POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVES ON POPULISM

Gilda Sensales
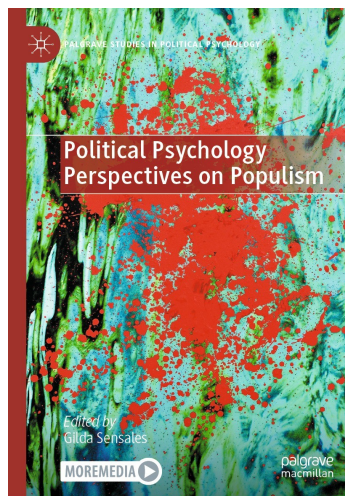
By Annamaria Silvana de Rosa, Former Full Professor of Social Representations and Communication with Laboratory of New Media and web-Marketing, Faculty of Medicine and Psychology, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy. January 2025.

The book 'Political Psychology Perspectives on Populism'- published in 2024 on the initiative of Gilda Sensales (Sapienza University of Rome, Italy) - adds significant value to the exponentially growing transdisciplinary interest in the controversial topic of 'populism'. As highlighted in the book's introductory chapter, this growing interest is evidenced not only by multiplied number of citations of the keyword 'populism' in the Google Scholar database from 21.900 during 1990-2000 to 73.000 between 2021-2021 (Caiani & Graziano, 2022), but also by the impressive number of handbooks published since 2017 and many other publications as book chapters or articles in international journals and special issues.

The editor Gilda Sensales has integrated her long-standing interest in the history of psychology, the theoretical trajectories in social psychology and the field of political psychology in a psychosocial perspective. Through a dialogue between disciplines and triangulation model between mainstream and critical theoretical constructs of social psychology, operationalised in diverse empirical studies conducted from 2017 to 2022, the volume testifies the editor's far-reaching scope to provide an overview of the contribution of political psychology to understand

the phenomenon of populism. Widespread in many contemporary democracies and subject to controversial social representations, it has largely been interpreted in contrast to the host ideology as a 'thin ideology' (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013), based on a Manichean vision of the reality centred on the opposition between the 'good people' and the 'bad elite' of the oligarchies in power.

The volume is an impressive collaborative enterprise based on twenty-one authors and co-authors among internationally renowned scholars and promising young researchers from six countries in Europe and the USA, according to the nationality of their institutional academic affiliation. The book – which also animated a lively presentation by most of the authors affiliated to Sapienza University and invited discussants from other institutions (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vC-cy8UVT4M&t=3s) – is structured into four sections.

Part I "Transcultural Comparative Analyses"

Part I includes two chapters focusing on analyses conducted in the European context.

Chapter 2 "Political and Psychological Processes Contributing to European Populisms of the Left and Right" is written by a transcontinental team: of researchers: Eduardo J. Rivera Pichardo (New York University, USA), Jacopo Custodi (Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence, Italy), and John T. Jost (New York University, USA).

It aims to examine the ideological structure and functions of populism, with particular reference to countries such as Spain, France and Italy. The authors adopt a dual 'top-down political perspective' - focusing on the discursive superstructure, such as elite-driven forms of strategic communication – and a 'bottom-up psychological perspective' – emphasizing, as the motivational substructure, the psychological needs of ordinary citizens that are (or are not) met by particular belief systems, referring to the 'Big Five' personality traits and basic human values, authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, and theories of system justification. In other words, using their economic metaphor, the 'market' for populist ideology in terms of the 'supply' of offers from political elites, on the one hand, and the mass 'demand' for particular beliefs on the other.

After reviewing a rich array of studies that support the thesis that "What is clear is that social scientists should not be treating populism as a unitary construct, given the abundance of evidence showing that left-wing and right-wing populism are very different, both in terms of the political rhetoric employed by their leaders and the social and psychological characteristics of their followers" (pp. 38-39), the authors of chapter 2 conclude: "In terms of top-down (or supply side) political processes, the rhetoric of right-wing populist leaders is far more likely to be exclusionary, nativistic, and xenophobic, based as it is on ethnocultural distinctions, and hostile to foreigners and immigrants, in comparison with that of left-wing populist leaders. Conversely, the rhetoric of left-wing populist leaders is more likely to be inclusionary and pluralistic, that is, protective of ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities as well as members of the working class" (p. 39).

