

What is the relationship between the diffused perception of an increase in inequalities and the rise of populist movements? Which are the differences compared to the XIX century, when the left was still able to size the voices of discontent as to link them to the political sphere? Can we shed light on the differences between French and Italian populist forces?

EuVisions' Director, **Maurizio Ferrera**, and **Marc Lazar**, professor at Sciences Po and LUISS University in Rome, met in Milan on the occasion of a meeting organised by the Foundation Corriere della Sera Milano, to discuss these important matters.

A dialogue, moderated by **Dario di Vico**.

Maurizio Ferrera (MF): I think that we need to start from the different traits inequality detains today as compared to the past. Indeed, we do not observe a mere increase in the distance between income levels, as measured by the Gini coefficient. We need to take note of a fallback, at the individual level. **The deterioration of the living conditions of millions of citizens leads to a profound sentiment of relative deprivation at a personal level, which turned into an aggressive political and social behaviour.** This fallback hit blue-collar workers in those economic sectors that are more sensitive to international competition, indistinctively from appertaining to a specific social class. Workers in the public sector or pensioners did not hit the ground, as it happened, instead to young employees. This kaleidoscope of effects hindered the possibility for intermediate structures, such as trade unions, to size on the discontent (as it happened in the XIX century): the rhetoric of the “guilty” and the “scapegoat” prevailed. And populists were able to point at clear objectives: the élites and “the others”, that is the “immigrants”. I think that the success of populism lies in the rise of a sentiment of relative deprivation and the weakening of XIX century's narratives.

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Marc Lazar (ML): Alexis de Tocqueville told us the story of the French passion for equality. Today this love spread across the Continent, reaching countries such as Germany and the Czech Republic who enjoy a positive economic outlook. The excellent study, *Where is democracy heading?* sheds light on these developments. 87 percent of Germans declared to be very concerned about inequality. Likewise did 75 percent of Czech respondents.

Historically, populists claimed to be liberals, whereas today they present themselves as the defenders of those who are suffering. Populists of nowadays call for the defence of the Welfare state, yet they argue for an exclusive nationality-based model of the latter. That's how, step by step, the French Front National caught traditional leftist voters from industrial areas. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to look out for a unique answer to the populist's success: after the victory of Emmanuel Macron, many argued that Marine Le Pen is at the end of the line. I don't buy that. All necessary conditions for populism to thrive are still there, in France.



Marine Le Pen at a European
Parliamentary debate | CC Flickr:
European Parliament

Generally speaking, would you agree that the key- and differentiating-traits of the French and Italian populism, are respectively, “a pledge for social protection” and a “critique of the political class”?

MF: Even before Beppe Grillo took the stage, Italian populism was alive and represented for an extended period by the Northern League and, somehow less, by Silvio Berlusconi. However, the 5 Star Movement is an emblematic populist force, as they were able to size aggressive behaviours provoked by inequality and orchestrate them into a fundamental

conflict against the élites. **The “us and them” rhetoric paved the way for a radical horizontal democracy, as there wasn’t a need for a vertical process and organisation enabling decision-making. We are talking about a huge misunderstanding of the logic of democracies, a magma of vertical anti-elitism and “horizontal” confusion at the highest degree.** That’s why you can find whatever argument and policy proposal on the website of the 5 Star Movement, even different ones. If Syriza and Podemos are left-wing forces, whereas Le Pen and the Dutch Geert Wilders are distinctly right-wing, the 5 Star Movement is located nowhere on the left-right dimension.

Le Pen turned upside down the identity of the traditional right. As some far-right associations organised protests against a “marriage for all” policy, Le Pen didn’t show up: she knows all too well, that her electorate is different. On the left, Jean-Luc Mèlènchon, a former Trotskyist and socialist, totally changed his style on the occasion of the last electoral campaign. Mèlènchon took inspiration from Latin America’s populists

ML: Talking about left and right, Jean Marie Le Pen is a staunch liberal. On the contrary, her daughter, Marine, wants to protect public expenditures, although she doesn’t explain how. But we need to add another element to the picture: Marine shows off as a modern woman. She’s a divorced lawyer with two children. Le Pen turned upside down the identity of the traditional right. As some far-right associations organised protests against a “marriage for all” policy, Le Pen didn’t show up: she knows all too well, that her electorate is different. **On the left, Jean-Luc Mèlènchon, a former Trotskyist and socialist, totally changed his style on the occasion of the last electoral campaign. Mèlènchon took inspiration from Latin America’s populists. As a consequence, his rhetoric became all about “the people against the casta (the Spanish word for élite)”**. There was no space for the left-right distinction in his strategy. That’s why Mèlènchon is more similar to the 5 Star Movement and oriented towards transforming his political organisation. Moreover, this change of approach explains why he didn’t point at Macron or Le Pen, on the occasion of the second round of the presidential elections. Mèlènchon knew his electorate would have been

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split on the matter between an anti-fascist and an anti-liberal stance. Last but not least, it is essential to look at the sociological aspects of the vote. Industrial blue-collar workers voted for Le Pen. Lower level employees of the public administration opted for Mélenchon. Both gained many votes among the 18-24 aged population. Among these youngsters, the Front National attracted the lower instructed ones, whereas Mélenchon the laureates of public Universities. Crucially, the young voters of Macron stem from business schools and the so-called Grand Écoles. Thus, the level of instruction appears as a pivotal factor to understand the voting behaviour.



