

The Chain of Equivalent Demands in the Rise of Rural Neo-populism. Introduction to Special Issue

Since the referendum on Brexit on June 23, 2016, many observers have highlighted the territorial dimension of the profound political changes that have taken place in Western countries. In every country where citizens have been called to the polls, a significant difference has emerged between urban and rural areas, between large and medium-sized cities, and between the centers and suburbs of the most important cities. Someone brought together all the so-called populist voting areas—rural, medium, and peripheral—under the definition of places left behind (Rodríguez-Pose 2017). Others have instead emphasized the fault between city and country, to highlight the decisive role that citizens of rural areas have had in particular in the consensus for various populist parties and leaders (Carrosio 2020; Emanuele 2018; Marcinkiewicz 2017). Rural America was thoroughly investigated to understand which factors have worked in the background and led to such a marked territorial connotation of the vote (Inglehart and Norris 2018).

Many researchers are questioning whether new populism, as a phenomenon has specificities with respect to historical populism. There are basically two perspectives in dealing with this issue. The first, of a political nature, questions the political nature and types of populism: what it is and which variants it is characterized by. According to this perspective populism can be a form of mobilization, a type of political regime, a communicative style, a *forma mentis* or a thin-centered ideology (Zulianello 2017). It is a form of mobilization when heterogeneous groups find a political entrepreneur capable of coagulating on itself different and contradictory demands, establishing an unbiased relationship with their followers (Weyland 2001). It is a type of political regime when the leaders who govern reject intermediate forms of mediation (Wigell 2008). It is a communicative style, because it uses a language capable, in appealing to the people, of generating a distinction between the way of expression of ordinary people and the *establishment* (Moffitt and Tormey 2014). It is a *forma mentis*, because it believes in the innate virtues of the people, whose primacy is an exclusive source of political legitimacy. It is a thin-centered ideology, because it does not base its speech on a coherent and organic vision of the world (Mudde 2004), but adopts a simplified vision of the social structure, which is tripartite:

the pure people, the corrupt elite and others (immigrants or marginals) responsible, together with the elite, for the worsening conditions of the people (Pavolini 2018).

There seems to be a consensus that there are neo-liberal, socialist, and radical right-wing variants of this new form of populism. They are distinguished by the connotation of the pure people and the corrupt elite, and consequently by the socio-political objectives they pursue. Although, according to Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira (2017), whatever the variant, the new populism is a diverse set of ideas with three common characteristics: anti-establishment, authoritarianism, and nativism. The first characteristic stresses the wisdom and virtues of the common people, the silent majority, against the knowledge of the experts and the material and moral corruption of the elites. Authoritarianism recalls the direct relationship between a strong and charismatic leadership and the people, whose relationship is welded by forms of plebiscitary direct democracy (opinion polls, referendums, drawing of representatives, simplification of procedures to allow the people to express themselves), which discourage structured political and policy processes to ensure the protection of minorities and their integration into political life. Finally, there are hidden and manifested words of xenophobia and references to “us” and “them”. Inglehart and Norris (2018), like Stenner (2005), believe that this new populism can also be defined as an authoritarian xenophobic dynamic.

Neo-populist values could be traced back to a continuum of positions that see cosmopolitanism on the opposite side. Unlike the new populism, cosmopolitan values focus on the opening of national borders, multiculturalism, and social inclusion for diversity. According to Latour (2017), it is precisely from the tension between cosmopolitanism and nativism that neo-populism is innervated by a strong distrust of expert knowledge. The Trumpist denial of climate change as a scientific fact represents a sovereigntist design that requires a rupture of interdependencies between national states to address global environmental issues, spreading a pervasive delegitimization of scientific knowledge. The same narrative was in the culture wars around the public health responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, where the inherently evolutionary dynamic of the expert knowledge was portrayed as unreliable, further undermining science communication for the sake of political gains (Kennedy 2019).

Roughly outlining the main features, there is a second perspective that instead questions the causes that have generated the social climate necessary to the rise of the new populism. We can take the debate back to two approaches. The first links the emergence of new populism to

economic insecurity resulting from the profound changes in the labor market and in post-industrial economies: this approach focuses on increasing territorial inequalities since the 2008 crisis. It is the places left behind by neoliberal policies that express their unease through an anti-system vote. The second looks at the cultural dimension—the backlash against globalization—the reaction to the disorientation caused by globalization: this approach focuses more on the identity dimension and personal insecurity. Globalization has generated a demand for closure and homogeneity, for strong men capable of restoring lost order.

These two approaches respond to the new structural antagonism that characterizes the critical junction in which we are immersed. According to Kriesi (2013), in fact, the denationalization produced by globalization has introduced a new fracture called the “integration/independence dimension”. It is articulated both in the cultural and economic spheres, in differentiated positions of opening and closing and has strong similarities with the dialectic between localism and cosmopolitanism of Inglehart and Norris (2018). In short, when the conditions are created for structural antagonisms to become subjectively aware, the losers of denationalization will support independentist positions (economic protectionism and cultural defense), while the winners take integrationist positions (opening markets and multiculturalism). As Pavolini (2018) points out, populism presents itself as a political offer to the social demand that arises in the intersection between the cultural pole and the socio-economic pole. The losers of globalization cannot be combined with each other by mobilizing homogeneous interests and identities, but by leveraging the rhetoric of demarcation.

