Populism

Populism:

A Historiographic Category?

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INTRODUCTION

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Pierre Rosanvallon noted in his work "*Pour une histoire conceptuelle du politique*" that "history has the function of restoring problems rather than describing models"[1]. It is true that historians face difficulties when attempting to label phenomena which require a more conceptual and abstract vocation; nevertheless, historical case studies often represent a necessary preliminary work of political and cultural analysis.

Due to the incessant use of the term "populism", a historiographical response is needed to determine if populism can be considered an analytical category capable of superseding regimes and territorial distance. If so, then this category can also be used by history, with an acknowledgment of the work already carried out on this subject by political science, sociology, and political philosophy. Therefore, it is necessary to build a bridge between historians and the reflections of political scientists, sociologists, and philosophers, in order to launch a critical debate on the in-depth contribution supplied by historians on the category[2]. This operation appears all the more urgent since contemporary politics mixes with diachronic analysis to create a crisis in the apparently consolidated categories of democracy and in the concept of nation[3].

A first and more immediate objective of this volume is undoubtedly to verify, through an investigation arranged on a wide temporal and spatial horizon, how the different traits of the populist phenomenon are transformed by national and international historical evolutions. Although this approach could be considered overly generalist, we believe it is

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[1] P. Rosanvallon, *Il politico: storia di un concetto*, trans. Riccardo Brizzi, Michele Marchi (Soveria Mannelli: Rubettino, 2005), 15.
[2] The contribution by Loris Zanatta follows the same trail, see "Il populismo come concetto e come categoria storiografica", in A. Giovagnoli, G. Del Zanna (eds.), *Il mondo visto dall'Italia* (Milano: Guerini e Associati, 2004), 195-207.
[3] See for example the reflection of Cas Mudde which sees a radical interpretation of mainstream values instead of a pathology of democracy, C. Mudde, "The Populist Radical Right: A Pathological Normalcy ", *West European Politics*, 33, no. 6 (November 2010), 1167–1186.

worthwhile to reunite the analysis of known experiences with those lesser studied which are sometimes distant in time and space. The objective is not only to proceed with the collection of historical cases but to widen the reflection on "populist situations"[4], on the conditions which favour their development, and on the many forms that populism can take. Given that populism is rendered homogenous by a high rate of compatibility with all types of government, should we speak of "A" populism that from time to time must be qualified ("of the right", "of the left", "constitutional") but which remains on the path of a larger common reading, or rather is there only the existence of populism-S, understood as episodic and regional experiences? After all, a conceptual conflict regarding "populism" also expresses a conflict on the preference of political practices, given that politics is constructed linguistically. It was in 1981 that Canovan warned that the situation was characterized by a persistent "semantic disorder": "where some observers see a manifestation of populism, others don't see anything similar"[5]. Still, in more recent times, researchers have been left to reflect on the interconnectedness between the semantic sliding of the term populism and its conceptualization[6]. Populism is in fact a transversal phenomenon that is manifested most vivaciously in the political field, but is also present in culture and "shared knowledge".

Another pivotal observation was put forward by Ernesto Laclau, who noted that "populism has no referential unity because it is ascribed not to a delimitable phenomenon but to a social logic the effects of which cut across many phenomena. Populism is, quite simply, a way of constructing politics"[7]. Populism is, for Laclau, the political moment *par excellence* which coincides with the construction of "the People", and therefore with an *ex-post* construction of an idea of "the People". This affirmation is rendered even more fascinating for our research given that it can be applied beyond the dichotomy democracy/authoritarianism.

We think that two kinds of analysis on populism have appeared in the contributors' essays: an outline on populism-events together with a representation of the "ideological value" of populism. And these kind of

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[4] Zanatta, "Il populismo come concetto", 202.

[5] M. Canovan, *Populism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981) cited in P. Tangiueff, *L'illusione populista* (Milano: Paravia Bruno Mondadori, 2003), 78. See also M. Canovan, "Populism for political theorists", *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9, no 3 (Oct. 2004), 241-252.

[6] See A. Jäger, "The Semantic Drift: Images of Populism in Post-war American Historiography and their Relevance for (European) Political Science", *Populismus*, *Working Papers*, no 3, Thessaloniki (July 2016).

[7] E. Laclau, *On populist reason* (London, New York: Verso, 2005), XI.

analyses have evidently and undeniably demonstrated that populism is a "flabby ideology" (as some scholars defined it)[8]. This is clearly an ascertained fact by now among scholars but faced with this, it seems that we have moved beyond in the contributions, not only to new methodologies to investigate this phenomenon but also to new key points (see in particular the essay by David Darrow which analyzes how the development of statistical investigations has influenced the political proposal of the "first" populists). Other questions that emerged are the relationship with the elite, the rate of intrinsic organicism in the "historical fragment" of populism studied, the hostility toward forms of enlightenment, the anchoring to a national state and the intention (or lack thereof) to measure itself with the "level of democracy" hoped for.

If populism is a multifaceted phenomenon, what are these faces? The first is undoubtedly its anti-politics and anti-elitist dimension as an expression of a desire for increasingly direct representation[9]. The essays that deal with the Italian experience and document the so-called "First Republic" (1948-1994) highlighted these aspects. Emblematic is the case of the Uomo Qualunque movement portrayed in Maurizio Cocco's contribution. But anti-elitism and anti-poltics also appear in the anti-fiscal rhetoric developed by the entrepreneurial class as well as by the political class itself, as demonstrated in the essays by Davide Baviello and Gregorio Sorgonà. In these cases, anti-politics affects the intermediate bodies in society and it is linked to the opposition to paying taxes: the fiscal lever is in fact considered a loathsome tool through which the "partitocracy" reproduces itself.

