

Democracy in the Twenty-First Century: A Critique of the Concept of Populism

MASTER'S THESIS

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Contents

Introduction	3
Chapter 1 – Populism: history and development of an ambiguous concept	6
1.1 Semantic inflation and definitional difficulty	6
1.2 The “Cinderella complex” and the instability of the concept	6
1.3 Populist rhetoric and dichotomous logic	7
1.4 A structurally unstable but politically relevant concept	8
1.5. From the origins to the “reinvention” of the concept: five historical sequences of populism	8
1.5.1 Nineteenth-century roots: from the Russian narodničestvo to Latin America.	8
1.5.2 The conceptual turn: the “reinvention” of the 1950s and 1960s	9
1.5.3 The European extension and semantic inflation.	9
1.6 Populism: neither an ideology nor a distinctive style. The outdatedness of the concept	10
1.7 The stylistic-communicative track: populism as the language of crisis	11
1.8 Conclusion: from populism to the processes of mass democracy	12
Chapter 2 – The fears of the mass and the roots of “realist” democracy	13
2.1 Between conformism and the tyranny of the majority: the arrival of the masses and the fears of the elite . . .	14
2.2 The critique and the fears of John Stuart Mill	15
2.3 Gustave Le Bon and the examination of the crowd	16
2.4 José Ortega y Gasset: the diagnosis of mass society.	17
2.5 The 1920s: Lippmann and the critique of the citizen and of public opinion.	19
2.6 Kelsen and Schumpeter: two paradigms of democracy compared	22
2.7 Conclusion	24

Chapter 3 – The party: yesterday, today and tomorrow	26
3.1 The party as a problem of mass democracy	26
3.1.1 Ostrogorski: the party machine and representative distance	27
3.1.2 Robert Michels: the “iron law of oligarchy”	28
3.1.3 Weber: bureaucracy, leadership, plebiscitarianism	29
3.2 Party democracy between competition and pluralism.	30
3.2.1 Legitimation as competition: party and leadership in Schumpeter’s democratic theory	31
3.2.2 Kelsen: the party as the condition of the democratic will	32
3.3 Structural changes of the party in the second half of the twentieth century: from society to the state	34
3.3.1 The mass party as the historical realisation of mediation.	34
3.3.2 Implications for the thesis: from pluralism to immediate consent	35
3.4 The transformation of the party in twenty-first-century democracy	36
3.4.1 A critique of the diagnosis of party crisis.	36
3.4.2 The misunderstanding of the model of reference	37
3.4.3 From social decline to institutional strengthening	37
3.4.4 Competitive democracy, short-termism and consensus-seeking policies	37
3.4.5 Conclusion. Populism as an internal outcome of the transformation of parties	38
4. Conclusion	40
1. From the “shoe” to the mechanism: why the instability of populism is a clue, not an obstacle.	40
2. Democratic realism as matrix: from the general will to the selection of leadership	41
3. The party form as hinge: from integrative mediation to competitive machine.	42
4. The concluding step: from populism as a label to populism as a function.	42
5. The media ecosystem, post-truth: the medium as a possible accelerator of populism	43
6. Leaderisation and the direct relationship: the plebiscitary as a functional solution	44
7. Elites as innovation and as intertemporal constraint	45
Bibliography	46

In recent decades, the term populism has become an omnipresent feature of political and media vocabulary. It is used to describe phenomena that differ greatly from one another – charismatic leaders, anti-establishment movements, referendum campaigns, governing and opposition parties – to the point of turning into a sort of catch-all label, invoked whenever one wishes to point to simplifying drifts, demagogic tones or challenges to liberal democracy. As the reconstructions offered in the first chapter clearly show, the fortune of the concept is inversely proportional to its analytical precision: the more the term populism spreads, the more it is emptied of theoretical content, until it becomes an “umbrella/container concept” that groups heterogeneous phenomena under the same name.