These conclusions about the polarised representations of (im)migrants and the related

exclusionary-inclusionary policies in the rhetoric of right-wing versus left-wing leaders are deeply consistent with the findings documented by many empirical studies (Rochira et al., 2020; Fernandes-Jesus et al., 2023), including those conducted in an extensive mother research program led by de Rosa and extended to comparative studies conducted with bi-national Italian-Canadian and Italian-Brazilian research teams from the two sides of the Atlantic, illustrated in the book *Social Representations of (Im)migrants. Field and multi-Media Studies across the Atlantic and Mediterranean* (de Rosa, 2025, forthcoming).

Chapter 3 "The Inner Logic: An Intergroup Approach to the Populist Mentality in Europe" by Christian Staerklé, Matteo Cavallaro, and Anna Cortijos-Bernabeu (from University of Lausanne, Switzerland) reinforces some conclusions of the previous chapter 2 by suggesting that "the inner logic of the populist mentality is based on a combination of vertical and horizontal intergroup representations of the people-elite dualism. The vertical antagonism can be assessed with legitimacy judgements and the horizontal antagonism with stereotypical judgements. The specific manifestations and relative importance of the two antagonisms depend on the populist discourses developed across different national contexts, including left- and right-wing—or inclusionary and exclusionary—variations of populism." (p. 56).

Based on findings from a cross-national survey of eight European countries (Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, and the UK), inspired by the theory of social representations and interested in the 'intergroup model of the populist mentality' through the relationship between majority and minority, the authors assume the populism as a generalised way of conceptualising society as a 'thinking society'.

They study it as a mentality in the sense of a 'system of thought and a method of action' (Moscovici, 1987) "that produces views of society from a position of subordination and powerlessness, but at the same time elevates the 'us vs. them' cleavage into a moral battle between the good and virtuous people and the evil and immoral leaders, thereby imposing it as the key explanatory principle of society. This antagonism fuses power and morality differentials: the people-majority is in a subordinate power position with respect to the elite-minority who wields decision-making power over the people-majority" (p. 56).

Indeed, much more than in the subsequent development of the literature inspired by his thought - the theory of social representations, at least in the visionary mind of its founder (Moscovici, 1961/1976), was deeply intertwined with his theory of social influence, social change and active minorities (Moscovici, 1976; 1980; 1994; Moscovici & Faucheux, 1972; Moscovici & Pérez, 2007) through the dynamics of communication-action - different types of hegemonic, emancipated, polemical social representations.

A review of minority influence as an agenda for the study of social change was published in 2022 by Radmila Prislin, who highlights that "In spite of a remarkable scientific output, research on minority influence has not addressed its original question about social change. Rather, it has focused dominantly on the cognitive processes and attitudinal change in response to a minority advocacy or minority mere presence, and, to a lesser degree, to the role of minority influence in decision-making and task groups." (p. 1)

By examining similarities and differences in the populist mentality through a large cross-cultural study in several European countries, Staerklé and his team correlate the left-right

polarisation of the inclusionary-exclusionary and egalitarian-inegalitarian versions of populism with other variables, such as institutional and social (dis)trust, social dominance orientation and authoritarianism. These variables – along with others, such as collective narcissism and uncertainty avoidance – have already been examined in the previous chapter in the broad overview of the top-down political and bottom-up psychological processes contributing to European left and right-wing populisms.

Certainly, the two chapters presented in Part I furtherly enrich the tradition of promising comparative studies of exclusionary and inclusionary populism, even extended to European and Latin-America, carried out ten years earlier by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013).

Part II "Psychosocial Constructs in Action"

Part II includes three chapters. In particular:

Chapter 4 "COVID-19 Threat and Populism: The Mediation Effect of Epistemic and Significance Motivations" is written by Erica Molinario (Florida Gulf Coast University, U.S.A.), Gabriele Di Cicco (Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland), Gilda Sensales (Sapienza University of Rome, Italy), and Arie W. Kruglanski (University of Maryland, U.S.A.).