The anti-elitist issue also summons to its aid an analysis of pre-political attitudes such as the relationship between religion and dichotomous thinking. Anti-elitism puts itself forward as a bearer and promoter of "popular wisdom" often by using avant-garde means of communication, thus promoting an age-old message with modern means of communication[10]. Populism is the modern expression of an ancient

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[8] See Y. Mény, Y. Surel, *Par le peuple, pour le peuple. Le populisme et les démocraties* (Paris: Fayard, 2000).

[9] See for example the definition elaborated by Cas Mudde of "populism as an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonist groups 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people". C. Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist", *Government and Opposition*, 39, no. 4 (2004), 541-63.

[10] See I. Diamanti, M. Lazar, *Popolocrazia. La metamorfosi delle nostre democrazie* (Bari-Roma: Laterza, 2018), 8-9.

legacy that it expresses itself in an organicist vision of society (which has led to contamination with corporatism and cooperativism on more than one occasion) or in the form of a privileged relationship with the religious dimension. The relationship between populism and the complex reality of totalitarian systems, particularly of the right, is still an open historiographical discussion. Rarely have historians stopped to analyze the manner in which (and if) fascist rhetoric and populism can overlap as carried out in the essay by Giulia Medas regarding the historical case of the Falangist movement.

The semantic slipping from "popular" to "populist" is one of the nodes present in the histories of populisms that are considered "precursors" of today's movements (even if sometimes causing purely semantic misunderstandings). These first populisms, as highlighted in particular in the contribution by Sheyla Moroni on the People's Party, were in search of a better future but had already produced a reinvented past. Populism's rich history, however, also owes much to literature. From this perspective the relationship between the leader and the people has been examined through the protagonists of populism, meaning in the widest sense the "intellectual masters" of the movement at its origins, and in particular through the figure of Alexander Herzen whose political thought is examined in its dual dimension, public and private, in the essay by Kathleen Parthé.

Another expression of populism is the relationship between what Anderson calls the "imagined community" and the leadership and between the "imagined community" and the other, the outsiders. The self-perception of the populist people is that of a homogeneous and univocal community (although not egalitarian or undifferentiated) which needs an emotional proximity to the charismatic leader, the sole voice capable of representing and embodying "the People"[11]. As Edward Shills pointed out, populism is expressed in an ideology that "proclaims the will of the people in as much as that retains a supremacy on every other norm and identifies the popular will with justice and morality"[12]. That which has been defined

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[11] See L. Zanatta, *Il populismo* (Roma: Carocci, 2013), 25-6 and M. Tarchi, *Italia populista. Dal qualunquismo a Beppe Grillo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015), 56 and 75. Recently, Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser noted that "populism exists with various types of leadership and can even be leaderless". C. Mudde, C. Rovira Kaltwasser, "Populism and Political Leadership", in R. A. W. Rhodes and Paul 'T Hart (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Leaders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 386. See also C. Mudde, C. Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[12] E. Shills, *The Torment of Secrecy. The Background and the Consequence of American Security Policy* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1956), 98.

the "plebiscitary inspiration"[13] foresees not only the people's desire to return sovereign but also that this can occur through cohesion against one or more enemies. This aspect throws light on the manichaean cosmology of populism which separates the community from its enemies (who deny or obstruct its purity). It is a crucial relationship above all in European populist experiments "burdened" with the weight of long term demands for clarification, which never arrived, on the ethnic and cultural definition of "the People". In fact, both the United States and Russia can boast of a national history that allows the easier delineation of the limits of "the People" (in the so-called "historical populisms" the problem of inclusion/exclusion covers only a small part of the internal political debate), while in both Eastern and Western Europe the question of redesigning the national and ethnic borders triggers the debate. It is therefore interesting to note how even in a small reality like Switzerland, the nation which perhaps incarnates the idea of a plurality of nationalities within the State, it was precisely the theme of exclusion-inclusion that marked a crucial development of cohesion in the nation's history, as evidenced by Francesco Scomazzon's contribution. The problem of "the other" is situated at the origin of the populist phenomenon, and is seen in the internal debate of the intelligentsia of Central and Eastern Europe regarding the conciliation of diverging models of modernization, different visions of the social and, above all, different visions of the nation (as illustrated in the essays by Calin Cotoi and Andrei Taran, two essays to read in succession which, together with the contribution by Darrow, provide a detailed reconstruction of the wide intellectual debate that was built around the idea of the People at the end of the nineteenth century in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe). This trait re-emerges unexpectedly in other "populist moments": the Polish case illustrated by Lukasz Dwilewicz demonstrates how the identity of the "enemy" becomes a useful instrument to overcome a stagnant phase even at the presence of a dominant ideology, such as communism, through the reconsolidation of the relationship between the state-regime and the nation-society.

It remains clear that moments of crisis rapidly bring about a change of direction in the references to "the People" from "popular" to "populists", and in the references to the evocation of liberty from demands for emancipation to projection of frustrations. While these elements are present in the "historical" cases, it is also evident that the same phenomenon is proposed again in more recent episodes, as highlight by

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[13] A. Mastropaolo, "La mucca pazza della democrazia. La destra radical-populista e la politica italiana", *Meridiana*, no. 38-39 (Novembre 2000), 51-2.

Van Meurs-Morozova's essay, from which emerges that the new forms of populism of the twenty-first century are, however, intertwined with the traditional cornerstones of the "populist vision".