This rhetoric is well explained by the literature on recognition inequalities (Fraser 2000; Lamont 2018), although it has focused a lot more on the question of social demarcation than on the territorial one. The concept of recognition inequalities arises within the debate on equal opportunities and focuses its attention on the participatory parity that individuals and groups must enjoy in order to experience social interactions on an equal footing with others. From a theoretical perspective, it is a controversial concept, which however finds many applications from an empirical point of view in its dimension as a sensitizing concept.¹ We face a recognition gap on a territorial basis when people living in the

¹Blumer (1969) distinguishes between definitive concepts and sensitizing concepts: the former are clear in terms of characteristics and boundaries; the latter lack precise indications, but provide a direction, a functional orientation for approaching empirical cases. These are constructs that take shape from field research and are placed in an intermediate position between the simple descriptions of the experiences studied and the theoretical systematizations.

same territory feel that their specificities are not recognized—by politics, administration, culture, elites—, because they are not understood, or because they are openly despised. Misrecognition translates into territorial injustice when politics, policies, rules, norms do not take these differences into account, they do not recognize them. According to the principle of *territorial justice*, in fact, public action must be proportionate to the needs and culture of each place (Boyne and Powell 1991). There are differences in condition and role, which characterize and unite the lives of people residing in the same territory, which need to be recognized so that they translate into participatory parity, through institutions capable of producing cohesion. “The experience of misrecognition generates negative feelings which—albeit not necessarily—create the conditions for conflicting positions. The conflict arises, in fact, from situations of humiliation, contempt or disregard and represents the action through which the subjects try to obtain recognition”(Camozzi 2012).

According to Lamont (2018), it is in fact the neoliberal discourse preferred by the ruling elites, with imposed narratives of the self-made entrepreneurship, economic success, self-sufficiency, privatization of risk, exaltation of the metropolitan dimension, that produces new forms of misrecognition and new inequalities of status. This is also true in territorial terms: the misrecognition of the countryside by the urban (cultural, economic, political, civil, scientific) elites is not new, but has found a new breeding ground in the neoliberal discourse. It is therefore assumed that at the base of the growing popularity of new populism in rural areas there is a strong demand for recognition—of values, living conditions, difficulties, customs, perceptions—that comes from afar (Osti 1997) and that in the past years it continued to burn under the ashes, until new slogans managed to catalyze its discontent.

It remains to be understood how this demand is intercepted and capitalized to a greater extent by the political offer put in place by the populist forces. There is an ongoing debate on the reasons that favored the emergence of the new populism, and probably the causes are multiple and involve different plans: from the structure of the political offer to the economic-social dimensions. This special issue contributes to the debate, introducing a territorial posture in the analysis. The success of the new populism in rural areas is not to be sought in the ability to restore centrality to these places in the political debate or to represent the peculiarity of their instances in electoral programs and government action. It is in the aptitude to get in tune with the Gramscian *common sense* (Liguori 2006) and to organize it within a more general political discourse. Laclau’s work (Laclau 2005) helps us to better understand the relationship between the demand for

recognition and populism. The Argentine political scientist, in fact, believes that populism should be interpreted as a social logic, a way of constructing the political. This modality stems from the inability of traditional institutions and political forces to respond to emerging and differentiated social demands, which is an interesting paradox if we consider that liberal democracy, the system supposedly best equipped with integrating such demands, tends to struggle to undercut the populist tide.

In the liberal democratic political process, unheard questions—each isolated from the others—establish a relationship of equivalence between them. Whoever is capable of unifying the questions in a stable system of signification manages to produce a political offer that is in tune with the common sense emerging from the equivalence of unheard social questions. The peculiar demand for recognition that comes from rural areas, therefore, represents a piece of the chain of equivalences of so many unheard social questions that find an edge in the political logic of the new populism. This ensures that the neo-populist forces are able, through the process of building their people, to weld together classes and interests previously unconstrained by bonds of solidarity, and to give representation to fragmented, diversified and contradictory demands. In this sense, they are able to represent the demand for rural recognition, without precluding the possibility of including their own political offer on other social questions which have not been listened to until now. The *otherness* of the application for rural recognition is therefore constitutive of populism, which is based on the chain of equivalences of diversified applications. This does not mean that the populist political offer is capable of simultaneously giving answers to all unheeded questions. In the logic of equivalences, however, giving answers to some of these questions means giving signals of recognition of the diversified requests, which have been aggregated in the system of signification. In addition, answering some questions (typically culture war items) can also mask the inherent inability to answer others (typically economic ones), yet the emotional charge exploiting justified resentment tends to be sufficient for people to even vote against their own interests (Hartman 2019). In the next few years we will know if for the neo-populist forces this way of constructing the political will be strong enough to cross the “threshold of executive power” unscathed (Rokkan and Urwin 1982).

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