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THE LIBERAL TRAP HOW DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSE ENABLES ILLIBERAL POLITICS¹

ABSTRACT: This article investigates the internal tensions of Liberal Democracy through the lens of discourse and political language, with particular attention to the rise of populist narratives. Far from being an external threat, populism emerges as a product of democracy itself, appropriating its symbolic repertoire – such as freedom, sovereignty, representation, and transparency – to construct a rhetoric of rupture. This dynamic generates what can be termed the ‘liberal trap’: populism legitimizes itself within democratic frameworks while simultaneously fostering illiberal practices that erode pluralism, checks and balances, and the substantive rule of law. By analyzing the semantic reconfigurations of key democratic concepts, the article highlights how language functions as both a vehicle of legitimacy and a mechanism of democratic corrosion. The study argues that populism should not be reduced to pathology or deviation but understood as a discursive transformation that reveals unresolved contradictions at the core of liberal democracy. In this way, populist discourse operates as both a symptom of systemic fragility and a catalyst of political change, illustrating how democratic ideals can be reappropriated and instrumentalized to undermine their very foundations.

Keywords: populism, liberal democracy, political discourse, democratic erosion, identity politics

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INTRODUCTION

The last three decades have been characterized by the dominance of liberal thought. The end of the Second World War swept away fascist ideology, while the collapse of the Soviet Union sealed the failure of communism. From this moment on, the perception has dominated that we have reached what Fukuyama calls the “End of History”,² in which humanity’s path of ideological evolution has found its perfect form in liberal democracy. Freedom, Democracy, and market economies became the mantra of the new free world, conquering a large number of states across the globe. And if there are realities that adopt different models, it has always been spoken of as deviation, rather than alternative. The victory of the liberal narrative, it was thought, has put humanity on the right track, on the right side of history.

However, the initial optimism and convictions are giving way to significant signs of crisis. Global economic crises, the return of war to the European continent, widespread geopolitical instability, the growing popularity of populist parties, are all symptoms of a crisis of the liberal system. These signs of instability do not seem to stem from an explicit rejection of the democratic model, but rather from a progressive internal transformation of it, which can have more or less severe consequences for a State’s democratic resilience. Liberal democracy, far from being a static and completed system, reveals itself to be rife with tensions that call into question its coherence and capacity for adaptation. To grasp the profound nature of this crisis, it is necessary to move beyond a merely geopolitical reading and adopt a theoretical perspective that allows us to question the discursive and symbolic forms through which democratic power legitimizes itself, communicates, and transforms.

This article proposes to analyze the internal tensions of the liberal system from the perspective of discourse and narratives. This contribution has three primary aims. First, to argue that populism doesn’t grow externally to democracy but can be framed as an endogenous phenomenon that grows from its very discursive fabric. Second, to demonstrate how populism achieves this through an operation of emptying democratic terms – such as freedom, sovereignty and security – which are then reused in an exclusive and antagonistic key.³ Finally, to introduce the mechanisms of this liberal trap, whereby democratic discourse itself becomes the vehicle for its own potential erosion. This argument is motivated by the constitutive nature of language, one of the pillars of modern democratic societies. Through language – and its evolution – it becomes possible to grasp the causes, effects, and mechanisms through which a society evolves. The discussion begins with the definition of general concepts such as populism and liberal democracy, and then moves on to the discursive dimension. The main thesis is that populist and anti-establishment narratives are products of democracy, and as such, can

² F. Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” in R.K. Betts (ed.), *Conflict after the Cold War. Arguments on Causes of War and Peace*, New York 1992, p. XI.

³ E. Laclau, “Populism: What’s in a Name?,” in F. Panizza (ed.), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, London 2005, p. 2.

be used as indicators of the effectiveness and resilience of the liberal system. These narratives do not necessarily emerge in opposition to democratic discourse, but develop within it, exploiting its rhetorical and symbolic resources.