History, as a form of re-telling, is redefining its own borders, precisely thanks to its dialogue with enigmas such as "populism". Recovering a vision of history and historiography that can be compared with (rather than superimposed) is useful in 'drawing up' a map of the various questions and challenges that the study of populism raises. Many observers of the historiographical scene understand the contingency of the "methodological pillars" which keep professional historiography united and the consequent interpretative threat triggers the fear of fragmentation and the "denial" and "non-acknowledgement" of the issue. We are in fact convinced that in both social history and in the new cultural history categories, concepts or cognitive models (used by individuals for learning and organising the meaning of social reality) are a reflection of the social reality in itself. These categories are neither internalised values nor external interests but rather constitute an independent relationship structure which has developed and changed on the basis of its own rules and internal processes and in historical interaction with other contexts of social life. Populism seems, in the long term, to correspond to something like this.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PEOPLE OF THE PEOPLE'S PARTY (1890-1896)

SHEYLA MORONI

For many years the People's Party was the focus of a debate on the definition of "populism" and the relative historical trends which sought to capture the contents, language, and degree of "democratic inquietude"[1]. Founded in 1890, the party inherited the mantle of the populist movement which had won the legislative election of 1890 in Kansas and gathered support in Minnesota and Nebraska[2]. Often considered the forbearer of "Western populism", the party launched James B. Weaver as its candidate for the White House in 1892 and won nine seats in Congress in the midterm elections of 1894. The party had a brief life as a structured organization but its lasting impact was seen in the adoption of its "doctrine" and dialectic by both mainstream establishment parties. In fact, in 1896 the candidate William Jennings Bryan of the Democratic Party was considered an emanation of the People's Party which was then dissolving into sometimes opposing strands.

The present work proposes only to "determine" the political profile of the formation of the People's Party during several years, taking as a starting point the definition of people (most often the invocation of or at a people) present in the most diffuse texts, in the most famous speeches and in the most evident public practices such as marches, meetings and gatherings. In the obvious and not unexpected difficulty of finding any precise definition of people, it is preferable not to utilize antisemitism as a category, as sometimes used in studies of the American dynamic, but instead find the sense of the category (or at least a starting point) through

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[1] See for all R. Formisano, Il populismo negli Stati Uniti, *Ricerche di storia politica*, no. 3 (2004): 335-346.
[2] W. R. Miller, A Centenniale Historiography of American Populism, *Kansas History: A Journal of Central Plains*, 16, no.1 (Spring 1993): 54-69.

the degree of inclusion and/or exclusion present in the discourse and practices of the party and the movement in action. Naturally, it is not possible to capture the obvious ambiguity inherent in the English language expression "the people's", which indicates both the individual political actors and a sovereign collective subject[3].

The words and the march

Goodwyn recalls how the term "populist" was noted only in 1892. Still, through the analysis of other sources, the political brand of "People's Party" appears in New York in 1824 to indicate the "people" versus the so-called "aristocrats"[4]. This remained the case until 1891, when the name was coined by the lawyer David Overmeyer and linked to the political formation[5] intended to define "populist" as those who gave voice to the *vox populi* as perceived and utilized by Thomas Jefferson and the original Tea Party. In reality (above all) at the beginning, "populism" (above all the movement but also - during its brief existence - the party) tended to frequently model itself around the name of its "promoter" (e.g. "Pefferism": from the name of the Kansas senator Peffer, but also "Coxeyism").

Populism was recognized as a political-ideological orientation inscribed in the American tradition, from its inception: the theme of the "small" (the people) against the big, which cuts across the history of the United States dating back to the struggle for independence and, according to which, populism was nothing less than the "only genuinely autochthonous political doctrine"[6]. For a long time, populism has been seen as a national movement, which was concentrated among farmers but which includes (or tried to include in the program and in its discourse) employed workers and the bohemian urbanities[7]. Meanwhile, beyond the diverse historiographical readings, the constant reference to Andrew Jackson[8] is clear. All this appeared in a framework where the Civil War was still present in the battles between political parties and in the daily life

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[3] M. Canovan, *The People* (Cambridge (MA): Polity, 2005), 28 and 79.

[4] L. Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy. New York as a Test Case* (Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press, 2015), 10.

[5] "The Political Crises of the 1890s. Populism", Digital History, accessed March 2, 2018, http://www.sennhs.org/ourpages/auto/2016/2/23/53842179/Populism.pdf

[6] M. C. McGee, In search of 'the people': A rhetorical alternative, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 61 (October 1975): 235-249.

[7] Canovan, *The People*, 27.

[8] J. L. Blau (ed.), *Social Theories of Jacksonian Democracy. Representative Writings of the Period 1825-1850* (New York: Haner, 1948), 68.

and imagination of Americans[9], and in 1893 within the most dramatic economic crisis that the nation had ever witnessed[10], while the Spanish Empire in America saw its definitive decline (1898) with the consequent "passing of the torch" to the USA, leaving it the only power on the continent.

In this panorama, the People's Party did not question the nodal values of American democracy (at least formally), but on the contrary laid claim to them. The party was also characterized by a non-salvific and egalitarian vision of religion and the rhetoric of the party was therefore the typical opposition of a "virtuous people" (or virtuous populace) that moves against its very powerful enemies and that expresses disdain for the traditional forms of deliberative democracy and republican representation[11]. In this regard, McGee mentions John Locke's ideal ancestries[12]. For the Populists, in this period, the "people" was above all a "person" (holistic), in the singular. For Huey Long and George Wallace (believed to be inheritors of the tradition – at least rhetorically - of Populism) the synonyms of this definition could in fact be: "common man", "the man in the street" and also "every man"[13]. In general, the populists talked about a sense of belonging to an "injured populace" and referred to this people as being composed of "good" men (in a biblical sense).

Completing the pantheon of terms linked to the movement, in 1895 and 1896 (later secondary traces of it can be found at the start of the 1910s) the word "popocracy"[14] appears, which was used to define the rules and/or the policy of the party. In the same way, the term "popocrat" (member of support of the People's Party) also appeared[15]. These neologisms appeared and are traceable not just in numerous newspapers in the circuit of the Populists but also in the more diffuse ones in New York, Chicago and Boston (with the periodical "Voice" making a large use of them). The words coincided with a rise in the fortunes of the party, so that at first

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[9] G. Hermet, *Les populismes dans le monde. Une histoire sociologique. XIXe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2001), 121.

