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BOOK REVIEW

Giovanni Barbieri (2021), *The Fifth Cleavage. Genealogy of the Populist Ideology and Parties*, London: Lexington Books.

“The main thesis of the work is that the populist parties [...] originate from the same unique cleavage that counterposes the people with the élite and a participatory form of democracy with an elitist one”.

With this sentence Giovanni Barbieri introduces the readers to his latest work on populism, immediately arousing our curiosity and interest. From the start he makes it clear that “we try to clarify that the concept of populism does have an ideological core and that the other defining characteristics are only complementary to this core”. We shall see that is precisely this aspect, concerning the ideological element of populism, that allows Barbieri to draw a precise line between what he believes are more or less valid interpretations of populism.

The introduction concludes by announcing that the final part of the work offers an analysis of the dark side of populism (which is, in fact, the title of the section), and especially of the challenges it poses to democratic institutions and the illiberal and anti-systemic trends it brings about in democratic political systems.

As is immediately clear, the topics addressed are enough to capture the attention of a reader who might be even only slightly interested not only in issues linked to populism, but also in the crisis of contemporary democracies. These two topics, in fact, cannot be separated. And while the author obviously treats the former as the main one, he brings them together in the final part of the book, when he addresses concrete instances of populism and looks at some political figures who have been at the centre of the political scene in Italy, the United States and Thailand.

The first part of the text is devoted to a reconstruction of the different explanatory approaches that may help us understand the phenomenon of populism. Among these, one of the best known is the communicational approach by Canovan, Laclau, Taguieff, Mouffe, Jagers and Walgrave. According to Barbieri, this approach highlights how the phenomenon in question is based on communicational dynamics. In fact, some authors, including Moffit, maintain that populism is first and foremost a political style, while its link with ideology is only indirect, one that is associated with some other ideology, but never itself a producer of ideology. Moffit claims that populism is a political style but definitely not a political ideology, because the ideal elements present in populism are too fragile to constitute, if linked together, any ideological pattern. If, therefore, a populist style exists, but not a populist ideology, this means that actors not directly referable to or associated with the political area of populism can also appropriate this style politically. The populist *style*, in other words, is becoming an attitude generally used by almost all actors in the political arena. Thus, “populist styles cannot be included among the components that define the concept of populist ideology”. Barbieri criticises this conclusion: populism is and should also be treated as an

ideology, and although it undoubtedly rests on the effectiveness of the communicative factor, this does not mean that ideological aspects are to be considered as being secondary. Indeed in the author's opinion the weakness of the communicative approach lies precisely in its failure to explain and account for the ideological and cultural aspects of the populist phenomenon, which must instead be considered central to any explanation of populism that intends to offer an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon.

In addition to the communicational approach, the "ideational" approach must be mentioned, which, as the author reminds us, is probably the most popular among scholars. It explains populism as a set of ideas that conceive of politics as a struggle between the will of the people and conspiracies of the elites. Within this approach, which is evidently more oriented than the previous one towards considering populism as an ideology, it is nevertheless interesting to note that not all positions coincide or overlap. Marco Tarchi, for instance, considers populism more as a mentality than as an actual ideology. Also within this area of study, Barbieri criticises Aslandis, according to whom populism is a weak ideology with strong cultural roots.

After discussing the main theoretical lines of research that have contributed to the explanation of the populist phenomenon, Barbieri reviews the main political and cultural roots that have provided the most fertile ground for the development of populism. Among the most important ones, besides the organicist conception, which constructs the concept of people based on the idea of an organic community, another important source in populism is what the author calls its Rousseauian origins. Here, in fact, it is possible to find important connections with the philosophical tradition inaugurated by the Geneva thinker: popular sovereignty, the general will, the discarding of all forms of representation, the people as a homogeneous entity endowed with a conscience, the opposition between the purity of the people and the corrupt elites. The Rousseauian tradition appears all the more relevant in explaining the vitality of populism today if one considers the detachment, or rather the distance, that separates the current political classes in Western countries from their citizens.

Following this interesting overview of the theoretical explanations and cultural roots of populism, in the second chapter Barbieri goes on to analyse the various attempt to explain the origin and development of the phenomenon, looking at both the political supply (subjects and actors in the political arena) and the political demand (citizens).

As far as the political supply is concerned, one of the most relevant aspects has proved to be the increasingly important role played by the media in political communication. The latter has imposed new rules, new languages, new styles on politics, which have progressively veered towards "popularised" forms of politics. Indeed, there is also talk of the "popularisation" of politics, a phenomenon partly linked to populism per se. On the other hand, it is also true that the astounding proliferation of new information channels has subjected politics to new and more constant media scrutiny. Thus, whereas in the past a populist force could resort to slogans and appeals based on messages that were as radical as they were implausible, contemporary populism has to carefully weigh the words it uses and the discourses it elaborates, which means that "the more radical the ideological positions, the weaker the attractiveness" of populist political formations.