In particular, populism appropriates foundational concepts of democracy – such as popular sovereignty, representation, and transparency – to construct a rhetoric of rupture that, while maintaining a democratic form, can lead to illiberal practices. Analyzing populist political language thus means questioning the ambiguities and tensions that run through contemporary democratic discourse. The present contribution aims to explore these dynamics, showing how language can act as a bridge between democratic legitimacy and its erosion. Through a discursive and symbolic analysis, it will seek to shed light on the mechanisms through which democratic power transforms, and how such transformations can pave the way for forms of government that, while operating within the framework of democracy, undermine its substantive principles. The complexity of the topic makes it necessary to clarify the two main components of this article: populism and liberal democracy. Both concepts are widely used in the academic world as well as in the social sphere, yet they lack a single, universally accepted definition. This article does not aim to provide a totalizing definition, but limits itself to offering an operational one, necessary for understanding the relationship between political language (as a democratic practice) and illiberal tendencies. In other words, the goal is not to exhaust the theoretical complexity of concepts like populism or liberal democracy, but to identify their essential characteristics in order to conduct an analysis on a discursive level. In this sense, the present contribution aims to analyze the crisis of liberal democracy starting from its discursive manifestations, with particular attention to the role of populist political language and its rhetorical strategies.

THE PROFILE OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Undoubtedly, liberal democracy is one of the most studied and debated forms of government. However, it cannot be stated with certainty that there is a single, unambiguous definition capable of capturing its nuances, limitations, and mechanisms in absolute terms. This paragraph does not aim to provide one but attempts, at the very least, to extrapolate its fundamental concepts and characteristics, useful for grasping its dynamic nature and internal tensions. On a general level, this form of government combines the concept of democracy with that of liberalism. From the former, it inherits the idea of popular sovereignty, participation, political equality, and the criterion of representation. From the latter, however, derive the centrality of the individual and reason, upon which the cardinal principles of civil coexistence are based, regulated by individual rights and the rule of law. Therefore, liberal democracy is an empirical product born from the encounter of two distinct traditions. In its institutionalized form, there is a need to reconcile collective power (democracy) with the rights of the individual (liberalism). This association is far from static and constitutes the source of the various declinations of liberal democracy. As Kenneth Bollen emphasizes, the democratic

system is measurable across various aspects:⁴ from income equality to the propensity for conflict, from the quality of political participation to the protection of civil rights. This highlights how liberal democracy is not a monolithic concept, but rather a complex set of dimensions that can vary depending on historical and institutional contexts. Indeed, not all liberal democracies are the same: they are characterized by fundamental principles (free elections, pluralism, the rule of law) but differ in how they implement and balance their constituent traits.

According to The Economist's Global Democracy Index for 2024, only 6.6% of the world's population lives in a full democracy, and the global average shows a significant downgrade in terms of democratic experience, falling from a score of 5.5 in 2015 to 5.1.⁵ This data reflects not only a geographic regression of democracy but also a qualitative one, in which liberal forms of government appear to be experiencing an erosion of popularity. This erosion is often driven by actors and movements that operate within the formal framework of democracy, yet challenge its liberal principles, as widely evidenced by the experience of symbolic countries such as Italy, France, Germany, Poland, and the United States itself. In academic debate, several figures have emphasized the endogenous nature of populism, asserting that it is not an external pathogen attacking the democratic organism, but rather a symptom of its own internal pathologies or unresolved tensions. This article positions itself within this literature and shares the idea that there is no populism without a democratic container. The next paragraph will focus on the logics and distinctive traits of populism, aiming to outline a theoretical framework for analyzing how it, as a symptom, feeds on the resources of its very host to gain legitimacy and popularity.

POPULISM: LOGICS AND DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

When referring to the term populism, one is never able to provide a clear and complete definition. It is a term that is very present in academic literature as much as in civil society. The former has tried to define its origins, development, and characteristics, emphasizing certain aspects more than others. The latter, however, uses it by attaching a negative connotation, as a mark of repulsion towards democracy and its values. This article does not aim to provide a generic definition but proposes to focus on the discursive practices and rhetorical strategies through which populism manifests itself as a contemporary political phenomenon. Much has been debated about the definition of populism: there is no consensus on whether it is a thin centered ideology,⁶ a discursive

⁴ K. Bollen, "Liberal Democracy: Validity and Method Factors in Cross-National Measures," *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 37, no. 4 (1993), pp. 1207-1208.

