

Article

European Crisis in Historical Perspectives

Serena FERENTE & Takashi KOSEKI

ABSTRACT: Can historians shed a new light on the ongoing discussion of contemporary Europe? This is the chief question this article intends to raise and tackle. The article comprises two papers. Koseki's paper tries to locate Brexit in the historical context of plural post-wars of 20th century Europe. Ferente's paper examines populist discourse in much longer historical perspectives, going back to ancient Rome. Both papers are attempts at demonstrating the relevance of historical perspectives, insights, and thinking to our understanding of the current affairs.

KEYWORDS: European crisis, Brexit, populism, political discourse, historical perspectives

Serena FERENTE is Professor of Medieval History at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

E-mail: s.ferente@uva.nl

Takashi KOSEKI is Professor at the Institute for Research in Humanities, Kyoto University.

E-mail: koseki.takashi.3a@kyoto-u.ac.jp

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Foreword¹

Takashi KOSEKI

This article consists of two papers, which were delivered at the seminar ‘European Crisis in Historical Perspectives’, held at the Institute for Research in Humanities, Kyoto University, on 18 March 2020. The main aim of the seminar was to examine and demonstrate the relevance of historical perspectives, historical insights, and historical thinking to our understanding of the current European crisis or crises. In other words, the seminar intended to raise a question: can historians shed a new light on the ongoing discussion of contemporary Europe, which has been carried out mainly by political scientists, sociologists, or journalists?

In his short paper, ‘The End of ‘Post-wars’ Europe?: Preliminary Remarks on Brexit’, Takashi Koseki attempts at considering Brexit, finally actualized on 31st January 2020, in the historical context of plural post-wars of 20th century Europe. Serena Ferente’s paper, ‘An archaeology of populism: ‘the people’ in European political discourse’, examines populist discourse in much longer historical perspectives, going back to ancient Rome. None of the papers presents any definitive conclusions. They intend rather to be suggestive and thought-provoking.

The End of ‘Post-wars’ Europe?: Preliminary Remarks on Brexit

Takashi KOSEKI

After many twists and turns, Brexit was finally actualized on 31st January 2020. Now Britain has clearly crossed the Rubicon and its secession from the EU may drive what might be called the ‘post-wars’ regime in Europe to the edge of a cliff. European integration is in deep trouble and no plausible way out is in sight at this moment. It is surely a little too bold to predict that the end of the ‘post-wars’ regime will soon bring about another ‘pre-war’ Europe. Nevertheless, together with the influx of immigrants and refugees, the fragility of the common currency, and the rise of populism, Brexit will certainly make the predicament of ‘post-wars’ Europe much more serious.

¹ This contribution was successfully submitted for publication in ZINBUN 51, 2020. Unfortunately, due to an error in the editorial process, this article is published in this volume instead. The editor-in-charge would like to offer his sincere apologies for his mistake to the authors (TK).

1. Plural 'Post-wars'

First of all, I would briefly explain what my terminology of plural 'post-wars' implies. It is based on a simple fact that many people spend more than just one 'post-war' period. For instance, in the 20th century, which had at least three major 'post-wars' (the post-First World War, the post-Second World War, and the post-Cold War), it was fairly usual to experience plural and multiple 'post-wars'.

It should be noted that the newest 'post-war' does not erase older ones. The latter keeps its presence in the former. In the concluding chapter to the book *Aftermath* (ed. by Nicholas Martin, Tim Haughton & Pierre Purseigle, Ashgate, 2014), Haughton and Martin used an attractive metaphor.

These [major] wars are more akin to ice ages, with their huge glaciers. Although the ice retreats, it leaves spectacular landscapes replete with new valley and steep hill, terrain that is difficult to traverse and navigate.

What emerges in the 'post-war' period is nothing like the duplication of 'pre-war' society. People are compelled to live in an essentially new glacial landform, which is to be deformed again by another glacial shift of a great magnitude. It may be said that today we are living in a landscape shaped by three major wars of the last century. If I dare to use one more geological metaphor, plural 'post-wars' form a multilayered structure. The long shadows of preceding 'post-wars' are always casted over the newest 'post-war'. It goes without saying that none of these 'post-wars' is immutable. Each of them is often transformed and given fresh meanings according to the requirements of the present.

2. European Integration as a 'Post-wars' Scheme

Let me move to the topic of European integration, which seems quite a typical 'post-wars' scheme. The apparent institutional origin of the EU can be found in the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952. The very basis of the project is a pacifist ideal that another war between France and Germany should be made unthinkable and materially impossible. The strong impact of the latest lamentable world war was unmistakably inscribed in the scheme of European integration.

However, the ideological origins were much older. Those earlier plans for European federation and unity, advocated in the inter-war period or even during the First World War, were also influential on the scheme. Notable examples are the idea of *Mitteleuropa* by Friedrich Naumann, the proposal for the Federation of Europe by Aristide Briand, and the scheme of Pan-European Union by Coudenhove-Kalergi. In this sense, the ECSC was not

simply a product born out of the terrible experiences of the most recent armed conflict, but that of multilayered 'post-wars'. Therefore, as the 'Eurafrica' project for a merger of African colonies to be developed by a united Europe clearly revealed, the scheme of European integration was not free from imperialist and colonialist thinking, which was quite commonplace in the 1910s and 1920s.