It is theoretically framed by a decade of research about the psychology of extremist behaviour conducted by Kruglansky and his research team (2017), which provides collaborative field and experimental evidence that the need for closure caused by loss of meaning fosters radicalisation as the main road to extremism (Webber et al.,2018). Starting from the assumption that populism is a compensatory set of beliefs driven by a motivational process in the face of a critical reality of various kinds (economic, geopolitical, environmental, health problems..), the studies presented in this chapter examine populist attitudes towards the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy monitored at two different times, from the outbreak in April 2020 during the left-wing populist government led by the M5S and Giuseppe Conte (Study 1) to the spread of the pandemic in April 2021 during the technocratic government of national unity led by Mario Draghi (Study 2). Three main motivational processes that are positively correlated with populist attitudes – identified as the need for personal meaning, collective significance including collective narcissism, and cognitive closure – are the strategies for contrast uncertainty and the threat of fighting the 'invisible other' (de Rosa & Mannarini, 2020, 2021; de Rosa et al., 2024) with relevant consequences for political attitudes.

The results of these studies "are in line with uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2007). According to Hogg (2021), self-uncertainty can create an environment in which populism thrives (Hogg & Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2021), and people not only increase their support for populism but also for populist leaders." (p. 123)

Chapter 5 "Conspiracy Ideation and Populism", is written by Italian authors affiliated to the Sapienza University of Rome: Valerio Pellegrini, Mauro Giacomantonio, and Luigi Leone.

It presents an accurate review of the literature, starting from an illustration of the political

manifestations and core beliefs of populism, highlighting the common matrix of adherence to political populism and conspiratorial beliefs (as more specific expressions of the general conspiracy mentality framed as conspiracy ideology), which lies in the threat to basic psychological needs arising from the uncertainty and fear associated with uncontrollable social change. Drawing on the conceptual definitions and references to the extensive literature on right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance theory, and system justification theory, the authors discuss the common psychological function of both conspiracy theories and political populism in responding to identity threats and explain the reciprocity of the two phenomena in fuelling each other.

The empirical study was based on several measures: the System Justification Scale of Kay and Jost (2003), the RWA scale of Altermeyer (1996), the SDO scale of Pratto et al. (1994), the populist attitudes Scale of Schulz et al. (2018) , the scale for Conspiracy Beliefs of Leone et al. (2019). It was conducted in Italy on four independent samples in the following time periods of interest due to the changes in the political governing scenario: 1. After the general election of 4 March 2018, when the government based on the coalition between the populist self-defined anti-ideological 5-Stars Movement and the right-wing League Party had not yet been formed; 2. About 8 months after the general election that led to the populist coalition between the 5-Stars Movement and the League; 3. In June 2019 when the government based on the populist coalition was still in place; 4. In December 2022 two months later the formation of the populist right-wing government headed by the first Italian woman to hold the position of Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni.

The authors conclude that their studies have "highlighted how the worldviews of conspiracy theories and populism are based on simplified narratives with two distinct sides defined on moral grounds. They see the political-economic élite or the conspirators who control society, through immense power, and the ordinary people as their victims. The two phenomena appear as distinct manifestations of similar underlying dispositions. These dispositions derive primarily from psychological needs of an epistemic, existential, and social nature that individuals see threatened by social changes and turmoil. Support for populism emerges as a demand for social restructuring of the established system that individuals implement to politically address their psychological distress. Adherence to conspiracy beliefs emerges as a broader-spectrum compensatory strategy that concerns the interpretation and explanation of socially frightening events. Both populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs promise individuals to re-establish certainty and control over reality" (p. 166).

The richness of the variables included in the methodological design not only confirms the results obtained in the existing literature, but also offers some nuanced new interpretations, that the may be of interest to the readers of this volume. First of all, some tendencies underlying populism and conspiracy ideation defined by Jost et al. (2003, pp. 342-343) as "the conservative paradox…, an imaginatively transfigured conception of the past with which to criticize the present", and reinforced by more recent studies by other authors who find confirmation between nostalgia and support for populism (Van Prooijen et al, 2022), exploited by populist leaders to attract voter consensus (Lammers & Baldwin, 2018) as in Trump's rhetoric slogan "Make America Great Again" insistently repeated in his two presidential bids in 2016 and 2024.

In this regard what the authors of this chapter propose theoretically and have found in their

empirical analyses "is that system justification and social dominance orientation are not sufficient to resolve the fear and uncertainty that populists and conspiracists experience, and this is because of the pervasive sense of anomie deriving from societal 'declinism' that endanger traditional ways of living" (p. 171).