This semantic inflation is not merely a terminological problem, but a significant theoretical knot. If everything can be defined as populist, populism ends up no longer describing anything rigorously. In the scholarly debate, the difficulty of identifying a stable ideological core – a recognisable system of ideas, values and goals – has led to a multiplication of definitions that are partly incompatible with one another: populism as a thin ideology, as a political mentality, as a communicative style, as a discursive logic, as an organisational strategy. The result is a sort of “Cinderella complex”: we have the shoe (the term) but we cannot find the foot that fits it perfectly.

The thesis argued here starts precisely from this theoretical impasse. The underlying hypothesis is twofold. First, it will be argued that populism is a structurally empty, or rather structurally unstable, term, which does not refer to a unitary and autonomous object, but to a set of practices and rhetorics that belong to the genetic code of modern democracy. Second – and this is the decisive point – it will be shown that many phenomena labelled populist today do not in fact represent a pathology external to democracy, but the necessary product of a certain way of understanding and practising democracy itself, which progressively established itself over the course of the twentieth century. The central theoretical reference is the Schumpeterian definition of democracy as a competitive method for selecting political leadership through elections. Starting from *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Joseph Schumpeter proposes a sharp break with the normative tradition that had identified democracy with the self-government of the people, widespread participation and the realisation of ideals of equality and social justice. In his perspective, democracy is not a set of values, but an institutional procedure that organises competition between elites for the popular vote; the citizen is conceived mainly as a voter called upon periodically to choose between competing political offers.

This “realist” turn, as seen in the second chapter, does not remain confined to the theoretical level. It is intertwined with profound transformations: the crisis of classical parliamentarism, the entry of the masses into the public sphere, the emergence of mass parties first and their progressive crisis afterwards, the growing centrality of the mass media and, more recently, of digital media. Drawing on the work of authors such as Alfio Mastropaolo, the democratic twentieth century can be read as the passage from the “democratic” paradigm – of which Hans Kelsen is a reference figure – to a post-democratic paradigm, in which democracy is redefined as regulated competition between elites, while participation, collective organisations and social rights occupy an increasingly marginal space.

From this perspective, what we call populism appears less as a sudden threat and more as the coherent outcome of this evolution. If democracy is reduced to a contest between competing leaderships, if parties become personal vehicles and if the electoral moment tends to absorb the whole of political life – turning into a sort of permanent campaign – then personalisation, the simplification of public

discourse, polarisation and the direct appeal to “the people” are not deviations, but rational strategies within the rules of the democratic game as it has come to be configured. In other words: so-called populism does not corrupt democracy from the outside, but expresses its internal logic, when the latter is interpreted according to the Schumpeterian paradigm. This dynamic is further reinforced by the evolution of the media ecosystem. The passage from the democracy of mass parties to mediated democracy – first televisual, then digital and algorithmic – produces a highly polarised, fragmented and competitive communicative environment. The logic of general-interest media and, even more, of social networks tends to reward, in terms of visibility and circulation, emotional, conflictual and identity-based content; it fosters forms of “tribal” mobilisation around leaders, symbols and slogans; it shortens the (at least symbolic) distance between the leader and “the people”, reinforcing plebiscitary tendencies. In this context, many of the traits that public discourse attributes to populism – anti-elite rhetoric, the systematic recourse to polarisation, the use of simplified and dichotomous narratives – coincide with the most effective communicative strategies within the contemporary public space.

In the light of these considerations, the aim of the thesis is not to propose yet another “correct” definition of populism, nor to establish once and for all which political actors are truly populist and which are not. On the contrary, it is to shift the focus: from the attempt to “squeeze” different phenomena into the conceptual shoe of populism, to the analysis of the processes that make certain forms of political mobilisation and communication inevitable, or at any rate highly probable. In this key, populism is interpreted as a structural effect of representative mass democracy, especially in its realist and competitive version, and not as an exception to it. The argument unfolds over three chapters, each of which addresses a specific segment of this problem.