Beppe Grillo | CC Copyright: Giovanni Favia

Let's skip to the politics of values. In the light of the populist offence, there's a feeling of being at a ground zero. There isn't a clear competition between political narratives and the very adhesion to the principle of democracy is questioned.

MF: Norbert Elias and Zygmunt Baumann analysed and described the individualisation of needs and aspirations as amplified by social networks. This phenomenon makes it hard to make young people feel committed to shared values, as they live a fragmented life experience. After the end of the XIX century, Tony Blair tried to fill what we could call as "the market of ideas" with a new "set of values". Ten years after the end of his political career as Prime minister, we can say that the so-called "Third way" was the last attempt to provide a "value-frame" which was different from those of XIX century. That vision put together the prominence of "individual choice" with more traditional types of "social bonds". As such, Blair was able to frame a new concept of equality and was able to gain massive consent. To be credible and effective, Blair's political project

needed the “social elevator” dynamic to step in again. That’s why the Labour party emphasised pretty much education and vocational training policies, drawing inspiration from the 60s and 70s. At that time, mass-education allowed the most substantial social development ever, until nowadays.

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ML: Nowadays, populist show-off as “democratic” leaders. In the past, between the two World Wars, they were hostile to democracy in itself. Today, they call themselves protectors of direct democracy and believe in the magic of referenda. They call for a democracy featured by “immediate” decision making spurred by technological developments. As such, the 5 Star Movements is the most original populist movement out there and inspiration for Mèlènchon. Recalling the same inquiry of above, 33 percent of citizens think that there can be an alternative system to democracy, which sounds ambiguous. **Many youngsters declare that an authoritarian regime could be accepted. In the light of similar stances, we must admit that there the very value of democracy is being questioned. We need to rethink our narrative in a way that enables us to face the weaknesses of our democratic systems, concerning transparency and organisation.** For instance, I believe that Macron is wrong when he shows-off as a republican monarch instead of giving some leeway to “participative” demands. The political scientist, Pierre Rosanvallon argues that people cannot wait 4-5 years to have a say and vote. We need to find new tools through which it is possible to channel the participation of citizens. Let’s not forget that democracy took hold only as it bound together peace, prosperity and social justice. Today’s political landscape reopens a vital debate: are we in favour of democracy because we believe in it as a principle, or because we feel guaranteed by its collateral effects of welfare and increased quality of life? I think that a part of the success of populist movements is linked to the fact the latter challenge citizens on our system of beliefs and

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values. And this sort of questioning matches other social matters, such as immigration, the integration of Islam and terrorism.

Populism challenges us and finds us not ready to answer. It feels like we lack a convincing response on these subjects.

Coming back to the question about what kind of answer we can give to the populist threat, I ought to lay out a simple concept, namely the one of “liberal democracy”. The latter brings together both, the principles of constitutionalism and universalism

ML: Europeans are open minded. They accept diversity and other religions. But the ways through which politics tried to achieve “integration” – that is, either through the Northern European “multiculturalism” or the French “republican option” – experience a period of crisis, right as we are undergoing profound demographic transformations. Populism plays with the fear of the Islam. **We must concede that in 15 months of Islamic terrorist attacks we counted half of the victims of 15 years of left- and right-wing extremism. That’s nothing but trauma.** Personally, I feared counter-attacks on Muslim communities in France after the bombings of last years. It didn’t happen. And I am glad. All the more important, the latter reaction signals that French people were able to distinguish those who put bombs from the majority of Muslims. At this point, the central question for our society reads as follows: are Muslims willing to denounce those who are ready to undertake terrorist attacks? We have to accept a pluralism of religions, but we cannot discuss our set of rules. If moderate Muslims aren’t able to answer this point, populism will quickly pick up the fruits. On the other hand, the success of populism might depend as well on the fact that we, ourselves, became reluctant Western people somehow. Sometimes, it feels like Western democracy should be protected only by intelligence.

MF: Coming back to the question about what kind of answer we can give to the populist threat, I ought to lay out a simple concept, namely the one of “liberal democracy”. The latter brings together both, the principles of constitutionalism and universalism. **In Hungary and Poland, right-wing forces are challenging these cornerstones. For what concerns**

the Islam, the Muslim intelligentsia never spurred a process of re-interpretation of the Koran. As a matter of example, nowadays, in the Western world, not a single theologian would interpret the Bible literally and claim other should do the same.

Prominent Islamic theologians think the contrary when it comes to their texts. They do not recognise that language is time-relative and - appropriate. Those who challenged these beliefs were put in jail. Unfortunately, we cannot wait for Islamic theocratic intellectual élites to make the first move. It won't happen in a reasonable time lapse. Our only hope is the process of secularisation of younger Muslim generations.



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