The authors conclude their chapter highlighting the lessons that political leaders and citizens can learn from such studies in order to protect the democratic systems from the disruptive effects of feelings of decline, anomie, and being left behind: "To preempt the toxic effects of some forms of populism and conspiracism, democratically established institutions might strive to reduce individuals' feelings of anomie and alienation, fostering a more equitable and inclusive social arrangement, and thus assuaging feelings of fear and uncertainty. This would counteract the reactionary tendencies that appear underneath populism's cries for change and revolution" (pp. 173-174).

Among the disruptive effects of a sense of decline and anomie or their toxic effects we must not forget the increasing trends of abstentionism from democratic forms of active participation in the political life, such as the right and duty of large numbers of citizens to vote.

Chapter 6 "Populist Thin Ideology: From a Theoretical Conceptualisation to the Development of a New Scale", is written by Efisio Manunta and Maja Becker, both from the University Toulouse and the CNRS, France.

It aims to analyse the concept of populist *thin ideology* as opposed to the concept of *host ideology*, as a coherent system of beliefs and values that orient the social and economic system, desired by the citizens (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013, 2017). It also examines the explanatory role of social identity theory (Hogg, 2016; Turner et al., 1979) in the categorisation and social comparison of ingroups and outgroups dividing society into 'people' and 'elite', with the intergroup bias.

The chapter illustrates the lack of content validity, lack of construct validity, and methodological limitations of previous research presenting multiple individual-level attitudinal scales (e.g. Akkerman et al.,2014; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Hameleers & de Vreese, 2020; Oliver & Rahn, 2016; Rooduijn, 2014; Schulz et al., 2017) and aims to create new measures of populism to demonstrate criteria of distinction from traditional right-left political positions. Three studies, based on three independent datasets (three large samples of the French population), are presented to show the validity of the new Populist Thin Ideology Scale (POP-ThIS), from its construction phase and first validation (Study 1) to the test of its internal construct validity (Study 2) and its predictive validity, testing social dominance orientation, conservatism (vs progressivism) and capitalism (vs collectivism), political orientation, personality traits, and classical socio-demographics variables as predictors of the populist vote in France (Study 3).

In the results section, the authors present the convergent validity of their scale's between populism on the one hand and justicialism and negative attitudes towards journalists and globalism, on the other; the discriminant validity of right vs left positions, social dominance and personality traits; the construct validity, starting with the logical analysis of Mudde's definition of populism and conducting a preliminary discourse analysis of right and left oriented populist leaders; the predictive validity of the voting behaviour for populist parties in line with the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 2011).

The authors conclude their chapter suggesting further empirical tests, especially to analyse the cross-cultural validity of the POP-ThIS scale over and above the French context.

Part III The Italian Case consists of two chapters.

Chapter 7 "This Is Not the End: How the Appeal of Populism changed due to the COVID-19 Pandemic" is written by three Italian professors of social psychology Michele Roccato (University of Turin), Nicoletta Cavazza (University of Modena and Reggio Emilia), and Pasquale Colloca (University of Bologna).

Framing the analysis of populism in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy defined by Tarchi (2015) as "the promised land of populism" for the spread of a radical right-wing populism, the success of the League (Lega) and of Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia) parties – together with a self-proclaimed anti-ideological 5-Stars Movement (5-Stelle), recently more left-leaning – the authors present four surveys in a longitudinal perspective from the pre-pandemic period (June 2019) to June 2021, when the pandemic became almost endemic.

In the COCO project on the COnsequences of COvid-19 they examine the compensatory control mechanism (Kay et al.,2008, 2011) developed by people in search of defensive strategies to face the loss of control over their lives in a threatening situation of uncertainty and insecurity both for health and economic. In such historical contingencies there is an increasing desire for strong leaders, and technocratic or even anti-democratic governments, in crisis management: this is the so-called "rally effect" (Mueller 1970, 1973), a possible inhibiting factor of populism. "A prototypical example of the rally effect was observed after the 9/11 terrorist attacks when in a few days, the popularity of President George W. Bush improved from 51 to 86% (Hetherington & Nelson, 2003)" (p. 239).