[10] M. Del Pero, *Libertà e impero. Gli Stati Uniti e il mondo* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2011), 163-4.

[11] M. J. Lee, "The Populist Chameleon: The People's Party, Huey Long, George Wallace, and The Populist Argumentative Frame", *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 92, no. 4 (November 2006): 356.

[12] See M. C. McGee, In search of 'the people'.

[13] Lee, "The Populist Chameleon", 358.

[14] See for a different meaning "Democracy without elections: popocracy", accessed March 2, 2018, https://popocracy.wordpress.com/category/popocracy/.

[15] S. Carson, "Present Political Outlook. Democratic View", *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* (1898): 55.

"popocracy" (populist + democracy) was meant as democracy according to populists, while later newspapers increasingly used "popocrat" to mean a "populist who regards the Democratic Party with sympathy".

For many years, with some bias, the term People's Party was superimposed on "Coxeyism" both for its impact on the coexisting public opinion and for several of its specific requirements that were later taken on by Rooseveltian politics. It is worth exploring the importance of the "carnevalesque march" organized by Jacob Secheler Coxey[16] in 1894: in this context American populism has been studied as a "mobilization technique"[17] against a gravely exhausted institutional political class. The march organized by the eccentric businessman proclaimed itself the "Commonweal[th] of Christ" (one of the two promoters, Carl Browne, ex-mayor, was a theosophist)[18]. Present in this event were all of the elements that "described and enclosed" several facets of the People's Party as splinters which nominated Coxey as their gubernatorial candidate. Among these groups the label "people" was patently linked to a religious substrate that remained an important component: it was no coincidence that Pentecostals in Kansas declared that the Populists had been created to fulfil God's mandates[19]. It is exactly because of the force of this powerful "staging" that many historians reiterate that the black population was "used" as background actor, the Native Americans were displayed as if at a circus and the women present acted in Victorian style. The march, which made an impression on American public opinion, was also followed (for different reasons) by L. Frank Baum who then probably transposed it into his *Wizard of Oz*, and by Jack London who, in a tale (*The Stiff*) narrates a part of it (the main character is an ex-member of Coxey's Army). The mobilization, among other things, never arrived in Washington, because the police stopped it beforehand, creating the lasting impression that the State was opposed to the "people" who were defended only by Coxey who frequently demanded "Let my (!) people go free"[20].

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[16] C.A. Schwantes, *Coxey's Army: An American Odissey* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985).

[17] J.-P. Rioux, (ed), *Les Populismes* (Paris: Perrin, 2007), 14.

[18] M. Barkun, "Coxey's Army as Millenial Movement", in *Popular Culture and Political Change in Modern America*, eds. R. Edsforth and L. Bennett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 29-53.

[19] T. Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2004).

[20] M. Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2011), 105.

At the time of the march, the new party called Populist or People's Party had already been "founded": on July 4, 1892, in Omaha, Nebraska. Its agenda summarized the demands of 20 years of protests, and was proposed as a manifesto for national reform[21]. The preamble of its platform was written by Ignatius L. Donnelly who sought to use the convention as an opportunity to underline the "birthday of the nation" and to "reinstate the Government of the Republic in the hands of simple people […] the class in which it had its origins"[22]. So, it was not by chance that the party was founded on the Fourth of July. Russel Arben Fox noted the fervent, almost apocalyptic – but intensely patriotic – rhetoric that characterized this part of the declaration contained in the platform: the "plain people" of the nation needed to redeem the government from the forces that had corrupted it, deriving from this concept of the classically Jeffersonian and republican idea of independent men, able to exercise a real economic and democratic sovereignty[23]. The platform referred to "free men", an explicit and paradoxical evocation of the Civil War. According to several observers, the scope of the document and the party's ideals were revealed to be profoundly interwoven with the original Republican Party[24].

The populist people

The majority of the men and women of the movement did not possess a formal education (unless it was incomplete) and therefore analysts of the movement dwell on the difficulties of understanding many of the documents they produced. Despite this, they aimed for a "direct" and simple style, far from the evasiveness of bureaucratic jargon. They were the people and spoke "for/in the name" of people (not to people).

In this sense, the quotations from the same authors were also "very free". On the basis of a classification written on the documents, these came above all from the Bible and Shakespeare with a lesser influence from Cicero and Dickens[25]. Among the "men of history" cited in almost all of

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[21] See A. Testi, *Il secolo degli Stati Uniti* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014), 42-43.

[22] See "The Omaha Platform: Launching the Populist Party", History Matters, accessed March 2, 2018, http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5361/.

[23] See R. Arben Fox, *The History Legacy of Kansas Populism*, posted May 19, 2011, 3:15 p.m., on In medias res, accessed March 2, 2018, http://inmedias.blogspot.it/2011/05/history-and-legacy/.

[24] R. Hofstadter, "North America", in *Populism: Its meaning and national characteristics* eds. G. Ionescu and E. Gellner, (London: Macmillan, 1969), 9-28.

[25] It is interesting to quote a passage of a letter sent by Charles Dickens to William MacReady in 1842: "This is not the Republic I came to see; this is not the Republic

the preeminent documents, Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Calhoun[26] and Lincoln stand out. Populism was fed almost only on American history and several authors considered to be universally "classic".

Obviously, the cited "people" was that of the "frustrated producers" which created a link between the ideas of the makers and the consumer associations. In general, the shared feeling that seemed to hold these diverse souls of the movement together (and in part also the party) was their desire to liberate the "oppressed" from the chains of racism, unemployment, poverty, but with only a minority considering gender. [27] Despite this, the cause for which the adherents of the P's P fought could seem to be harbingers of "division" (and in effect the individual needs were), but all of the movements that were (even only in part) mixed into the party appealed to the unity of Americans. The idea of the people constantly emerged, meant as the entire American citizenship who decided in the general interest. Annie Diggs noted: "We call it a party, but it is not only that. It is the great rise of the people"[28]. This was also how Leonidas Polk viewed it, seeing only the urgency of "mapping" the requirements of the people in order to serve them[29], as commemorated in the American constitution ("We, The People").

