

Report on STSM in Perugia University, 2015 May 5-20
dr. Péter Csigó

In the Short Term Scientific Mission framework of COST Action 1318? I have spent 15 days (May 5 - 20) in the Political Science Department of Perugia University. Formally, I have visited Professor Paolo Mancini, but I have developed good collegial relationship with prof. Mancini's nearest colleagues, like dr. Marco Mazzoni and dr. Alessio Cornia. During my stay in Perugia, I had several occasion to discuss professional issues with members of the Department. Prof. Mancini was kind to invite me to give a lecture in front of the research group "Information, Communication and Democracy". In the lecture I talked about the key topic of my forthcoming book (The Neopopular Bubble, CEU Press, 2016) : how today's system of "mediatized populist democracy", the most typical configuration of late modern politics, is shaped by a process of collective speculation about "the people" and the people's will. The comments made by research group members helped me better articulate my key point that today's "partyless" populist democracy (as Peter Mair has called today's political systems that have emerged after the collapse of mass parties embedded in civil society) necessarily harbours a self-referential, self-enclosed collective speculation about "the popular", an imitative process in which political actors' main preoccupation is to imitate each other's successful strategies (similarly to the herd behaviour typical to speculating investors at financial markets). The examples that colleagues in Perugia have mentioned in the Q&A of my lecture offered particularly interesting insights into Italian politics. We had an interesting and substantive debate about whether politicians' populist competition for representing "the people's will" reflects the real affinities and expectations of popular media using voters, or it is a self-feeding vicious spiral that is driven by its own inner logic.

My discussions with prof. Mancini, dr. Mazzoni and dr. Cornia have revolved around three key questions, all of key importance to the development of my research projects in the COST Action framework. (1) The first of the three topics has been the growing presence of cognitive or epistemic "bubbles" in the late modern information society, bubbles in which participants engage in a collective sense making process and create a common universe in which only filtered evidence is available about the world. Dr. Cornia has shared evocative insights about his previous research about Italian journalists in the Brussels 'news bubble' in which reporters of all European nations collectively produce a certain imagery of the European House. (The Europeanization of Mediterranean journalistic practices and the Italianization of Brussels: Dynamics of the interaction between EU institutions and national journalistic cultures. European Journal of Communication 25(4) 366–381) Dr. Mazzoni has added to this his research experience on why and how televised and TV-triggered gossip plays an increasing role as a channel of collective sense making in politics. (An incomplete transition? How Italian politicians manage the celebritisation of politics. Celebrity Studies, 5(2) 2014) (2) The second strand of our discussions revolved around the notion of populism as a key, inevitable feature of mediatized politics. We have discussed, along the argument of prof. Mancini's recent book, the figure of Berlusconi as a key impersonator of mainstream populism in a mediatized democracy. We have agreed that it is probably a mistake to identify populism with the revolt of antiestablishment forces. Instead, populist logic need sto be seen as a key generative force at the very heart of the system of mediatized democracy. (3) The third key point of our discussions has concerned the importance of international comparative research in the study of populism and mediatization. Following the argument of prof. Mancini's book Comparing Media Systems, we have agreed that although the flows of globalization have pushed media and politics towards an American-type model in each national context, this process of convergence has been considerably modified by national specifics.

Consulting the Perugia scholars about the three above vital issues has allowed my to develop during my stay in Perugia the grounds of the theoretical article and of the research initiative that I

have forecasted to prepare in my application for STSM. My further projects will be based on a critique of the established Canon of populism research in media and political studies. In Perugia, I have elaborated the key points where my alternative understanding differs from the Canon, and also I have established the Canon's key shortcomings which call for repair.

The Canonic Model versus the Alternative Model

Definition of populism

The canonic model (Mudde, Canovan, Taggart, Laclau, Mény-Surel, Howard, Jaspers-Walgrave, etc.) defines populism as an ideological-rhetorical articulation of anti-establishment popular revolt.

The alternative model (that I have developed following the works of Mair, Ankersmit, Manin, Crouch or Touraine) defines populism as the generative operational code of late modern mediatized democracy.

The two alternative definitions are based on three radically different understandings of today's politics.

1. Intra-systemic cleavage (in space) versus inter-systemic cleavage (in time)

The Canon envisions that the democratic political sphere is divided by an apparent cleavage separating the non-populist establishment from its populist anti-establishment opposition. The intra-systemic cleavage that separates the nonpopulist center from the populist margins is one that inevitably appears in every democratic system, due to the inevitable failure of central actors to live up to the idealized promises of democracy.

The Alternative model envisions a temporal, inter-systemic divide that separates the populist present from the non-populist past, that means, today's "populist democracy" from yesterday's mass party and class based democracy. Today's democracy is necessarily populist because it is a "partyless democracy" that is devoid of large mass parties embedded in large social groups that could serve as primary referential frames for political action. In the post mass party universe, all political parties are populist because the main point of reference of their actions is the imagined, universal figure of „the people”.