As mentioned above, the paramount aim for setting up the ECSC was nothing but the realization of a durable peace in Europe. Especially, the prevention of another hostility between those two countries, which had been at war three times within less than eighty years, was by far the most pressing task. During the years after the First World War, France tried hard to keep Germany down only to fail completely. The main lesson France learnt was that a strong international institution, acceptable for Germany as well as for France and other European countries, was necessary. In this sense the preceding 'post-war' experiences crucially directed the current 'post-war' strategy. It is against this background that Robert Schuman dared to foresee optimistically that the EEC, a supranational body operating above national governments, would be a reliable foundation for the preservation of peace at its establishment in 1957.

3. An 'Illusion of Grandeur'

How about Britain? First of all, it should be remarked that Britain's 'post-war' period following the Second World War was very much different from those of West Germany and France. In Britain the Second World War, often called the 'people's war', was generally remembered as a heroic triumph, 'the finest hour', as Winston Churchill predicted in June 1940. Unlike Germany, which played the role of the worst possible war criminal against humanity, the country could assume that of savior of European civilization. Unlike France, which went under German occupation rather submissively, the country successfully repelled German invasion and was never occupied. The painstaking task of coming to terms with past under Nazi regime (*vergangenheitsbewältigung*) was not Britain's business. Nor was the complicity of the Vichy regime with Nazi Germany an acute issue to cope with. In the 'post-war' period after 1945, Britain was not forced to be tormented seriously by the trauma of the latest war.

As a result, Britain came to regard itself as a superior country unrivalled by any other European countries and even as one of the three global powers in the 'post-war' world, along with America and the Soviet Union. Britain was 'not simply a Luxembourg'. This is what Ernest Bevin, Foreign Secretary of the Attlee government, said in demanding an exceptional status for Britain in the Organization for European Economic Cooperation, which was set up to receive the financial support by the Marshall Plan in 1948. Needless to say, such self-assessment was something like an 'illusion of grandeur'. As a matter of

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fact, Britain went bankrupt and its status was nothing but that of a mere supporting actor on the international political stage.

Such false complacency may explain why Britain kept reluctant towards European integration. Britain did not share other European countries' keen pacifist motivation and was unwilling to compromise its sovereignty. When he delivered a famous speech pleading for building 'a kind of United States of Europe' in 1946, Churchill did not suppose Britain to be a constituent part of the coming United States. He believed that Britain held a special position among European states and had its own mission of assisting and looking after the project.

What seemed much more important than European integration was the 'special relationship' with America. During the inter-war period, America largely withdrew from the international system and its isolationist stance did much to bring about the Second World War. Having learnt a lot from the former 'post-war' experiences, Britain judged that preventing a further withdrawal of America into isolation was by far the most effective in neutralizing the threat of the Soviet Union. European integration was thought to be much less reliable than American commitment in European affairs.

By taking somewhat condescending and arrogant attitudes, Britain seriously underestimated the potentiality of European integration. However, the acceleration of the pace of decolonization soon urged Britain to recant its reluctance. In the early 1960s, when Britain's trade with Europe came to exceed that with the Commonwealth, the entry into the EEC became a reasonable option.

4. An Awkward Partner

Britain's entry into the EC finally materialized as late as in 1973. However, even after the entry Britain remained an awkward partner of Europe, adopting a very utilitarian approach. In British minds, the EC was primarily a free trade zone, in other words, a lever to achieve economic prosperity. It is symbolic that the EC was widely called the 'common market' in Britain. Only two years later since the entry, Britain's first ever referendum on EC membership was held under the Wilson Government with serious internal divisions. Although the outcome of the referendum was a landslide victory for staying in, the lack of enthusiasm among the British people was soon to become apparent.

Next came Margaret Thatcher, who believed that Britain and America had saved Europe in the Second World War. Just after forming her first government, Thatcher demanded the reduction of British contribution to the EC budget with her famous exclamation: 'I want my money back!'. Not a very decent wording, indeed. And her premiership strongly stimulated Euro-skepticism in and out of the Conservative Party.

In 2001 Tony Blair condemned the past British policies towards Europe.

The tragedy for British politics – for Britain – has been that politicians of both parties have consistently failed, not just in the 1950s but on up to the present day, to appreciate the emerging reality of European integration. And in doing so, they have failed Britain’s interests.

As the most pro-EU British Prime Minister, Blair signed the European social chapter and was involved in post-Cold War European politics more actively than his predecessors. However, on the central issue of monetary union he kept Britain out of Euro. The traditional preference for looser forms of European integration appears to have been inherited by the New Labour governments.

To sum up, Britain’s triumphant memory of the Second World War and underestimation of the potentiality of European integration, which was conceived out of the experiences of Europe’s multilayered ‘post-wars’, seem to have created a political trend leading to Euro-skepticism and Brexit. As this paper has shown, it is surely imperative to pay close attention to the historical context of ‘post-wars’ Europe in our discussion of Brexit.

✂ This paper, which was prepared before the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic came to be known widely, does not consider its implications upon the future of European integration.