⁵ "The Global Democracy Index: How Did Countries Perform in 2024?," *The Economist*, 27 February 2025, at <https://www.economist.com/interactive/democracy-index-2024>, 22 October 2025.

⁶ C. Mudde, C.R. Kaltwasser, *Populism. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2017, p. 6.

logic,⁷ a political strategy,⁸ or a style of doing politics.⁹ This multiplicity of approaches testifies to the complexity of the topic, but there are recurring elements for which fundamental logics and characteristics can be identified. A suitable starting point can be the definition provided by Nadia Urbinati: *Populism consists in a transmutation of the democratic principles of the majority and the people in a way that is meant to celebrate one subset of the people as opposed to another, through a leader embodying it and an audience legitimizing it.*¹⁰

This definition effectively captures the heart of the phenomenon: populism forms and develops within the democratic context, not in opposition to it. The liberal trap that this article aims to describe has its core in the aforementioned concept of *transmutation*. Since populism operates primarily within democratic contexts, legitimizing itself through mechanisms guaranteed by the constitution, it must necessarily employ liberal language and symbols to legitimize its political positions. Before delving into the linguistic element, there are macro characteristics by which one can at least recognize the occurrence of populism.

The first fundamental element is the people/elite dichotomy as a discursive matrix. Populist epistemology reduces reality to a consolidated Manichean division between the righteous people and the corrupt elite. This division is not political and transcends party affiliation, aiming to split society into factions. Generally, the people are presented as virtuous and the repository of authentic values, while the elite is portrayed as a sort of sabotaging hand, described as unreliable, distant, and opposed to the general will.

The second element concerns anti-pluralism as a logical consequence of the Manichean opposition. The previous paragraph highlighted pluralism as a fundamental pillar of liberal democracy. However, this very dualistic vision of society seems to stand in contrast with populist manifestations. Since populism embodies the righteous and honest part of society, no political alternative is automatically considered valid. Recalling Urbinati's definition, populism involves the celebration of one part of the people. The element of celebration serves to invest the people with a mission of redemption and retaliation. The direct consequence is the invalidation of all political alternatives, which become illegitimate and enemies of the people.

The final element concerns the figure of the charismatic leader as a device for simplification and aggregation. Up to this point, we have consistently referred to the phenomenon of populism, but the central and fundamental role belongs to the figure of the leader, who gives shape and coherence to the movement. Personalities like Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, and Giorgia Meloni perfectly embody this figure. A crucial

⁷ E. Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?...", p. 2.

⁸ K. Weyland, "Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach," in C.R. Kaltwasser et al. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford 2017, p. 55.

⁹ B. Ardit, *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism. Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation*, Edinburgh 2007, p. 61.

¹⁰ N. Urbinati, "Political Theory of Populism," *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 22 (2018), p. 111.

trait is their relationship with the people. The democratic tradition teaches the principle of representation, through which civil society chooses to vote for a representative to mediate diverse and conflicting interests. The populist logic is the opposite and starts from the bottom up. The leader is a charismatic figure who is perceived as the very embodiment of the people. They do not necessarily have to be righteous or equal to the people, but they must share the people's mindset. Figures like Donald Trump or Silvio Berlusconi are far from being common people themselves, but through a process, they have managed to reinvent themselves and construct their political identity.¹¹

Giorgia Meloni, for example, describes herself as *The underdog, who must defy all odds to succeed*, positioning herself as a disruptive and underdog figure, meaning someone who feels excluded or marginalized by the political and social system. Similarly, Matteo Salvini presents himself as the spokesperson for the people against the elite, synthesizing this contrast through slogans like *ordinary men, the people versus the elite, the square versus the palace*. Statements like these maximally express the rhetoric of the underdog, the direct identification with the people, the binary construction of reality, the personalization of power, the appeal to national sovereignty, and anti-pluralism, which is perceived not as democratic competition but as sabotage. Precisely these statements, however, lead us to the heart of the matter to be addressed here: the logic and characteristics of populism cannot function if confined to an abstract theoretical framework. The chameleonic nature of populism demands a study based on context, culture, and especially its linguistic and discursive manifestations. The contextual dimension is crucial: populism cannot be understood as a monolithic and unitary phenomenon, but as a set of discursive practices rooted in the socio-cultural fabric of a society. The charismatic leader draws on this context to construct rhetoric and channel political dissent. Therefore, populism can manifest in multiple forms depending on cultural and contextual factors. This approach recognizes the limitations of studies focused solely on language, which alone cannot capture the full complexity of the populist phenomenon, but it constitutes a privileged field of analysis and a fundamental operational mechanism. This is because populism legitimizes itself within the democratic game, accepting its modes and practices.