The first chapter reconstructs the genealogy of the concept of populism, highlighting its main historical and theoretical twists. Starting from the nineteenth-century experiences of the Russian *narodničestvo* and the American People’s Party, passing through Latin American populisms and the conceptual “reinvention” of the 1950s and 1960s, up to the European and global extension of the term, the chapter shows how populism progressively turned into an essentially contested concept. The discussion of its supposed ideological characteristics and of its stylistic-communicative forms leads to a clear conclusion: populism does not possess an autonomous doctrinal “essence” and can be reduced neither to a coherent ideology nor to a mere political style. It appears rather as a mobile semantic container, which reflects tensions internal to mass democracy more than a stable doctrine.

The second chapter approaches the problem from a different perspective, reconstructing the fears that the entry of the masses into the political space aroused in the liberal tradition and in the theories of the crowd between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Through the analyses of Tocqueville and Mill, the first diagnoses emerge of democratic conformism, of the tyranny of the majority and of the risk of a social homologation capable of compressing originality and individual freedom. The reflections of Le Bon and Ortega y Gasset accentuate the psychological and moral dimension of the problem, insisting on the transformation of the individual into the “mass-man”, vulnerable to suggestion and charismatic leadership. With Walter Lippmann, finally, the critique shifts to the cognitive terrain: in complex societies, the citizen has neither the information nor the time needed to form rational opinions, and public opinion appears as the product of processes of mediation and manipulation that bring democracy closer to elitist theories. It is against this background that the comparison between Kelsen and Schumpeter is set: on one side, a democratic paradigm founded on pluralism, proportional representation and compromise; on the other, a post-democratic paradigm that reduces democracy to competition between elites for the popular vote. The conclusion of the chapter shows how it is the latter model that

progressively prevails, preparing the ground for a normalisation of the dynamics that are today defined as populist.

The third chapter – which will focus on the evolution of political parties and of the forms of electoral competition – will analyse how the passage from the twentieth-century mass party to the “light”, personalised and leadership-centred party has helped to put the Schumpeterian logic concretely into practice. The leaderisation of organisations, the growing autonomy of executives and the systematic use of political marketing and professional communication techniques redraw the relationship between citizens and institutions: organised participation loses weight, while the act of voting becomes the privileged (if not exclusive) moment of encounter between the voter and the political system. In this context, the figure of the leader becomes the main point of symbolic identification, bringing representative democracy ever closer to forms of plebiscitary legitimation.

Overall, the thesis therefore argues that populism, rather than a conceptually graspable object, is the name we give to certain structural consequences of representative democracy as it has come to be realised: a democracy centred on competition between elites, on the personalisation of leadership, on permanent campaigns and on a communicative ecosystem that rewards polarisation and simplification. Instead of treating populism as a foreign body, it is proposed to read it as the internal logic of the realised democracy of the twenty-first century. Only by shifting attention from “populist deviations” to the structural processes that govern the evolution of representative democracy does it become possible to understand why such phenomena not only emerge recurrently, but stabilise as ordinary forms of contemporary political competition.

Chapter 1 – Populism: history and development of an ambiguous concept¹

1.1 Semantic inflation and definitional difficulty

Over the last forty years, the term populism has enjoyed an unprecedented spread, becoming one of the keywords of contemporary political language². This “exceptionally vague” term (Canovan)³ has seen its political and media fortune grow to the point of making the “populist” label a daily and, at times, suffocating presence in public debate. At the same time, however, the concept has seen its meaning and field of application change profoundly, turning from a category referring to specific phenomena into an umbrella category, used to describe extremely heterogeneous leaders, movements and political styles. Many figures have dealt with this term: historians, political scientists, social scientists and anthropologists have proposed multiple definitions, often in contrast with one another, agreeing only on the indeterminacy and vagueness of the term⁴.