An archaeology of populism: ‘the people’ in European political discourse

Serena FERENTE

1. Populism and the discourse of ‘the people’

Like a virus, the idea of populism has spread widely and fairly quickly in the last two decades. As all political labels that matter, ‘populism’ has an uncertain and contentious range of meanings and usage. In fact, in the definition of populism ambivalence and uncertainties may well be even more striking than in other terms of ordinary political language.

Language and labelling has been central in all scholarly attempts to explain populism.²

² Among recent overviews see especially Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017 and Nadia Urbinati, “Political Theory of Populism”, *Annual Review of Political Science* 22.6 (2019), pp. 111–127. A short English-language bibliography on populism in recent political science can be found here: <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756223/obo-9780199756223-0300.xml>

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Political scientists such as Ernesto Laclau have argued that the vagueness and contradiction of the language of populism is performative, in that it helps to create and shape the notion itself of the subject of populist grievances (that is, ‘the people’).³ Other scholars, going back to a tradition as old as Gustave Le Bon’s 1895 *The Crowd*, argue that populism is better understood as a rhetoric, or a set of rhetorical tools, a way of communicating, rather than an ideology that seeks to provide a systematic and rational explanation of the world. This would be the reason why populism can be located both on the left or the right of the ideological spectrum, and is often associated with claims that it transcends the mainstream division between right and left. Populism is generally a negative word, although lately there have been signs of it being reclaimed by some movements, which were originally labelled as ‘populist’ by their adversaries (recent examples in Europe are the Spanish *Podemos*, and the French *La France Insoumise* parties).

There are some elements of a definition of populism, however, around which there is broad consensus. The most important one is the centrality of the notion of ‘the people’ in populist discourse, and the attribution to ‘the people’ of virtuous and indeed almost mythical qualities. An aspect of the populist notion of ‘the people’ is the coexistence of inclusion and exclusion in it: ‘the people’ on the one hand suggests the totality, and on the other hand it always excludes some, typically designated as ‘the elite’ or ‘the establishment’. Another aspect – this one more contentious among scholars of populism – is the tendency of populist discourse to fixate on an embodied, unitary representation of ‘the people’, often (but not always) overlapping with the body of the political leader.

Histories of populism generally begin in the modern age. Late 19th-century political movements in the USA (The People’s Party) and the Russian Empire (the *narodnik* movement) are the first examples of movements for which the designation populism is commonly accepted. In the twentieth century, the first case of a populist regime (that is, not just a movement) is assumed to be the 1946 Perón government in Argentina. The success of the label has risen with the rise of political leaders such as Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, or Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands in the 1990s (both generally associated with the right), as well as some protagonists of the ‘pink tide’ of left-wing governments in South America such as Luis Inácio Lula in Brazil, or Evo Morales’ government in Bolivia. The year 2016, eventually, sealed the success of the label ‘populism’ in the UK and the USA, where the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump to the presidency have signalled a striking new phase in global politics and political discourse.

But is populism, as the examples mentioned above suggest, a distinctively modern discourse? If we agree that one of the difficult and ambivalent aspects of populist discourse is its unavoidable proximity to democratic discourse more generally, then we also need to

³ Ernesto Laclau, *The Populist Reason*, London, Verso, 2005.

consider that democratic discourse is not a modern phenomenon. In European traditions, it builds on both ideas and practices that go back to Antiquity and the Middle Ages. (What is purely modern about democratic discourse, of course, is its success; before the modern age the cluster of ideas and practices associated with democracy today were relatively marginal or short-lived, and often understood as negative, starting with the very word *demokratía* in Pericles' Athens.) It would be surprising, then, if the discourse we call 'populism' was instead entirely a product of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It may be a worthwhile exercise to search for a deeper history, perhaps almost an archaeology, of populism, by setting populist discourse into a temporally longer and layered context of intellectual history.

My objective is to show that crucial populist elements are built into the notion of 'the people' since its earliest uses in Europe and European-influenced traditions. Those are not simply a product of modern 'mass' democracy. The word itself, in languages that have preserved it in its Latin and romance forms, carries such history with it. I will explore two aspects of the definitions of contemporary populism briefly outlined above as guiding threads for the rest of this paper. I will first illustrate them with recent British examples, and then offer the outline of a longer-term intellectual history of populist discourse.

2. The paradox of inclusivity and exclusivity in the notion of 'the people'



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These are two front pages of British newspapers, The Daily Mail and The Daily Telegraph respectively, from 4 November 2016, commenting on a constitutional pronouncement of the UK High Court about the government’s powers to trigger Article 50 of the EU Lisbon Treaty, without the approval of Parliament. And here are some tweets from pro-Brexit MPs on the evening of the ruling, 3 November.

Jack Lopresti MP @JackLopresti

Unelected judges should not seek to thwart the will of the British people. We voted to leave the EU & we will. #brexit #article50

13 8:50 PM - Nov 3, 2016

137 people are talking about this

David TC Davies MP @DavidTCDavies

Unelected judges calling the shots. This is precisely why we voted out. Power to the people!
google.co.uk/amp/www.bbc.co...