Although the results of their studies "showed that the pandemic led to a break in the rise of populism in Italy, at least from a behavioural perspective", as did other studies conducted in other countries, the authors conclude their chapter on a less optimistic note: "Indeed, it is plausible that the long populist wave had a temporary halt, but it is likely to rebound to higher levels when the health and economic situations will return to pre-pandemic levels" (p. 253).

Chapter 8 "Representations of Populism, Pandemic, and War Among Italian Citizens of Different Political Orientations: A Psycho-Linguistic Analysis of Their Associative Productions (2019–2022)" is written by a transnational research team that includes Gilda Sensales (Sapienza University of Rome, Italy), Gabriele Di Cicco (Jagiellonian University of Krakow, Poland), Erica Molinario (Florida Gulf Coast University, USA), Laura Prislei (Sapienza University of Rome, Italy), and Arie W. Kruglanski (University of Maryland, USA)

In chapter 8 "Italy was chosen as a case study because several waves of populist sentiments". Extending the research period by four years, from 2019 to 2022, the authors explore the social representations of populism along the birth of to two right-wing populist governments: the first, led by Giuseppe Conte from 2018 to 2019, with the participation of the *Movimento 5 Stelle* (5 Star Movement: M5S) and the *Lega di Salvini* (Salvini League); the second, led by Giorgia Meloni from 2022 and still in office in 2024, with the participation of the *Fratelli d'Italia* (Fdl), the *Lega*

di Salvini and *Forza Italia*.

Using the free association projective technique, the studies included ten stimulus keywords: five related to populism (People, Leader, Elite, Party, Politics), three related to the pandemic (Covid, Nature and Science), and two related to the war scenario exploded in 2022 between Russia and Ukraine (Peace and War).

The diachronic analyses of four groups of voters "highlight the differences between the different populisms, such as i.e., the marked stigmatization of the elites by the 5Stelle voters, but not by the other two populist parties. This stigmatization appeared emotionally charged, especially in 2022, with the advent of Draghi technocratic government. Or, again, a partially anti-scientific attitude has been detected only in the voters of the FdI. Conspiracy and denier associations concerning the pandemic are then observed among conservative populists. Finally, compared to the war, a greater critical charge was seen in the populists of the M5S and the non-populists of the PD, while for peace, the right-wing populists appeared more favorable" (p. 15).

In brief, "results have shown the founding role of polarized and antinomic thinking and evaluative and emotional factors in the construction of populist representations, confirming what has been argued by scholars of SR (Caillaud et al., 2016; de Rosa et al., 2021; Eiguren et al., 2021; Joffe & Lee, 2004; Markova, 2006; Staerklé et al., 2011). The emotional factors are then more characterized by the negative polarity and mainly concern populist parties, as foreseen by the literature, which for right-wing populism speaks of an angry populism that arises from the privileged 'emotional regime' (Reddy, 2001)" (p. 296).

In line with their expectations, the authors "have provided interesting insights into understanding the role of some psychosocial factors in a broad and complex phenomenon that crosses contemporary realities by questioning their democratic representative and party forms and showing the peril of giving life to a 'disfigured democracy' (Urbinati, 2019a)" (p. 305).

Part IV "Populist Communication in the Blogsphere"

Part IV includes two chapters that – through the analysis of sources on Facebook and Online Discourse, respectively – valorise the fundamental role that social media have played in the last decades for the phenomenon of populism "as a privileged place to promote the agency of the people-public" (p. 4).

Chapter 9 "Italian Populist Leaders and Their Followers on Facebook (2019–2022): Representational Fields and Empirical Evidence from a Psycho-Social Linguistic Perspective" is written by Gabriele Di Cicco (Jagiellonian University of Krakow, Poland), and co-authors from Sapienza University of Rome, Italy: Laura Prislei, and Gilda Sensales.

The authors highlight the "elective affinity" between populism and social media (Gerbaudo, 2018), which give ordinary people a voice as a platforms for free-expression, allowing populist movements to fuel their anger against the 'pro-establishment bias' of mainstream media and populist leaders to occupy these spaces "with a communication deliberately oriented towards persuasion, bypassing any intermediation (of journalists, editorial offices, etc.), favouring

horizontality, addressing messages based on specific audience segmentations, and interacting with different media, both social and mainstream, to make their communication more pervasive"(p. 349).