What an analysis of language and narratives can reveal is the logic behind the construction of a narrative aimed at achieving political power. Language is the place where the transmutation of democratic principles occurs, where concepts like *nation, people, sovereignty, and security* are emptied out in favor of a conflictual, polarizing, and exclusive meaning. The next paragraph will investigate this aspect, showing how the resemanticization of the liberal vocabulary can pave the way for illiberal practices.

¹¹ A. Schedler, "Anti-Political-Establishment Parties," *Party Politics*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1996), pp. 298-299.

THE LINGUISTIC APPROPRIATION OF DEMOCRATIC IDEALS

The concept of Freedom is the founding value of democracy. It applies to the spheres of religion, thought, expression, and the individual, to guarantee pluralism and institutionalize manifestations of dissent. Following the brutality of the World Wars and totalitarian regimes, freedom was the primary achievement of the societies that chose to rebuild an institutional model based on respect for human rights, the separation of powers, and democratic competition, in which everyone has the right to participate. However, it is precisely this concept that is at the center of a crucial semantic battle within the liberal trap. The crisis of liberal democracy does not stem from an explicit rejection of its ideals, but from a progressive internal erosion legitimized by its own means. The populist narrative does not reject the principle of freedom; on the contrary, it repositions it at the center while remodulating its meaning and instrumentalizing it in a particularistic and antagonistic key. Among their key characteristics, populist leaders present themselves as simple people who embody the authentic populace whose freedom to assert itself is being denied.

This is what happens, for example, regarding freedom of expression. Populist figures like Salvini, Meloni, or Trump claim a freedom of expression that has, in reality, always existed. However, their rhetoric performs a subtle but decisive twist: they transform a guaranteed right into a victimistic claim of denied freedom. They thus create a perceptual paradox whereby, despite enjoying broad media visibility and political influence, they present themselves as victims of oppressive censorship by the elite. This mechanism, besides fueling a sentiment of dissatisfaction due to the unfulfilled promises of the liberal model (welfare, stability, and inclusion), acts as an aggregator of discontent.

In this sense, populism operates according to the logic theorized by Ernesto Laclau: it manages to condense a series of unsatisfied demands (economic instability, public order, immigration, security, healthcare, education) by creating a chain of equivalence, unifying them around empty signifiers like nation or freedom. This means that populist concepts of the people and freedom are artificially constructed, with the aim of producing a perpetual mobilization. This process reveals and exploits what can be defined as the liberal paradox: the democratic system is based on the principle of tolerance. However, to preserve its own survival, it must necessarily place a limit on intolerance. Therefore, when populist parties appeal to freedom of expression to legitimize discourses that undermine the foundations of civil coexistence, they place democracy before a seemingly unsolvable dilemma: can a certain expression be denied without betraying one's commitment to freedom itself? The nature of this paradox produces, according to democratic norms, opposing opinions and visions.

What is extraordinary, however, is not the dissent itself, but the toxic quality that populist discourse impresses upon the debate. Polarization and radicalization, normally necessary elements for a democratic confrontation, are not an accidental byproduct, but rather the strategic objective. As emerged in the previous paragraphs, the populist dichotomy does not envisage debate, but the prevarication of one subset of people over

the whole. The debate is not conducted to foster participation and democracy, but to delegitimize and discredit opponents, regardless of their political color. Simplicity, transgression, radicalization, and polarization are the key ingredients for the populist mixture, guaranteeing disruptiveness and effectiveness in political discourse. Extremely complex themes like immigration, public security, or precariousness are deliberately reduced to slogans to attract consensus. The frequency of emergency and securitization frames for issues like immigration negatively impacts citizens' perceptions, producing radical responses.