Within the populists (who produced documents for the party, newspapers, papers, speeches, new universities, pamphlets and serious and rigorous journalistic investigations) there were at least three groups that I have considered: the "narrators" (at least considered as such) of a sort of origin story of the movement, the "leaders", coming above all from religious propaganda and the associations of consumers, and the part of the movement that tended to converge with the political universe of the ex-slaves, the "Achilles heel" of the populist narrative. All of these groups held the premise that "people" meant the "American people".

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of my imagination". Cited in F. Tonello (ed.), *La Costituzione degli Stati Uniti* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2010), 37.

[26] "John C. Calhoun Biography", Biography, accessed March 2, 2018, https://www.biography.com/people/john-c-calhoun-37250.

[27] See Preamble, "The Omaha Platform".

[28] R. Haywood, "Populist Humor. The Fame of Their own Effigy. Presidential Address", *Kansas History*, 16 (Spring 1993), accessed March 2, 2018, http://www.kshs.org/publicat/history/1993spring_haywood.pdf.

[29] See L. Carr Steelman, *The North Carolina Farmers' Alliance. A Political History, 1887-1893* (Greenville: East Carolina University Publications, 1985).

Populist narratives

The People's Party did not feel it needed theorists, but rather someone who could narrate the truth of the people and for the people, and revival vehicles for popular (therefore reliable) beliefs, often with a millenarian bent. The authors of this narrative constellation were often businessmen, ex-businessmen and journalists. For this group, the people were sometimes embodied above all by the "country people". Henry Demarest Lloyd's "Wealth against Commonwealth" is the best-known pamphlet among these and sought to create a dialogue at a distance with the then very famous "The American Commonwealth", an 1888 volume by James Bryce which stated that "no European" [30] (that is, an American descendent of Anglo-Saxons) could find a sensible response from the Democrats and the Republicans and that, in the moment of major quantitative adhesion to the voting rite, American politics had emptied itself of sense, becoming merely a projection of rivalries present among ethnic and social groups; at their base the parties were national amalgamations of localized groups, considered to be ideologically incoherent coalitions and congeries[31]. What is striking about Lloyd[32] is the fact that he doesn't seem to strongly share the obsession of other authors in the "populist universe", of being able to intercept and embody the "feeling of the people"[33]. Meanwhile Kansas senator Peffer seemed to be a recognized maestro[34].

In 1894, the Texan lawyer James "Cyclone" Davis, who had already helped to write the Omaha platform, published "A Political Revelation" in which he claimed that the movement followed "Jefferson's theories on democracy" and that, as in Jefferson's dispute with Hamilton, "the Populists represented the People against aristocracy". Meanwhile Luna Kellie looked at direct legislation as the guarantee that "no power higher than the vote or veto of the people can exist in a free country".

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[30] J. Bryce, *The American Commonwealth* (voll. 2) (Chicago: Charles H. Sergel, 1891), 20.

[31] See. M. Schudson, *Il buon cittadino. Una storia di vita civica americana* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2010).

[32] "Henry Demarest Lloyd", Columbia250, accessed March 2, 2018, http://c250.columbia.edu/c250_celebrates/remarkable_columbians/henry_lloyd.html.

[33] See H. Demarest Lloyd, *Wealth against Commonwealth* (New York: Harper and brothers, 1894) and J. L Thomas, *Alternative America: Henry George, Edward Bellamy, Henry Demarest Lloyd, and the Adversary Tradition* (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 1983).

[34] W. A. Peffer, *The farmer's side: his troubles and their remedy* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1891).

Appearing frequently among the economic "pamphlets", the real cult author was Ignatius L. Donnelly who wrote "Atlantis: Antediluvian World" (1882), "Caesar's Column" (1890) and "The American People's Money" (1896). Already a representative and (Republican) lieutenant governor[35] of Minnesota, he was a very successful author.

Like Coxey, he was passionate about theosophy[36], and is among those who could be connected to Hofstader's analysis that the Populists saw history as a conspiracy[37]. Donnelly however was not perceived as an outsider or bizarre, to the extent that Gladstone, an admirer of his theories, proposed a scientific expedition (which was in reality never organized) to search for traces of the ancient Atlantis[38].

In his "Caesar's Column" (in particular in chapter XI, "How the World came to be ruined") he reported (using the conceit of finding himself in a distant future) pieces from populist newspapers like "The Progress" of Boston (from 1889) where "disquieting prophecies" that told how the United States had fallen could be read:

> Look at the past: when Egypt went down 2 per cent of her population owned 97 per cent of her wealth. The people were starved to death. When Babylon went down 2 per cent of her population owned all the wealth. The people were starved to death [...]. For the past twenty years the United States has rapidly followed in the steps of these old nations. Here are the figures: in 1850 capitalists owned 37½ per cent of the nation's wealth. In 1870 they owned 63 percent[39].