512 8:05 PM - Nov 3, 2016

3,724 people are talking about this

This aftermath of the so-called Brexit referendum of 2016 is an excellent illustration, I think, of a populist discourse of ‘the people’. In these four examples the notion of ‘the people’ is deployed in opposition to ‘the judges’ (who are not, therefore, to be considered part of ‘the people’), described as ‘out of touch’, photographed wearing their professional, archaic, and unusual attire. The Daily Mail, in addition, draws attention to the fact that one of the judges is gay and a former Olympic fencer. In their tweets, the two MPs call the judges ‘unelected’, even though no judge is elected in the UK. David Davies MP implicitly equates unelected judges with the infamous ‘unelected bureaucrats’ of the EU (‘Unelected judges calling the shots. This is precisely why we voted out!’), although the Leave vote platform aimed in part to return powers to the UK judiciary. Crucially, ‘the people’ is presented here as a unified entity, whose ‘will’ is to leave the EU, even if, of course, the result of the referendum was a slim 52% to 48% in favour of Leave.

So ‘the people’ in these examples are understood as a unified whole with a clear ‘will’, which includes everyone or nearly everyone. Yet at the very same time ‘the people’ is used in a way that excludes the judges (and possibly gay men and Olympic fencers) as well as, implicitly, all those who voted for Remain. This puzzling and powerful ambiguity is the property of the notion of ‘the people’ at the core of populist discourse.

The word ‘people’ in English ultimately derives, through the medieval French of the Norman conquerors, from the Latin word *populus*. All Romance languages have cognate words with the same meaning: *peuple*, *pueblo*, *popolo*, etc. Because words and their meanings carry with them long histories (even when their users ignore those histories), it is essential to go back to the ancient Roman notion of *populus* (not to the Ancient Greek notion of *demos*, which, it seems to me, was somewhat different and less ambivalent than *populus*).

In Rome, starting after the institution of the Tribunes of the Plebs or Tribunes of the People (*tribuni plebis*, *tribuni populi*) in 494 BCE, and the constitutional reforms of Servius Tullius in 471 BCE (which reorganised membership of the main legislative assembly of Rome along territorial, and not clanic, lines), one can see the first gradual development of a political discourse on the *populus*. The *populus* was one and the same thing with the *plebs*, the non-aristocratic majority of the population, and therefore excluded the patrician class. At the same time, the overwhelming majority of plebeians in the main legislative assembly meant that *populus* was identified with the assembly itself, as the source of laws. Every citizen was part of the people because all citizens were members of the assembly, and from the assembly of the people derived all power. As Valentina Arena has recently reiterated,⁴ by Cicero’s times a specifically Roman (i.e.

⁴ Valentina Arena, *Libertas and the Practice of Politics in the Late Roman Republic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012

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not Greek) theory of the popular republic had developed, which equated the *res publica* with the *res populi* (the *commonwealth* as *the people's thing*, or *the people's property*). So the whole of the commonwealth was identified with the Roman *populus*: the people was the commonwealth. Indeed in foreign relations, and in empire-building, from ca. 80 BCE, 'the Roman People' became the subject of sovereignty/empire in official communication. *Populus* in Rome was not only a social or political designation, but a legal one, too, an entity that could act in legal transactions as *Roma* itself.

Despite this, the ambivalence persisted: constitutionally, because the patrician class had a separate assembly of its own (the Senate, from which the plebeians were excluded), and politically, because Roman politics in the late Republic were dominated by the party conflict between the *populares* (the Popular Party) and the *optimates* (the Aristocratic Party).

Part and whole, whole and part: this ambivalence is the essence of the notion of *populus* in Ancient Rome. Such a fundamental ambiguity was crystallised and preserved in Roman Law (the *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, compiled under Emperor Justinian in 529–534 CE), and through Roman Law transmitted to the medieval and early modern languages of politics, long after the collapse of Roman republican institutional structures.

A well-known example of the late medieval approach to 'the people' as a subject of political theory, and indeed of a theory of 'popular' sovereignty, is in Marsilius of Padua's *Defensor Pacis* of 1324:

Let us say, then, in accordance with both the truth and the counsel of Aristotle, Politics III chapter 6, that the 'legislator', i.e. the primary and proper efficient cause of the law, is the people or the universal body of the citizens or else its prevailing part, when, by means of an election or will expressed in speech in a general assembly of the citizens, it commands or determines, subject to temporal penalty or punishment, that something should be done or omitted in respect of human civil acts. (I say 'prevailing part' taking into consideration both the quantity and the quality of persons in the community upon which the law is passed.) This is so whether the said body of citizens or its prevailing part does this directly of itself, or commits the task to another or others who are not and cannot be the legislator in an unqualified sense but only in a certain respect and at a certain time and in accordance with the authority of the primary legislator.⁵

For Marsilius, 'the people' is equated to 'the universal body of the citizens' and 'the people' is the maker of the law. Marsilius is far from a populist theorist: he immediately