Another relevant historical interpretation of the phenomenon of populism refers to the topic of modernisation, whereby "orphan masses" can easily be mobilised by charismatic leaders, according to a well-known line of thought developed in the fields of sociology and political science by some of its main exponents such as Max Weber, Gino Germani and Seymour Martin Lipset. However, as Barbieri notes, although the theme of modernisation certainly offers arguments that are capable of shedding light on very significant aspects of populism, it nevertheless also presents some weaknesses, starting with the one that emerges when considering the relationship between the macro-level of modernisation and the micro-level of electoral behaviour. Here the relationship is not always clear, the author continues: inconsistencies and contradictions can be easily detected. Indeed, if we were to draw definitive conclusions from the theory in question, we would have to conclude that the more the process of modernisation is advanced, the larger the populist electorates. This condition, however, seems to be more intermittent than constant in Western political systems, more related to the life cycles of political parties than to modernisation as such. Also, it is precisely on the basis of comparisons of electoral behaviour that we can identify another important strand of

socio-historical studies on populism. This approach tends to focus on, and consider as a decisive element, though certainly not unique, the economic crises that cyclically appear in the history of capitalist and democratic economic systems.

Following the first two chapters, which illustrate with exemplar clarity both the approaches and the debate on the causes and roots of populism, the third chapter is devoted to what is also the title of the book: “the fifth cleavage”, which uses the well-known category developed by Stein Rokkan. The idea that populism can be viewed as a possible “fifth cleavage”, alongside the four already identified by Rokkan which, depending on how they are combined in political systems, structure the physiognomy of the party system, is an idea that we believe is well-founded. In fact, the four traditional lines of division (centre-periphery, city-countryside, state-church, capital-labour) are, as is well known, the result of historical processes that may differ from country to country, and that therefore give rise to equally different party systems. Apart from the capital-labour divide, in fact, the other three may be more or less present and differently combined depending on the history of each nation. Conversely, if we assume, as we can, given the extensive literature on the subject, that one of the founding causes of the phenomenon of populism lies in the opposition that emerges between a people and its political class, or establishment, then the people-elite fracture can also be added to the first four. The latter, however, unlike the others, in our opinion is not constant, i.e. it is not always and in any case present within a political system, but can resurface from time to time – depending on the social, economic and political conjuncture – and thus give rise to political parties and forces that grasp and express its messages and motivations. Conversely, while the other four may appear, complete a long life cycle and then slowly decline, the fifth never disappears completely, as it is rather characterised by a karstic movement that allows it to be always either on the scene or behind the scenes of the political agon.

The author states that the people as opposed to the elite constitutes a cleavage characterised by three elements: the socio-structural element (the people themselves), the collective identity element (the collective identity of the people), and the organisational model in the form of collective action (the political organisations of collective identities). In particular, the political identity of a people, unlike other types of identity such as ethnic or cultural identity, is formed in close relation to and with major constitutional events (and, we would add, military events: the political identity of a people is defined above all as a result of the wars it has endured historically).

If, therefore, it is the political history of a people that defines its political identity, what happens – Barbieri asks – when “the strength of social linkages at the basis of political cleavages weakens, and the latter start losing their salience, that is, their capacity to shape political conflict and identities?”. According to some authors, including Kriesi, Inglehart and Norris, if some cleavages weaken, sooner or later society will give birth to new ones. This is what happened in the 1960s and 1970s, for example, with the emergence of feminism and environmentalism, especially in the United States. This interpretation, however, does not fully convince us. The 1960s and 1970s were not, at least in Europe, decades in which old cleavages faded. All political scientists are familiar with what Rokkan and Lipset wrote in *Party systems and social alignments*, published in the 1960s: “The political-electoral cleavages [in the 1960s] remain essentially the same as in the 1920s”. It is therefore not this interpretation that allows for an explanation of what gave rise to the collective movements of those two decades.

But let us return to the text, to the relationship between the weakening of cleavages and the emergence of populism. Here Barbieri goes to the heart of the problem, and in our opinion this is the centre of the entire book, when he states that:

The identity of being part of the people manages to perform the aforementioned functions only in certain situations when specific critical junctures occur. In these critical situations, the salience of the traditional cleavages fails, the external boundaries of the people become prominent, and the commitment to protecting them comes to constitute an essential component of the individual identity. In this way, individuals come to identify with the people. More specifically, the people succeeds in becoming a pivotal source of identity formation when its enemies (the elite) reveal themselves in all their forces and when they are regarded as personal enemies, as strangers who do not deserve recognition by the individuals who feel that they belong to the people.