Their analysis of the dynamics between social representations of populism and management of TRT (T=traditional Television), new media communication (R=Rete-network) and Territory (T) by the populist leaders is very well framed in the social representations research literature on communication and new media, and in political psychology.

"Taking up Urbinati's (2019) argument about the pillars of representative democracy that the disfigured democracy seeks to undermine, this is linked to the relationship between majority/minority and political representation: when the people become the majority, the others, the bad guys who have become the minority, are ignored in name of a 'politics of partiality' that, by reifying the majority, subverts the rules of representative democracy by removing the voice of minorities. The democracy of the parties is replaced by the democracy of the populist leader, who constantly stimulates the mobilization of their people, who have become their public and are called upon to support them in their governmental actions. Once this direct link is established, the leader must use all the means (e.g., opinion polls) to know public opinion and to support it by controlling it as much as possible. In this game, where the leader seems to be guiding public opinion, they actually end up pursuing it by building a political agenda that must satisfy different needs, from those related to national and international political dynamics to those dictated by their people/public. They are thus forced to oscillate between the need for complexity, which is necessary for those who want to govern, and the need for simplification, which responds to populist aspirations. Within this dynamic, the democracy of the leader is at the same time a democracy of the public, regulated by elections. The leader establishes a relationship of identification between themself and their people, in which they can lead them, but only if they correctly interpret their needs, otherwise they will be rejected at the first electoral opportunity" (pp. 352-353).

The findings presented in this chapter – based on a complementary Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) and qualitative analysis of excerpts from posts and comments – show how three populist leaders (Giorgia Meloni of the radical right-wing Brothers of Italy party, Matteo Salvini of the right-wing League party, and Giuseppe Conte of the more eclectic transversal centre-left 5-Star Movement) used Facebook's communication features to engage with their followers from 1-1-2019 to 23-3-2022.

The keywords that significantly organise the structure of the representational field, as revealed by the MCA results, show the polarisation between Salvini – who uses the language style of affection to emphasise themes of friendship, pride, and law enforcement – and Conte – who focuses on collective ownership and community concepts, returning to more institutional communication as a former head of government according to a logic of self-promotion. The MCA results also show the linguistic style dichotomy between Meloni's sovereigntist discourse – adhering to more agentic dimensions, reflecting charismatic leadership, political power and governance, receding through the reference to the in-group centred nation and state – and Salvini's discourse - focused to themes of unity, camaraderie and national identity, receding through the appeal to the Italians and Italy.

Both the right-wing populist leaders emphasise the appeal to the national electoral ingroup

against the outgroup identified in the opposing political parties and in the common target others of the immigrants. This emblematic core issue of the political propaganda is addressed with clear stylistic differences by Meloni – as a legal problem to be stopped and solved – and by Salvini – who evokes repressive exclusionary measures against the criminalised invaders and even associating the smugglers and the NGOs involved in humanitarian rescue operations.

When analysing the representational field of commentators/followers, the research results also show that it is "modulated differently based on the input received from leaders. Thus, Meloni's followers respond positively to her ingroup-centred leadership, as they seem to be characterized by a reference to their own party, which is absent in the representational field of Salvini's followers. (…). Salvini's commentators respond to his outgroup-centred leadership by favouring a focus on the left, one of the outgroups *par excellence* to which Salvini refers, along with the issue of migrants. Unexpectedly, this last issue does not appear in the representational field, even though we have seen how it is referred to in one of the excerpts from the comments we have quoted. This result shows that the priorities of Salvini's supporters are different. In line with the affectionate language of their leader, his followers respond with expressions and feelings of love that are also translated into explicit expressions of support and encouragement. The reference to Salvini as a 'captain' reinforces the perception of him as an authoritative figure" (p. 390).

The authors then highlight the emphasis on Salvini's leadership narrative, which is centred on strength and decisiveness, emotionally evoking the authoritarian and strongman elements often inherent in far-right populism, and conclude their comments on the findings by emphasising that Salvini is also a 'divisive leader', being the only one who clearly also attracts demonstrations of dissent that become part of the representational field.

Chapter 10 "Double Bind or Political Advantage? The Negotiation of Womanhood in the Online Discourse of Female Right-Wing Populist Politicians" is written by Katarina Pettersson and Inari Sakki, both from the University of Helsinki, Finland.