2. The key generative trope of research : the populist-nonpopulist axis versus collective populist traps

In the Canon, the main preoccupation of research is to distinguish populist entities (actors, performances, texts, media, rhetorics, ideology) from nonpopulist ones. In this binarizing enterprise, the pole of populism is constructed as a realm of sovereignist ideology, antielitism, urge for direct popular power, emotionalism, the exclusion of Others, rejection of pluralism and complexity, while the imagined pole of nonpopulism is constructed with the tropes of liberal pluralism, constitutionalism, the mediation and constraint of majoritarian power, rationality, lack of excess, long-term thinking, awareness of complexity.

Seen from the Alternative approach, which opposes a non-populist past (of democracy as class struggle) with the populist present of democracy as a mediatized struggle, the mechanisms of

populism penetrate the whole the contemporary political system and not just certain (anti-establishment) parts of it. Thus the axis of populism versus nonpopulism is marginal in to an alternative concept, namely that all political actors are hostage of the logic of populist politicking. Populism is a collective trap, or a “social trap” in Platt's sense of the word, where actors over-exploit a common resource of democracy (the people's will and the people's interest as key justification principles) that all actors would like to profit from at the same time.

3. The main manifestations of populism : apparent rhetorical-ideological performances versus the politics shaping power of a specific operational code

For the mainstream Canon, populism is a fixed rhetorical-ideological configuration of a sovereignist ideology and a communicative-rhetorical style being performed in public communication. Populism, then, is primarily defined on the basis of its apparent, well-definable, formal communicative articulations.

Seen from the Alternative model, populism cannot be defined on the basis of apparent rhetorical and ideological performance, because it can manifest itself in all imaginable (diametrically opposed) forms of public communication. Instead, populism should be grasped as a generative principle of doing politics (communication but also policy making) in a way that is optimized to win the support of “the people” instead of representing the interests of a particular social group. Populism, then, is a background code of operation, which absolutely revolves around winning support through popular media communication, however, cannot be linked to some privileged genres of communication, since it can find its expression in any genre that an actor speculating on „the people” finds appropriate in a given context.

The critique of the Canon

The mainstream Canon has usefully mapped the “populist challenges” to democratic politics, however, it has reached its limits and its validity needs to be put to the probe of rival approaches. The Canon blinds its protagonists to the followings.

1--. The Canon offers an ahistorical model about how the edifice of democracy is necessarily exposed to the revolt of outside contenders. This static model veils the fact that today's “populism at all levels” is a historic answer to the dramatic emptying of democratic institutions of political representation (parties, unions, associations) in the last decades. The Canon is insensitive to the basic flaws of the new, mediatized system of intermediation (media management, image making, marketing) that has taken over the representative functions of disintegrated mass political organizations. This new system of intermediation is not able to connect the state and the citizen, instead, pushes political actors into a speculative competition for opular success.

2. The Canon is irreflexive to its own implication into the discourse of the analyzed actors. Too often (and with important exception like Laclau), mainstream scholars simply rewrite a 200 years old rationalist discourse, by which the then exclusivist system of liberal democracy tried to defend itself from the dangers of an uncivilized “people ante portas” whose claim for mass entrance risks to ruin the edifice of democracy. The Canon falls too close to the establishment's justification of today's elitist democracy in which clever technocratic leaders are supposed to govern the unpolitical people.

3--. The Canon is blind to the “populist traps and fences” that may entrap political actors. Increasingly, political actors find themselves in situations where populist race seems to be the only option that to the expectations of the people. These populist traps and fences penetrate politics at all levels: we may think here on media frenzies and hypes, on the journalistic coverage of extremist parties' scandalous acts, on politicians' licit of untenable promises, and so on.

4--. The Canon systematically blinds itself to the populism of those actors who seek to fulfil their populist strategy through seemingly non-populist communicative means. However, the mere fact that an actor uses sober, modest, self-constrained, rational rhetorics does not make it non-populist. In recent international debates about Europe, the infamous North-South axis has been constructed by populist actors at both sides. No matter how sober and civilized rhetorics some Northern/German politicians have used when they stepped up in the name of their “hard-working, responsible, rational Northern/German people”, their discourse was not a single bit less populist than were the demagogic examples of Southern politicians calling for a “freedom fight”. Although using very different communicative means, both positions follow the populist strategy of constructing a position of a morally superior „people” that would surpass other „peoples”.

My stay in Perugia has been extremely useful to elaborate the above basic points, that will serve as the ground for the forthcoming article and research initiative that I mentioned in my STSM application and that I will elaborate in the next weeks.