If populism can therefore be considered as a way of socially and politically organising and structuring the divide between the people and the elites, what are the historical forms of this divide, which have shaped the various political and party systems in which it has produced its effects? Here Barbieri provides a very useful historical survey on the different forms of political organisation produced by populisms. From the original populism, that of the Russian Narodniks, we move on to the American People's Party, to Boulangism in France, to the regimes of Vargas and Peron in South America, back to France with Poujadism, and finally to our present, with nationalist populisms, the South American neo-populism of Chavez, Correa and Morales (and, we might add, of Bolsonaro), and finally with the populism of the radical left in Europe and the neither right-wing nor left-wing populism of the 5 Star Movement in Italy.

The last chapter is entitled "The Dark Side of the Populism", and deals with probably the most topical and pressing issue in the sociological and political debate on populism today: the question, that is, of the relationship between populism and democracy. A question that is not only topical, but also of great importance, given that populism "considers the participatory form of democracy the best". The fact is that while considering participatory democracy as the best (or shall we say direct?, in keeping with a well-known juridical tradition), populism nevertheless has a dark side in that it poses real challenges to democratic institutions. Given the state of health of political participation in democracies, indeed, some of the arguments put forward by modern populisms are not entirely far-fetched: "In supporting a republican or a moderate communitarian version of democracy, populism may come to represent a sort of antidote that helps democracy to revitalize itself, fostering the appropriate measures for enhancing the people's political participation and reducing the gap between the people and the élite: the institutions of referendum, the recall election and so on".

Among the various historical waves of populism, there have in fact been quite a few examples of populist parties that include in their political-electoral programmes the implementation of more or less strong forms of "communitarian" democracy – with this expression Barbieri means a political-cultural version of democracy as opposed to liberal democracy. With the aim of improving the functioning of democracy by shifting the pivot of its "political formula" (as Gaetano Mosca would have put it), i.e. the "centre of gravity", from the elites to the people. This proposition was present, for example, in the agenda of the People's Party just over a century ago or, in our days, in that of the 5 Star Movement.

The problem with democracy in its populist version, however, lies not so much in the final objectives, which to some extent one might also agree with, but in the manner and overall vision that precedes objectives and solutions. In fact, there is a "monolithic" and homogeneous conception of the people that invalidates its applicability in democratic environments and contexts, even those in which the legal parameters of the rule of law are the weakest. Indeed, how is it possible to imagine such a conception of the people and citizens, without this also leading to the marginalisation of specific social groups, categories, sectors not in line with the uniform vision of the people supported by the ruling populist elite? Put another way, such a populist government of the people means "dismantling the liberal system of checks and balances".

Indeed, as Maurice Duverger observed at the time, although characterised by pluralism, Western political systems have always also been characterised by a strong presence, among the actors that directly or indirectly have shaped the domestic political dynamics, of groups linked to large corporations and in general to large capitalist figures: "Western regimes are therefore only partially democratic. It would be more accurate to call them pluto-democracies because the power rests both on the people (demos) and on the wealthy (plutos)" (Duverger, *Institutions politiques et droit constitutionnel. Les grandes systems politiques*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1955).

Hence the strong anti-plutocratic *acquis* that has always been embraced by the main political subjects ascribable to the populist formation. Also, it is precisely by addressing the relationship between populism and plutocracy that Barbieri develops an original thesis, something not all scholars in the field of populism do. The interesting aspect lies in the fact that although populism possesses obvious anti-plutocratic traits, several leaders who have been identified as populists in the past have a personal history of accumulation of

enormous wealth, which has often favoured and accelerated their political rise. We might indeed speak of a plutocratic history. These leaders, like Trump in the US, Berlusconi in Italy, Taksin in Thailand, have established themselves by embracing the populist message (although Berlusconi's populism is not a unanimously accepted fact in literature). In their political programmes and discourses, although there was obviously no reference to positions opposing the accumulation of wealth by the few, there was nevertheless a clear call for the social redemption of the many citizens who had been forgotten by establishment politics. As the author rightly observes, if one looks at whether and to what extent at the end of their respective terms of office these leaders actually followed up on what they had promised, there is no trace of these promises having been kept, while, on the contrary, and very strong evidence can be found of their decisions to expand opportunities for the already wealthy few to become even richer – by means of tax cuts and various other measures benefitting these categories. This very valuable book by Barbieri confirms our belief that the phenomenon of populism, at least from an electoral point of view, responds not so much to a securitarian and economic narrative, but to one that concerns identity, and is a response to deep-seated drives, moods and sentiments, which are unrelated to purely materialistic issues and are rather generated by a lack of certainty and identity, a lack of sense of community and social ties.

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