⁵ Marsilius of Padua, *The Defender of the Peace*, ed. and tr. by A. Brett, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, I.12

acknowledges that ‘the people’ in practice do not act as a unified whole, and introduces the notion of ‘prevailing part’ (*valentior pars*), which can range from a numerical majority to a qualitative distinction of other kinds. What was exactly ‘the people’, *populus* or *popolo* in fourteenth-century Padua and other Italian republics? *Popolo* was something rather less abstract than what the modern reader could guess from this passage. *Popolo* was the self-designation of the social class of those who belonged to guilds, and therefore identified with the ethos of merchants and artisans, those who worked for a living and paid taxes, but were not merely salaried workers. The *popolo*, starting in the 1280s in several Italian cities such as Florence or Bologna, had formed self-governing political regimes where a class of land-owning aristocrats called *magnates* were excluded from office and given a separate legal status from the *popolo*. The anti-elitist discourse that accompanied the rise of *popolo* regimes in Italy was ideologically very charged: *magnates* oppressed the people, and were depicted as fundamentally anti-social, warlike, divisive, prevaricating, idle, and tyrannical. So, like in Ancient Rome, *popolo* was a legal category as well as a social and political one: to be a member of the *popolo* was not only a form of social identification or an ideology but conferred particular legal and political rights.⁶

So with this background in mind, we can uncover the ambivalence of the notion of ‘the people’ in Marsilius’ times: the *populus*, intended as ‘the universal body of the citizens or its prevailing part’ is the source of the law, but the *popolo* in fact excluded the elites. Late medieval writers are seldom explicit about such an ambivalence. Those who feel compelled to define it and describe it are generally jurists, such as, for example, Cino da Pistoia (a good friend of Dante Alighieri):

Although according to Roman Law the name ‘people’ includes also noble magnates, according to the customary laws of nearly all of Italy the name ‘people’ only applies to plebeians. And this is why we said ‘commune and people’, because the name ‘commune’ also signifies the magnates, whereas ‘people’ only the plebeians. Hence the councils and orders of the cities, and the decrees of their priors are distinct. For one thing is the council and decree of the commune and another the council and decree of the people.⁷

Thus in the city-republics of late medieval Italy, *popolo/populus* preserved the ambivalence of the Roman tradition, although in a vastly different political and constitutional

⁶ For a brief overview in English on the history of *popolo* regimes in medieval Italy see Andrea Zorzi, *The ‘Popolo’, in Italy in the Age of the Renaissance, 1300–1550*, J.M. Najemy (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 145–164.

⁷ Edited in Manlio Bellomo, *Questiones in iure civili disputatae*, Rome, Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo, 2008, p. 299, my translation.

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context. 'The people', who thought of itself as the whole, especially in its capacity to legislate over the commonwealth according to its 'will' (*voluntas*), was also proudly a part, opposed to the elite of magnates. The magnates were still part of 'the Commune', but not of 'the People', so in legal documents on behalf of the republic, Cino says, both must be mentioned: 'the people', because according to Roman Law that's where all powers come from, and 'the Commune', because it truly encompasses every citizen, both 'plebeians' and magnates.

I'm here focusing on the inclusion/exclusion of the elite in the notion of 'the people', because it is the most relevant for populist discourse. But I must at least mention the fact that all democratic theories and practices imply some form of exclusion from the presumed 'universal body of the citizens'. Historically, women have been excluded until very recently. Slaves, low-caste, and immigrants have been or are still excluded. Destitute, or non-tax-paying males were long excluded. Until the late eighteenth century in Christian Europe, non-Christians were almost always excluded. 'Mad' and imprisoned people are still today excluded from full citizenship rights in some countries. And so are children, everywhere. It is important to mention this even in passing, because the tension between universalist claims and the actual profile of the body of 'the people' is a characteristic of the history and theory of democracy that is still relevant today.

The feature of populism, by contrast, is that its discourse focuses on one specific form of exclusion from the notion of 'the people', that is, the opposition between 'the people' and 'the elite' or 'the establishment'. In so doing, populist notions of 'the people' ignore and elide all other forms of differentiation: much like its Roman and medieval precedents 'the people' is a capacious designation, which is not intrinsically ethnic, national, religious, gendered or age-related (although it can be made to overlap with those other categories).

3. 'The people' embodied

Let me move to my second point about 'the people' in populist discourse: the image, the fiction of 'the people' as a unitary thing, which seems to necessitate, or at least benefit from, a particularly close identification with a single figure, a single body, often but not always that of the leader. Here is another example from recent British history:

Transcript: Prime Minister Tony Blair and wife Cherie with children walking towards press; Blair walks to microphone; SOT Blair: "I feel like everyone else in this country today. Utterly devastated. Our thoughts and prayers are with Princess Diana's family. Particularly her two sons, the two boys. Our hearts go out to them. We are today a nation in Britain in a state of shock, in mourning, in grief that is so painful for us. She was a wonderful and warm human being. Though her own life was often sadly touched by tragedy she touched the lives of so

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Let us examine for a moment the idea of Lady Diana as ‘the People’s Princess’. Its use by Prime Minister Tony Blair in the aftermath of her death in 1997 is a complex case of populist rhetoric. Lady Diana had been branded ‘the people’s princess’ by popular publications such as the one in the image above,⁹ which is from 1989 and pre-dates the years of marital scandals and conflict with the royal family, and her divorce from Prince Charles. The label did not become particularly widespread, however, until the newly elected Tony Blair and his advisor Alastair Campbell decided to deploy it after Diana’s unexpected and tragic death, in order to bring under control and harness an equally unexpected and momentous outpouring of public grief in Britain. The outsize display of emotion that coincided with Diana’s death, in a culture that traditionally prized emotional self-control, is to an extent still in need of historical interpretation. It is important to notice, however, that it followed a cataclysmic election, and the first landslide victory for the Labour Party after decades of Tory dominance.