Donnelly wrote his dystopia also as a "response" to Edward Bellamy's utopian novel, "Looking backward", which excited vivid interest everywhere. Bellamy outlined a socialist society founded on cooperation and fraternity in the United States. A fervent supporter of the

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[35] See "Donnelly, Ignatius (1831 - 1901)", Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, accessed March 2, 2018,
http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=D000417.
[36] His correspondence is partially accessible on Minnesota Historical Society website, http://www2.mnhs.org/library/findaids/00782/pdf/DonnellyDarwin.pdf, accessed March 2, 2018
[37] See R. Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform. From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), 64-65 and J. Ostler, "The Rhetoric of Conspiracy and the Formation of Kansas Populism", *Agricultural History*, no. 69 (Winter 1995): 1-27.
[38] M. Ciardi, *Le metamorfosi di Atlantide. Storie scientifiche e immaginarie da Platone a Walt Disney* (Roma: Carocci, 2011), 73.
[39] I. Donnelly, *Caesar's Column. A story of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: F.J. Shulte & Co., 1890), 235.

nationalization of public services, he also inspired a part of the populist electoral program of 1892 via the periodical "The nationalist" (1889-91) and "The new nation" (1891-94). To support his vision, 160 clubs were created throughout the United States, but he was more loved by the reformist press than by the populace itself[40]. These authors underline two aspects that did not disturb the populists: the deliberate socio-cultural exclusion of several "ethnicities" held to be non-American (Jews and Italians), and a notable millenarian energy within the movement.

William Hope Harvey was instead the creator of the 1893 bestseller "Coin's Financial School"[41]. Not structured from a point of view of formal education, he argued for "bimetallism" and against usury and was nominated to run as President of the United States in 1932 by the Liberty Party. A very famous example of populist political stories and related themes was "The Wizard of Oz" (published a good four years after the end of the People's Party), written by L. Frank Baum, columnist for the provincial newspaper "Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer" and son-in-law of the suffragette Matilda Gage. The story involved a constant application of the word "everyman" to the main character of Dorothy[42]. It is interesting for the development of the "already consigned to history" Party, the reference to the "flying monkeys" (the American Indians) and to the yellow Winkies (the Chinese) who are liberated[43]. The myth of the populists also emerged in the volumes of Laura Ingalls who narrated the story of her family and was welcomed with notable success (not to mention later television success)[44].

The women and the people

Women had strong importance in the movement which mixed with, took inspiration from and amalgamated with the prohibitionists, and at times

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[40] R. H. Fritze, *Falsi miti. Come si inventa quello in cui crediamo* (Sironi, Milano, 2012), 45-52.

[41] J. P. Nichols, "Bryan's Benefactor: Coin Harvey and his World", *Ohio Historical Quarterly*, 67 (Oct. 1958): 299-325.

[42] See C. Angiò, "L'allegoria populista del Mago di Oz", *Ideazione* (marzo-aprile 2000), 11.

[43] See G. Riitter, "Silver Slippers and a Golden Cap: L. Frank Baum's The Wizard of Oz and Historical Memory in American Politics", *Journal of American Studies*, 31, 1997.

[44] J. E. Miller, *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Woman Behind the Legend* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 162.

even with the women who fought for the rights of consumers[45]. In particular, Kansas (together with Nebraska) became one of the most important states for the party. For many years women had already been at the heart of the propaganda of the alliance, when in 1889 in an invitation to a meeting of farmers there appeared the underlined phrase "Ladies are especially invited"[46]. The populists found space above all in the tradition of the religious revival in 1870 and 1880, with pastors like Dwight L. Moody[47].

Olster found that no one had as much oratorical force when speaking of economic inequality as the most famous populist woman, Mary Lease, who made more than 160 "appearances" during the 1890 campaign[48]. Each time, for more than two hours Lease ("[one of] the more colourful activists"[49]), would captivate her listeners, speaking of the injustice of the world that was "upside down"[50]. Already in 1890, Lease said that "we must unite" against "the insane monster, the power of money […]. Forget the affiliations to parties of the past," she admonished "forget the moral questions of the present, this is a battle for our houses". The usual enemies were then enumerated: the old politics, the monopolies and the corporations.

It was Lease (nicknamed "the pythoness of Kansas")[51] who spread the idea that the slavery they had fought against during the Civil War had taken on another aspect, that of "white wage slavery"[52], which was worse than before. She proclaimed (in a famous speech repeated that year in front of several audiences) that "Wall Street owns our country. It is no longer the government of the people, by the people and for the people, but

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[45] On this topic, see the similarity with another experience cited in S. Meret, "Charismatic female leadership and gender: Pia Kjærsgaard and the Danish People's Party", Patterns of Prejudice, 49 (2015): 81-102.

[46] J. Olster, *Prairie populism. The Fate of Agrarian Radicalism in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, 1880*-1892 (Lawrence: University of Kansans, 1993), 97.

[47] See G. Hermet, *Les populismes*, 195.

[48] J. Olster, *Prairie populism*, 128.

[49] J. A. Johnson, "Book Review: A Common Humanity: Kansas Populism and the Battle for Justice and Equality, 1854-1903", *Great Plains Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (2006), 209.

[50] A. L. Diggs, "The Women in the Alliance Movement", *Arena*, June 6, 1892, 166.

[51] The reference was to several cartoons which depicted the People's Party as a python devouring the Democratic Party.

[52] M. E. Lease, "The Money Question, 1892", History 1000: American Society and the Individual, Fall 2013, accessed March 2, 2018, https://blogs.baruch.cuny.edu/his1000fall2013/?p=622.

a government of Wall Street, by Wall Street and for Wall Street"[53]; a discourse that was so effective that it found a place on the site of *OccupyWallStreet* in 2012[54]. Often therefore, for Lease, the populace were the people who could not be defined as "capitalists". The enemy, the non-populace, was Wall Street.

Luna Kellie and Bettie Munn Gay who followed more usual paths for the women of their generations were an active part of the People's Party while other adherents (such as Anna Ferry Smith) had also been nurses during the Civil War[55]. In "their" People's Party the form of political participation for women was not able to produce a particularly original discourse.

Even though this was the role of the preeminent women in all the populist campaigns, it was articulated through various oratorical approaches and various intellectual and political positions. This spectrum of positions mirrored the complexity of the movement and was not at all peculiar in itself. The more interesting aspect is perhaps that the women were, in proportion, the real "front-men" of the movement: their discourse and their oratorical tours were the most listened to and followed. After Lease, the most famous was Annie Diggs, who wrote for the "The Advocate", and Fanny Randolph Vickery.