This semantic inflation has produced considerable theoretical difficulties. Indeed, while it is relatively easy to indicate “who” the populists are, thanks to the journalistic and political use of the term, it is much harder to answer the question of what populism really is. Brexit, Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, Luc Mélenchon, Matteo Salvini, or movements such as Podemos in Spain or Syriza in Greece, are all united by this label, despite being profoundly different in ideology, organisation and programmes⁵.

This heterogeneity shows how the concept loses theoretical consistency when applied indiscriminately, and explains why the scholarly community has not yet arrived at a shared definition⁶.

1.2 The “Cinderella complex” and the instability of the concept

As early as 1967, Isaiah Berlin, commenting on a conference organised by Government and Opposition, described the difficulty of defining populism through the metaphor of the “Cinderella complex”: there is a shoe — the word populism — but the “perfect foot” that fits it is never found. Every definition proves either too broad to be rigorous, or too rigid to include all the cases commonly attributed to the category⁷.

In the 1960s populism was considered a predominantly non-European phenomenon, linked to rural or modernising societies. Today, by contrast, it is seen as a worldwide phenomenon that also cuts across consolidated democracies⁸.

However, despite the growth of studies, the definition remains elusive and the concept unstable by nature. This instability is partly linked to a classic problem of the social sciences: many political concepts

1 The theoretical approach adopted here is the one proposed by Damiano Palano in his genealogical and conceptual reconstructions of the phenomenon: cf. D. Palano, *Populismo*, Brescia, Scholé, 2020; Id., *La genealogia del populismo. Dal populismo agrario alla crisi della democrazia rappresentativa*, Brescia, Scholé, 2017.

2 Marco Tarchi, «Lo studio del populismo fra complessi e rimozioni», *Quaderni di Sociologia*, 83- LXIV | 2020, 131-140.

3 Margaret Canovan, *Populism*, Harcourt Brace Janovich, New York and London 1981

4 Ilvo Diamanti, Marc Lazar. (2018). *popolocrazia - la metamorfosi delle nostre democrazie*. Rome: Laterza.

5 Baker, Peter. “Cos’è Davvero Il Populismo.” *Internazionale*, 15 Feb. 2019, www.internazionale.it/notizie/peter-baker/2019/02/15/cosa-e-davvero-populismo.

6 Damiano Palano. *Genealogie Del Populismo*. Mimesis, 15 Feb. 2024, pp. 15–16.

7 “Isaiah Berlin, To Define Populism, The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library, 2013, pp. 6-7; web address: <https://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/lists/bibliography/bib111bLSE.pdf>

8 Damiano Palano, *Genealogie Del Populismo* 16–17

do not refer to material objects, but to historically changing and contested cultural constructions. Populism is among these “essentially contested concepts”⁹.

Following Gallie’s distinction, two issues explain its definitional difficulty:

1. Balance between intension and extension. If a very inclusive definition is adopted, capable of covering a large number of cases, the distinctive properties of the concept necessarily diminish, and it thus ends up losing precision and analytical content. If, instead, the intension is enriched by focusing on contemporary cases (e.g. digital or anti-immigration populisms), one risks excluding historical phenomena, breaking the conceptual genealogy¹⁰.
2. Historical and value anchoring. Unlike ideologies such as liberalism or socialism, populism has rarely been adopted as a positive self-definition by its own actors; the term has been used mainly in a polemical or accusatory key, as an equivalent of demagoguery and political irresponsibility. This negative connotation — present since the construction of the concept between the 1950s and 1960s — imprints an original distortion, which makes its neutral use in the social sciences difficult¹¹.

1.3 Populist rhetoric and dichotomous logic

Despite the difficulty of defining it theoretically, populism presents some recurrent discursive traits, which constitute the core of its political rhetoric. Speaking of populist rhetoric, however, does not imply the existence of populism as a coherent ideology; it indicates rather a set of recurrent discursive devices, which can be mobilised in very different contexts and by very different actors.

The first element is the opposition between the people and the elite, constructed in moral and not only political terms. The people are represented as morally pure, authentic, the repository of the general will; the elite as corrupt, distant and parasitic, interested in defending its own privileges and in manipulating public opinion through compliant media¹².

