequality and robotization. At the very least, the rise of populism is better understood in connection to digitization and sentimentalization -the latter being simultaneously a new phenomenon and a new understanding of an old one. Unmediated communication (or the appearance of such), the fragmentation of the public opinion, the creation of echo chambers and cognitive bubbles, the reinforcement of moral tribalism, the spread of a political language that is emotionally persuasive rather than deliberatively rational, the increasing relevance of the visual, the shift towards permanent electoral campaigns -all these developments attest to the explanatory relevance of both digitization and sentimentalization, while at the same time are beneficial to what populism *says* and *do* for reasons that hopefully have become clear throughout the paper. Even if we are not entering into a populist age, the political style of populism is one of the defining features of the age.

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