There is an obvious paradox in the notion of ‘the people’s princess’: Diana was an aristocrat who lived an extraordinarily privileged life, was treated as a global celebrity, and had been part of the royal family. Yet, while she was objectively a member of the elite, she could be transfigured into ‘one of the people’ because of her charitable activities, and especially because of her clashes with the royal family. As Tony Blair put it, “the people everywhere, not just here in Britain but everywhere, they kept faith with princess Diana. They liked her, they loved her, they regarded her as one of the people.” Such paradoxical forms of identification between ‘the people’ (in fact, “the people everywhere”) and a single person (a single body) who often comes straight from ‘the elite’ (however defined), but stands against ‘the elite’, are a common and, I would argue, distinguishing feature of populism. Diana ‘the People’s Princess’ was not merely a case of the centuries-old tradition of embodiment of the country that is typical of monarchies (as studied, famously, by Ernst Kantorowicz),¹⁰ because the label ‘people’s princess’ became implicitly anti-monarchic, and anti-establishment.

The Diana case is complex for two reasons. First, she was never herself a political leader, and in her death was a passive tool of populist discourse (unlike, for example, other glamorous ‘women of the people’ such as Evita Perón, who were at least partially in control of the message). Secondly, Tony Blair was no populist politician but resorted here to the

⁸ A video recording of the original interview Tony Blair granted to the press on 31 August 1997 can be found on the Youtube channel of The Associated Press, *AP Archive*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3qinDH_3HE

⁹ Tim Graham, *The Royal Year 1989*, Summit Editions, London 1989 – an annual review of photographs of the most prominent members of the British royal family collected by photographer Tim Graham.

¹⁰ Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1957.

populist toolbox at a moment of perceived political vulnerability for the British monarchy. The new (young, Labour, ‘in touch’) Prime Minister harnessed public grief and emotion and made himself the conduit, the voice of the people’s feelings (“I feel like everyone else in this country today”).

Despite these complexities, ‘the people’s princess’ case still illustrate the properties of populist embodiment. As we have seen above, what is distinctive of ‘the people’ in populism is that it must be thought of as a unified and homogeneous, virtuous whole, which encompasses everyone while being opposed to the elites. A mental and visual representation of such a whole can hardly be a collective, such as Parliament for example, because Parliament’s own multiplicity suggests plurality and the potential for division. What can be often observed in historical instances of populism is instead the centrality of the rhetorical (but also visual) identification between the leader as a single individual and ‘the people’.

Populist embodiment also has a deep intellectual history rooted in the notion of ‘the people’, since Antiquity. We have seen how a political discourse on *populus* in Ancient Rome started with the establishment of the Tribunes of the People. The Tribunes were, in Roman religio-institutional vocabulary, *sacrosanct*, that is, their bodies were sacred and could not be harmed by anyone on pain of death. Punishment of those who attacked Tribunes could be legally inflicted by the mob or any member of the *populus*. Importantly, there are hints in Roman sources suggesting that the Tribunes of the People were understood from a constitutional perspective not as *representatives* of the interests of the people, but as *expression* of the people’s will.¹¹ The sacredness of the body of the Tribunes reflected the sacredness of the will of the people. (*Vox populi, vox dei*, the voice of the people is the voice of God, was a medieval expression inspired by Roman Law.)

The Tribunes of the People, however, were more than one (two or perhaps even five, in the earliest stages). It was with the establishment of the Empire under Augustus that the connection between the single and the *populus* became a figure of law. Augustus, who cumulated all the most important magistrate roles of the republic, was, among other things, the Tribune of the People, and alone in office. The handover of all powers to Augustus, which *de facto* transformed the Roman republic into the Empire, was framed, probably retrospectively, as a voluntary transfer from the *populus* to him. The legal act, presumably a *plebiscitum* (plebiscite, or people’s law), which enshrined the transfer came to be called later *lex regia* or *lex de imperio*, and despite not surviving in its original form, it was mentioned in various parts of the *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, the basic collection of Roman Law promulgated by Emperor Justinian.

¹¹ See again Valentina Arena, *Libertas and the Practice of Politics*, p. 124.

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Populus ei et in eum omne suum imperium et potestatem conferat.

To him [the Prince] and into him the people transfers all its authority [empire] and power.¹²

The persistence of the *lex regia* in the legal traditions of Europe is absolutely crucial in understanding the history of the idea of popular sovereignty. Even at times when the overwhelming majority of constitutions in Europe were monarchic, and kings and lords claimed to receive their power from God, Roman Law preserved and transmitted the notion that ultimate power resides with ‘the people’, and only the people can transfer it to a ruler. The *lex regia* formula was in fact used repeatedly in Italian city-republics as a legal framework when the constitution was changed into a *signoria* or lordship: in law it was the *populus* or *popolo* that transferred its sovereign powers to a lord, through some form of ‘election’.¹³

This Roman and medieval legal pattern of invocation of ‘the people’ in foundational constitutional moments re-emerged powerfully in modern times, of course, from the famous rhetorical act of the American Founding Fathers of 1787 (“We, the People... do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States of America”) to the *plébiscite* of 6 November 1804 confirming the imperial election of Napoleon Bonaparte (with 99.9% of the votes). In fact, it is especially in the act of transferring its powers that ‘the people’ can be imagined as a unified, homogeneous, and absolutely powerful whole. Ordinary, everyday instances of government ‘by the people’, instead, are bound to lack such unity and homogeneity, and have long offered a spectacle of division and disharmony, which opponents of democracy found, and still find, easy to deplore.