The novelist Hamlin Garland explained that women were attracted *en masse* by the movements and associations around the party and by the party itself: "No other movement in history, not even anti-slavery, has appealed to women as much as populism"[56]. Kansas was particularly favourable to these female protagonists due to a state tradition linked to the crusade launched in the preceding years by the populist movement of the WCTU against saloons[57]; a crusade that was reprised by the People's Party inasmuch as the proprietors of saloons were for many years identified as the non-productive middle-men and were therefore among the professional categories they were fighting against. It is interesting to note the quantitative investigations which revealed a quarter of members in the

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[53] M. E. Lease, "The Money Question".

[54] See "Wall Street Owns The Country. A Speech by Mary Elizabeth Lease (circa 1890)", History as a weapon, accessed March 2, 2018, http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/marylease.html.

[55] C. Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 73.

[56] H. Garland, *A spoil of Office, A Story of the Modern West by Hamlin Garland*, 1897, 352, accessed March 2, 2018, http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/26189.

[57] Olster, *Prairie populism*, 129. See also R. Baritono, "Il ruolo delle donne nella politica Americana". *Il Mulino*, 5 (2012): 883-892.

Kansas Famers' Alliance were women (1888-1891), and in its equivalents in Nebraska and Iowa[58].

The women of the movement laid claim to a moral superiority as wives and mothers and "named men's political hegemony as a major cause of civilization's decline"[59]. The notion of people however changed from orator to orator, and while Lease was the most orthodox of her colleagues, other female proponents of consumer rights and proto-feminists preferred to choose other intellectual and political paths after the dissolution of the party.

At first glance the African-American women who worked *en masse* for Black Populism in the South appeared more heterodox and dynamic that their white and Midwestern counterparts. Even at the end of the movement, women like Ida B. Wells-Barnett[60] and Lutie Lytle moved towards the North and continued their battle for their "people"; many of these activists joined local groups to fight for female suffrage and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's Campaign[61], reiterating that their battle conformed to the interests of those who they maintained were "their" people. In this context the assumption seems to hold true that the women of the People's Party accepted "a silent presumption and [...] a symbolic order [...] that regulated the social exchange without being, and without being able to be, scratched"[62], all the more so (except in unmistakable cases)[63] those who remained in the Party and above all the most fierce speakers: a sort of Pythia of the popular sentiment who did not aspire to any role of power or institutional leadership but who influenced with their power to "put them in contact" with the irrational (and therefore not sophisticated, good in itself) sentiment of the people.

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[58] Olster, *Prairie populism*, 183-184.

[59] M. J. Buhule, *Women and American Socialism. 1870-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 76-87.

[60] P. A. Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett & American reform. 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 2001), 69 and 103.

[61] E. Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church. 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 120-149.

[62] I. Dominijanni, "Populismo post-edipico?" in M. Baldassari and D. Melegari (eds), *Populismo e democrazia radicale. In dialogo con Ernesto Laclau* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2012), 168.

[63] M. S. Gustafson, *Women and the Republican Party. 1854-1924* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2001), 46-47.

The colour of the people

Obviously while racism did not pose tactical dilemmas for populism in the West, it did pose them for populism in the South of the United States[64]. In both cases, however, it seemed that the People's Party cynically presented itself at the last possibility for political unity but not social unity for the black populace at the end of the nineteenth century. American populism spoke to the "*petits blancs*"[65] persuaded of being the only ones able to reclaim American authenticity within "civic nationalism".

Tom Watson, for example, wrote that "the end of the war brought changed relations" and also "changed feelings". And that it was the "old" parties who were taking advantage of the situation. Watson believed however that both the whites and the blacks shared the same situation, the same land and language and suffered from the same unjust laws. The only response that could be given according to him was a real national party, the People's Party: "The whites of the South can never support the Republican party [...]. The blacks of the South can never support the Democratic Party [...]. Therefore a new party [is] absolutely necessary"[66] in a context, whatever it may be, of "racial separation" driven towards a single political entity.

Coxey's March, for example, was said to be "cosmopolitan" and pointed out that there were no practical reason to exclude blacks: "We want to represent every nationality", said Brown in the name of Christian tolerance. But it was indicative that the "representation" of this minority was univocal: many of the Afro-Americans sang and played, while the American natives who appeared had been taken from an asylum. Hamlin had already "embraced" the cause of the Native Americans[67] while other ethnicities were considered universally as passive objects or real disasters.

On the Chinese, the "Farmers' Alliance" (part of the movement) noted them as "a foreign class, who could not if they would, and would not if they could, become American citizens" (1894) in full correspondence with the "Chinese Exclusion Act" launched in 1882. Several Mexican farmers from New Mexico who were allied with the "Alliance" held a different position; this group welcomed them in the hope that their own cultural background (Catholicism) would be illuminated by the association in

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[64] R. C. McMath, *American Populism*: *A Social History 1877-1898* (New York: Hill and Wang 1995), 122.

[65] Hermet, *Les populismes*, 193.

[66] N. Pollack (ed.), *The Populist Mind* (Indianapolis-New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1967), 364-365.

[67] Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 29.

which they were welcomed so that sooner or later, thanks to this step, they would embrace "progress and reform".

The black populist movement was not the mirror of the white and the organizations did not mix, even though the Colored Alliance had notable numbers.[68] The black Populist movement maintained their own organization and their own leaders and developed their own objectives and strategies[69].

With the exception of North Carolina and eastern Texas, the black Populists were unable to produce democratic political reform, or gather funds for public education and Afro-American employment. But in the summer of 1891, 10,000 Afro-Americans participated in the local initiatives of the Colored Alliance or of the future People's Party (some state parties had already been created) asking above all for the political reform that needed to precede the economic one[70]. At the national convention in Omaha the newspapers reported that around "400,000 blackmen have been enlisted in the organization"[71] (but there is no possibility to verify it). The legacy of this movement is by now recognized by historiography, which since the 1930s has investigated the presence of a black Populism.