Emphasising that "gender has not been considered as one of the major attributes of the attractiveness of populism in the traditional populism literature (e.g., Mudde, 2007; Stavrakakis, 2018)", the Finnish authors of this chapter affirm that "Today understanding the appeal of right-wing populism is not possible without a gender perspective" (p. 406). In particular they examine the female populism in two European countries, referring to the role of Marine Le Pen in France and the success of Giorgia Meloni, who became Italy's first female prime minister in October 2022 as the founding leader of the Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) party.

The two Finnish authors highlight one of the factors that makes the comparative context of their research interesting: they start from factual elements based on the Gender Equality Index relating to France and Finland which rank 5th and 4th place respectively in the EU, highlighting that the two countries are very different in terms of their history of gender equality. In France only in 2000 "a parity law was accepted that requires that women candidates constitute half of the electoral lists; however, gender equality did not advance, and women never constituted more than 6 per cent of the deputies in the National Assembly and 3 per cent of the Senate (Scott, 2004)" (p. 407) . On the other hand, "Finland was the first European country to grant women the right to vote in 1906. Thus, a myth of being a pioneer of gender equality has over time become

an inherent part of the Finnish national narrative (Ahonen, 2017) and branding (Larsen et al., 2022). However, in right-wing populist rhetoric, gender equality is typically described as having gone 'too far' and shifting into a domination of feminists over white heterosexual men (Keskinen, 2013)" (p. 407).

Navigating the double bind between hegemonic femininity and hegemonic masculinity is indeed one of the key points as premise of the study that Pettersson and Sakki conduct on two contemporary right-wing populist leaders:

-   Marine Le Pen in France, examining her 2022 presidential campaign as the longstanding leader of the Rassemblement National (RN) party for a decade since 2011;
-   Riikka Purra, in Finland, examining her 2023 presidential on political blogs and tweets as leader of the Perussuomalaiset, PS (Finns Party) since 2019 a shorter period compared to Marine Le Pen's French leadership.

The authors highlight the rhetorical skills of the two right-wing populist woman leaders who use three main effective strategies to attract their gender-segmented electoral audiences.

In brief:

(1) present themselves as strong leaders to their voters of both sexes;

(2) appear able to protect their 'own' women, who are seen as vulnerable to the ideology of Islam, which is denounced as oppressive;

(3) be able to protect their men from 'men-hating' feminists.

These strategies also show some nuances linked to the different histories of women's rights in the two cultural contexts of France and Finland, as well as to the length of their experience and expertise as leaders of their parties and to the interactive characteristics of the two online political communication channels used (Twitter and blog).

It would be certainly interesting to extend this kind of approach combining gender and political studies to other populist right-wing political leaders, as Sensales and Prislei (2023) did with Giorgia Meloni, Italy's first woman Prime Minister. Driven by their long-term interest in both gender and political studies, the two researchers have identified "forms of benevolent sexism capable of neutralizing aggressive responses from their men colleagues' thanks to the fact that they do not feel challenged in their power position, but valued" (p. 17). Furthermore, given some of the distinctive dimensions identified in the left and right-wing populism, it would also be interesting to extend the study of the relationship between gender and populism to include left-wing woman and men populist leaders.

At the end of this intensive journey through the multifaceted analyses of populism, Gilda Sensales' **"Concluding Remarks"** offer a great synthesis of the key points.

Driven by well-integrated knowledge of the history of psychology, the diversified epistemologies in social psychology and the political psychology, by a dialogical approach between mainstream and critical theoretical constructs of social psychology, and by the triangulation model in the adoption of diversified multi-methods in the empirical researches - she prospects that the journey will continue, highlighting interesting developments of the research field on populism through further comparative studies combined with longitudinal perspective, essential to investigate forms and modalities of populism, taking into account changes in geo-political cultural contexts along the historical time dimension.

The rich empirical studies presented in the volume and the extensive literature cited both to introduce their subject matter and to contextualise the interpretation of their results, ensure prospective added value for further research developments in longitudinal studies that will take into account the role of the communication in the co-construction and diffusion of social representations in the evolving political scenario, and the psycho-social-cultural implications of media and social representations of otherness (Mannarini et al., 2020).

In the globally interconnected world – despite the increasing tendency of right-wing populist parties to deny this in favour of nationalism – these longitudinal studies should also take into account a comparative perspective beyond national borders, in order to understand the echo chamber effect of communication also in relation to the change of political power in governments around the world.