So the central paradox in the history of the idea of ‘the people’ in the European tradition is that a definition of the powers of ‘the people’ becomes clear only when those very powers are being given away, concentrated on and transferred to someone, who is not just a representative, but an embodiment, the voice of the people. “On m’aime, Monsieur, parce-que je suis le peuple-empereur” (“They love me, Sir, because I am the people-Emperor”), Napoleon reportedly told Benjamin Constant.¹⁴

¹² D 1.4.1: Corpus Juris Civilis, *Digesta*, vol. 1, ed. P. Krueger and T. Mommsen, Berlin, Weidmann, 1895, my translation.

¹³ For a brief summary of the debate on the *lex regia*’s fortune in the European Middle Ages, see Joseph Canning, *A History of Medieval Political Thought: 300–1450*, London, Routledge, 1996, pp. 8–10. For a more recent interpretation Serena Ferente, ‘Popolo and law. Late medieval sovereignty in Marsilius and the jurists’, in R. Bourke and Q. Skinner, *Popular Sovereignty in Historical Perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 96–114.

¹⁴ A phrase Napoleon Bonaparte liked to repeat, one can find it for example as the epigraph on the cover of *Napoléon. Mémorial anecdotique et biographique de l’Empire et de la Grande Armée*, Year 3, Paris, 1835.

4. 'The people' between democracy and populism

The examples of the American "We the People" Constitution or Tony Blair's 1997 speech are a reminder that democratic discourse and populist discourse are often intermingled, and can be particularly difficult to tell apart. There is no democracy without foundation in the people, and in the people's capacity to ultimately make the best choices. The concluding part of this paper will briefly try to examine the boundary between democratic notions of 'the people', and populist ones, in historical perspective.

Arguments in favour of democratic government must grapple with the fundamental question: why is democratic government better than other forms of government? The most durable answer to this question was offered by Aristotle in book 3 of *Politics*.

The principle that the multitude ought to be supreme rather than the few best is one that is maintained, and, though not free from difficulty, yet seems to contain an element of truth. For the many, of whom each individual is but an ordinary person, when they meet together may very likely be better than the few good, if regarded not individually but collectively, just as a feast to which many contribute is better than a dinner provided out of a single purse. For each individual among the many has a share of virtue and prudence, and when they meet together, they become in a manner one man, who has many feet, and hands, and senses; that is a figure of their mind and disposition.¹⁵

Aristotle's argument is that many individuals, *when they meet together*, are likely to be better than one or the few in making decisions. Indeed they each bring their share of virtue, which may well be individually inferior to that of the wiser in society, but combined together it turns them in a sort of unitary thing, "in a manner one man, who has many feet, and hands, and senses". Aristotle was no straightforward democrat, but it is important to notice that he does not use the Greek name for 'the people' (*demos*) as the foundation of the government of the many, but always speaks of 'citizens', in the plural. The word *demos* in Ancient Greek city-states clearly designated the poorer majority of the population, and never acquired the ambivalent whole-and-part meaning of the Latin *populus*. Aristotle recognised, however, the value of the process of unification that happens when citizens *meet together*, that is, when they assemble to discuss and deliberate. It is in this coming together for deliberation that resides the advantage of the government of the many, what we would call democratic government: the many gathered in assembly are able to make better choices than the few or one person alone.

Aristotle's argument enjoyed a halting fortune in subsequent European traditions of

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, tr. by B. Jowett, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1905, pp. 121–122.

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political thought. Thinkers who supported popular governments in the medieval period all offered variations on Aristotle's argument: the people, gathered together, have better judgment and are able to take better decisions. See for example the jurist Bartolus of Saxoferrato in his short treatise *On the Government of Cities* of ca. 1355.

And so we call that government a government for the people, or a government of the multitude, as was said. This government is so called, however, because the jurisdiction is with the people or multitude.

But what I say, 'by a multitude', I mean with the lowest people excepted... Likewise, some magnates can be excluded from that government: those who are so powerful that they would oppress others.

And we have seen this in the city of Perugia, which in this way is ruled in peace and grows in unity and flourishes, and those who rule the city according to their offices are on guard against no one, but they themselves are guarded by the people, and it is often seen that something will be decided by the common counsel of the city's men that the wiser and more prudent may think to be a bad decision; but, as things turn out, the decision is seen to have been an excellent one.¹⁶

In this passage we see the merging of the Aristotelian argument with the Roman and medieval notion of 'the people', which excludes both "the lowest" and the magnate elites, "who are so powerful that they would oppress others". Bartolus observes that in his city, Perugia, governed by a *popolo* regime, it often happens that the "common counsel" of the people in assembly comes as a better decision than what the few ("the wiser, the most prudent") advise.