However, populism unites dissent but does not create it. Liberal democracy, a young and complex form of government, is going through a period of crisis independent of the proliferation of populist parties. The link between the crisis and populist proliferation is direct, because charismatic leaders are skilled at grasping, collecting, and directing the various reasons for dissent, speaking to the gut of the people.

CONCLUSION

This article has described the crisis of liberal democracy in relation to the proliferation of populist movements. The word 'movement' is used here to emphasize the anti-establishment and disruptive connotation of such parties. Liberal democracy is a complex, dynamic, and debated form of government, but one can at least identify some fundamental pillars: 1) The Rule of Law and popular sovereignty. 2) Political and social pluralism. 3) Checks and balances. These three principles do not exhaust the fundamental characteristics of the liberal system, but they are the foundation from which the crisis springs. The word 'Freedom' is crucial in this sense, as by its very definition it implies the principle of tolerance. On the other hand, defining populism proves to be extremely more complicated. This article argues that it can necessarily only arise in a democratic context, precisely because of the characteristics of the liberal system. Among its main logics and characteristics, the following stand out: 1) The Manichean division of society, where a righteous minority is opposed to a corrupt elite. 2) Anti-pluralism as a direct consequence of the Manichean division, because if the people are inherently right, there is an a priori delegitimization of any opponent. 3) The figure of a charismatic leader as a device for simplification and aggregation.

The central thesis of this article is that populism is not an external pathogen to democracy, but rather a pathological transformation made possible by its own foundational categories. The analysis of language thus becomes crucial, because populism feeds on and develops from democratic principles. It uses democratic tools to potentially undermine the very values themselves. This is the liberal trap: the democratic crisis exists outside of populism (economic crises, welfare setbacks, security issues) but is consumed by an internal erosion. Therefore, the proliferation of populist movements testifies to the weakness of the current system, but also offers important insights for countering this trajectory.

One of the main problems lies in the journalistic and communicative apparatus in general. The enormous exposure to information, the pursuit of headlines and simplification, create fertile ground for populist rhetoric, which thrives on Manichean simplification and emotional framing. Complex issues are reduced to slogans, turning debate into clash. In this context, fact-checking struggles to keep pace with the production of like-grabbing and polarizing content. However, the very linguistic and discursive nature of this challenge also indicates the possible direction for an effective response. If the trap is based on the appropriation and twisting of the democratic vocabulary, the reaction can only stem from a semantic reappropriation of the key terms of democracy. Although this proposal may appear reductionist, it provides a necessary starting point for addressing the symbolic dimension of democratic erosion.

This process involves identifying the semantic shift (eg. freedom as a guarantee of pluralism turned into freedom as a right to exclude), exposing its instrumental artificiality, and redefining the signifier by linking it to inclusive practices and institutional frameworks.

In this sense, the Italian debate on the so-called 'Naval blockade' (*blocco navale*) is emblematic: a legally impracticable measure in peacetime, yet discursively powerful because it resonates with cultural anxieties about migration and security. Here, political discourse distorts the concept of national sovereignty. An unfeasible measure is framed as the authentic expression of popular will, resulting in a polarized clash between the judiciary and the political class. This dynamic emerges clearly when Giorgia Meloni states: *I perceive a political design behind certain decisions of the judiciary, particularly those concerning immigration issues, as if, in some way, there were an intention to hinder our efforts to combat illegal immigration.* Such framing constructs judicial oversight not as a constitutional safeguard but as an illegitimate obstacle to sovereignty, reinforcing the populist narrative of an elite conspiring against the people's will. A semantic reappropriation would restore its meaning as lawful capacity exercised through cooperative governance and respect for international norms.

However, semantic reappropriation cannot succeed as a purely rhetorical exercise when empirical evidence contradicts the redefined meaning. Appeals to inclusive language sound hollow if urban spaces display insecurity or unmanaged flows. Populist actors exploit this feasibility gap, portraying liberal discourse as detached from reality and in opposition to the general will of the people. Closing this gap requires coupling discursive strategies with credible policy delivery – effective migration governance, social safety nets, and urban security – so that normative language aligns with lived experience. From this perspective, there is a lack of references regarding the impact of factors such as distrust in institutions, the poor quality of political proposals, and the limited success of opposition parties. An analysis of these elements could shed more light on the catalysts of populism, linking the communicative dimension to the normative one.

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