An emblematic case is Trump's impressive victory in the US presidential election in November 2024. Once again – as in the successful 2016 presidential campaign (Inglehart, & Norris 2016; Oliver & Rahn, 2016; Van Prooijen et al., 2022) – the slogan-mission "Make America great again" was relaunched by Trump in the 2024 presidential campaign. His victory was immediately recognized by the democratic rival Kamala Harris, and the transition from the past President Joe Biden was ensured in a pacific manner, respecting democratic rules. The vivid memory of Trump's unprecedented reaction to the US presidential election of 2020 won by the Democratic candidate and contested by him and his supporters - who violently attacked Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021, the day of the proclamation of Joe Biden as the new US President, also causing tragic deaths - has left the world forever astonished as a black page and extreme act of the "democracy disfigured" in the visionary terms formulated ten years earlier by Urbinati (2014, 2019, 2020).

In the book "*Trump vs Biden. Populismo e moderazione nella sfida*" ("*Trump vs Biden. Populism and moderation in the fight*") published in Italian in march 2024, eight months before the election of the new US President, Sofia Gadici, a journalist expert in Political Science and Communication for wide TV audience, concludes that the 2024 US elections are a crucial test for understanding the future that lies ahead, after stating that "it is the challenge of this century, of a time when certainties fall and people struggle to find their way. Populism feeds on fears and rides on people's backs. Moderation with its rituals and complex procedures fails to offer immediate answers and creates disillusionment. The clash between these two ways of dealing with the reality that surrounds us is being played out in every corner of the planet, but it has found its main battleground in the United States, the home of democracy, of the form of government that has established itself in the West and that seems to be increasingly in crisis" (Gadici,2024, back cover of the book, our translation from the original in Italian).

Certainly, we are living in an increasingly polarised political climate in which various forms of populism contribute to increasing the antagonism between sovereign nations in search of their respective power supremacy – which also explains political decisions such as Brexit (Inglehart & Norris ,2016) – rather than cooperative coexistence in a pacific geopolitical global scenario of the world as a '*common house'* based on free exchanges, open borders, mutual support (Mannarini, 2022), anchoring this dichotomous view in metaphors of the "wall" versus the "bridges" that organize the discourses of Trump vs Francis Pope (de Rosa et al., 2021)

In conclusion, welcoming the research prospective scenario – as long-term constructive potentiality of the key book edited by Gilda Sensales (2024) "*Political psychology perspectives on*

populism" to understand contemporary scenarios of 'democracy disfigured'- we recommend to do not forget the role of the evolving scenario of the communication-knowledge-actions driven by the application of the Artificial Intelligence with its behind economic interests on the political blogsphere. In this respect, it is interesting to look retrospectively and prospectively at the relationship between the re-elected US President Donald Trump and Elon Musk, who –shifting his political orientations from the Democratic to the Republican party, first denying and later allowing Trump the propagandistic use of Twitter (transformed into the X.com platform in October 2022) – was one of the more influential supporters of Trump's 2024 presidential campaign, appointed head of the Department for Government Efficiency.

The role of Artificial Intelligence cannot be ignored by scholars interested in understanding the evolution of political-economic scenarios on a global scale and the role of communication in reinforcing/contrasting various forms of populism.

"International research teams (from countries with high disparity in technological and socio-economic development) are called for collaborative inter-disciplinary engagement: from the top advanced technological sectors of informatic engineering and disciplines like neurosciences and medicine to the social sciences, like work organizational and social psychology, communication studies, sociology, politics, law… and the humanities. Among these disciplines, the centrality of ethics for the need to develop awareness of the AI risks and benefits for human beings has led to its specific redefinition as algor-ethics (Paolo Benanti, 2024)" (de Rosa, 2025, forthcoming).

The rediscovery of ethics in politics could be the main road for the '*disfigured democracy*' to regain its constitutional credibility, based on mutual respect for rules and civil coexistence or negotiation of different political views, expressed in participatory community and political actions: these include the right-duty of a large number of citizens to vote, as opposed to the diffuse abstentionism caused by the delusion for a politics of unfulfilled promises, ignoring the real needs of the people or to their delegation to populist authoritative leaders, invested with all their expectations as captains in chief.

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