A more developed version of the Aristotelian argument can in fact be found in the most passionate supporter of popular government in pre-Enlightenment political thought, Niccolò Machiavelli. As it is well known, Machiavelli argued throughout his career as a civil servant and a political writer that 'the people' (*il popolo*) are a better constitutional foundation for both republics and principalities. His notion of the *popolo* is very much the Roman and medieval one, in that it is opposed to the nobility but is also used to signify the whole of the republic. Machiavelli believes profoundly in the wisdom and virtue of the people; his comparison of princes (i.e. individual rulers) and people (i.e. popular republics), for example in *Discourses*, I, 57, produces a series of arguments in favour of the latter. 'The people' can rely on the amplification and multiplication of individual virtues, which are superior to the virtue of a single prince or a few elite men.

¹⁶ Bartolo of Saxoferrato, *Treatise on City Government*, tr. S. Lane, online edition: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/Bartolus.asp>

But as regards prudence and stability, I say that the people are more prudent and stable, and have better judgment than a prince; and it is not without good reason that it is said, “The voice of the people is the voice of God”; for we see popular opinion prognosticate events in such a wonderful manner that it would almost seem as if the people had some occult virtue, which enables them to foresee the good and the evil. As to the people’s capacity of judging of things, it is exceedingly rare that, when they hear two orators of equal talents advocate different measures, they do not decide in favour of the best of the two; which proves their ability to discern the truth of what they hear. And if occasionally they are misled in matters involving questions of courage or seeming utility, (as has been said above,) so is a prince also many times misled by his own passions, which are much greater than those of the people. We also see that in the election of their magistrates they make far better choice than princes; and no people will ever be persuaded to elect a man of infamous character and corrupt habits to any post of dignity, to which a prince is easily influenced in a thousand different ways.¹⁷

In Machiavelli the people’s collective virtue translates in an almost miraculous ability to judge things truly. “When they hear two orators of equal talents” the people are nearly always able to decide in favour of the best option. And when they elect their magistrates, they make better choices than the Prince, because they are less easily swayed and more impervious to passions than the Prince.

Unlike late medieval thinkers, however, Machiavelli is keenly aware of the importance of leadership for popular action: a leaderless people is cowardly and potentially “mad”, foolish or violent. And ‘the people’ make mistakes, too, which can be ruinous.

After the capture of the city of the Veienti, the Roman people became possessed of the idea that it would be advantageous for the city of Rome if one half of its inhabitants were to go and settle at Veii; arguing that, inasmuch as that city was rich in lands and houses and near to Rome, one half of the Roman citizens might thus enrich themselves without in any way disturbing by their proximity the public affairs of Rome. This project seemed to the Senate and the most sagacious men of Rome useless, and fraught with danger, so much so that they declared openly that they would rather suffer death than give their consent. When the subject came to be discussed, the people became so much excited against the Senate that it would have led to violence and bloodshed, had not the Senate sheltered itself behind some of the oldest and most esteemed citizens, the reverence for whom restrained the people from carrying their insolence farther. Here we have to note two things; first, that the people often, deceived by an illusive good, desire their own ruin, and, unless they are made sensible of the evil of the one and the

¹⁷ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Historical, Political and Diplomatic Writings*, vol. 2, *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*, I, 58, tr. C. Detmold, Boston, Osgood, 1882.

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benefit of the other course by some one in whom they have confidence, they will expose the republic to infinite peril and damage. And if it happens that the people have no confidence in any one, as sometimes will be the case when they have been deceived before by events or men, then it will inevitably lead to the ruin of the state.¹⁸

So Machiavelli's *popolo* is not only an Aristotelian gathering of equal citizens, but also a force that can be guided, persuaded or deceived by good or bad leaders. It is in the relationship between leaders and 'the people' that Machiavelli sees the corrective to the mistakes of popular opinion and popular decision-making. Such a relationship is founded on the natural rationality which allows the people to judge the correct argument (if presented by orators *of equal talent*), as well as on a sort of "occult virtue" (as in the passage before the last) which gives popular opinion an almost divine, or magical, ability to foresee the better course of action. In addition to those two, Machiavelli adds here a third element: confidence or trust. "The people often, deceived by an illusive good, desire their own ruin". Yet if "someone in whom [the people] have confidence" takes the stand and persuades them, then the deceit and the foolish decisions of the people can be avoided or corrected in time. But "if it happens that the people have no confidence in any one, as sometimes will be the case when they have been deceived before by events or men, then it will inevitably lead to the ruin of the state."

It seems to me that in Machiavelli the proximity between what we can call a democratic discourse of 'the people' and a populist one is particularly evident: both discourses rely on a notion of the people, the citizens, the multitude, which inevitably emphasises their unity and their virtue – even though a democratic discourse is or should be more open to acknowledging the existence of difference, of disagreement, of error and accountability, which a populist discourse tends to elide and disguise. But Machiavelli's notion of 'the people' also points to a topic that is receiving increasing attention on the part of political scientists, but still needs a proper analysis from the perspective of the history of political thought: trust. Trust is the enabler of democratic politics particularly in the relationship between citizens/people and their leaders. It is with this suggestion (which Machiavelli himself does not develop much further) that I wish to conclude. Is trust what ultimately distinguishes populist politics from democratic politics? What is exactly political trust, what are the roles of reason and emotions in forming it? And how is trust built, maintained and lost?

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, I, 53.