But the discussion of the Populists around the "racial question" corresponded to the focus on heredity chosen by the female reform movement. In 1881, the women on the Texas Women's Christian Temperance Union had already posed the question of the lack of rights for women produced by "a progeny of slaves who grow into a nation of imbeciles"[72]. Mary Elizabeth Lease was particularly clear on this topic: for her, the progress of women was part of the "problem of racial hygiene". Her book "The Problem of Civilization Slaved" (published in 1895) proposed a proper "racial engineering" that pictured the whites as the guides of the Earth[73].

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[68] R. Manning Humphrey, "History of the Colored Farmers' National Alliance", in Dunning, N.A.(ed.) *The Farmers' alliance history and agricultural digest* (Washington: The Alliance Publishing Company, 1891), 288-293. The Colored Alliance reached 1.200.000 adherents in 1890, including 300.000 women.

[69] O. H. Ali, *In the Lion's Mouth. Black Poppulism in the New South, 1886-1900* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 10.

[70] G. H. Gaither, *Blacks and the Populist Movement: Ballot and Bigotry in the New South* (Toscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), 196-197.

[71] J. Abramowitz, "The Negro in the Populist Movement", *Journal of Negro History*, 38, no. 3 (1953): 257-289.

[72] Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 98-99.

[73] M. E. Lease, *The Problem of Civilization Solved* (Chicago: Laird and Lee, 1895), 250-255.

But in 1894 the "Georgia Baptist" explained that: "To the colored man the People's Party in Georgia is largely what the Republican Party was to him in this nation thirty years ago"[74]. This perception was made stronger by W.E.B Du Bois who, at the start of the twentieth century, wrote:

> The populist movement that has destroyed the West and the South [...] a third party with profound significance [...]. This means that the Afro-Americans of the rural South must construct their movement without the support of the northern leaders[75].

According to Du Bois, these northern leaders did not understand the importance of the experiment underway in the South.

Du Bois studied several intellectual and political courses of leaders of the movement which became part of his trilogy "The Black Flame" in which the "people" of black Populism appeared clear: "The same people were wary of its break with the Republican Party and its alliance with the disgruntled Democrats and the white poor"[76]; the people and the populace, not just the Afro-Americans in their ethnic collective but also, sometimes, the subset linked to the spiritual and religious leaders (which often overlap) of their territorial communities. The fragile alliance between white and black populists collapsed in 1896 as the People's Party began to dissolve. After 1896, the black Populist movement challenged the Democratic Party on several fronts (above all in East Texas) but black populists as a regional force were by then destroyed[77]. With the end of black Populism, many African-Americans left the South or migrated to urban areas[78].

Populist inheritance

In 1894, the party had conquered 41% of votes in Colorado, 39% in Washington and Kansas and 36% in Texas[79] but populist politics, which represented more than the total sum of the financial demands of its parts,

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[74] See O. H. Ali, *In the Lion's Mouth*, 113.

[75] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 54.

[76] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Black Flame. A Trilogy. Book One. The Ordeal of Mansart* (New York: Mainstream Publishers, 1957), 179.

[77] O. H. Ali, *In the Lion's Mouth*, 11.

[78] M. Marable, *Race, reform, and Rebellion. The Second Recostruction in America. 1945-1990* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2002), 3-12.

[79] Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 14.

was already "melting" into the two major parties[80]. The most realistic summary of the populist movement was perhaps expressed by William Jennings Bryan's famous proclamation at the 1896 Democratic Convention: "You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold"[81].

In spite of these few years of "self-labelling" by the American party, the term "populist" became a pejorative one, used frequently by the movement's adversaries. For example, the Dutch newspaper "Algemeen Handelsblad" reported on the Democratic Convention of September 4, 1896, citing Fowler, a leader of the Democratic Party, who used the term "populism" as an asymmetric concept of counter democracy: "Our presence here demonstrates [our] nature as real democrats, opposers of the people who favour populism and anarchy"[82].

The populist language seemed to play an important role in American politics, not just through Bryan, democratic and populist candidate[83]. We should also remember that in the 1930s, Franklin Roosevelt appealed to the "forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid" [84] (overturning the meaning given by a social darwinist to the same term) and that in 1992 Bill Clinton ran for presidency by borrowing the need to "put people first" and to "invest in people"[85]. A part of the populist current even reached Europe, for example, with the "dissident thought" of the monetary politics of Ezra Pound, whose familiar story was linked to the fight in favour of

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[80] See also M. A. Lause, *Young America: Land, Labor and Republican Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005) and M. Green, "Young America: Land, Labor, and the Republican Community by Mark A. Lause", *The Business History Review*, 80, no. 2 (Summer, 2006): 355-357.

[81] "William Jennings Bryan: "Cross of Gold" Speech (1896). Commentary by Lewis L. Gould, University of Texas at Austin", Milestone documents, http://www.milestonedocuments.com/documents/view/william-jennings-bryans-cross-of-gold-speech, accessed March 2, 2018.

[82] "De convention te Indianapolis", *Algemeen Handelsblad*, September 4, 1896, cited in T. Houwen, *The non-European roots of the concept of populism*, Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex and Radbound Universiteit Nijmengen, Working Paper no. 120, 2011.

[83] See G. N. Magliocca, "Costitutional False Positives and the Populist Moment", *Notre Dame Law Review*, 81, no. 3 (2006): 821-888.

[84] J. C. Humes, *The Wit & Wisdom of FDR* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 152.

[85] E. D. Dover, *Images, Issues, and Attacks. Television Advetising by Incumbents and Challangers in Presidential Elections* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), 74.