This narrative reduces political conflict to a sharp dichotomy between good and evil, the honest and the corrupt, the people and the establishment. The “ordinary citizen” becomes the only legitimate bearer of sovereignty, while professional politics, intellectuals and technocrats are perceived as usurpers. This simplification contributes to the engine of populism: it offers an easily recognisable, polarising and identity-based framework, capable of gathering support in different contexts¹³.

Over the last two decades, populist rhetoric has spread well beyond the margins of the political system, penetrating the centres of democratic competition. The global economic crisis of 2008 accelerated this process, opening political spaces to anti-establishment forces in countries traditionally considered “immune” to the populist syndrome¹⁴.

An emblematic case is the 2016 US presidential campaign, dominated by two outsiders: Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. Although they represented opposing visions, both relied on a populist discursive structure: the former against the economic oligarchy, the latter against cosmopolitan elites and the me-

9 [https://cooperism.law.columbia.edu/files/2023/12/Gallie-Essentially-Contested Concepts-1955-CL.pdf](https://cooperism.law.columbia.edu/files/2023/12/Gallie-Essentially-Contested%20Concepts-1955-CL.pdf)

10 G. Sartori, *La politica. Logica e metodo in scienze sociali*, SugarCo, Milan 1979.

11 Palano, *Genealogie del populismo*, p.20

12 Daniele, Reggiardo. “Il Populismo: Cos’è, Tipi, Cause E Conseguenze.” *Liberioltreillusioni.it*, 2025, www.liberioltreillusioni.it/articoli/articolo/il-populismo.

13 Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (New York, 2017; online edn, Oxford Academic, 23 Feb. 2017),

14 Sciences Po. ““Le Populisme Fragilise l’Économie et Les Libertés Démocratiques.”” *Sciences Po*, 2016, www.sciencespo.fr/fr/actualites/politiques-dausterite-fragilisent-democratie/. Accessed 3 Nov. 2025.

dia. Trump's victory showed that populism can reach central power, altering institutional balances¹⁵. As Cas Mudde stresses, we live in a populist Zeitgeist: populism is no longer a temporary deviation, but a permanent political climate in contemporary democracies¹⁶.

1.4 A structurally unstable but politically relevant concept

The impossibility of fixing a stable definition of populism does not depend only on its changeable nature, but also on the way in which the concept was constructed. From its origins, it has been used as an external and polemical category to describe phenomena perceived as problematic for the liberal-democratic order.

This makes populism a concept intrinsically traversed by value tensions: it is not a fully fledged ideology, but a set of discursive and strategic practices, capable of adapting to different political contexts. Precisely for this reason, rather than an anomaly of representative democracy, it can be considered a component that *springs* from within it: a form of politicisation of conflict that becomes stably embedded in contemporary representative and communicative dynamics¹⁷.

1.5. From the origins to the "reinvention" of the concept: five historical sequences of populism¹⁸

The difficulty of defining populism in univocal terms is not a recent phenomenon, but is rooted in a long and complex historical trajectory. The genealogy of this category is marked by conceptual twists, retrospective rereadings and semantic extensions that have progressively turned the term into a sort of flexible and polemical receptacle. Reconstructing this genealogy does not mean finding a "pure" origin, but showing how the category was defined each time in response to specific fears, conflicts and transformations of democracy.

Broadly speaking, five main sequences can be identified in the history of populism: (1) the Russian *narodničestvo*, (2) the American experience of the People's Party, (3) the "classic" Latin American populisms, (4) the theoretical re-elaboration carried out between the 1950s and 1960s and (5) the European and global spread from the 1970s to today. These phases do not exhaust the variety of phenomena, but they outline their conceptual evolution and problematic legacy, which still conditions the theoretical debate today.

1.5.1 Nineteenth-century roots: from the Russian *narodničestvo* to Latin America

The first significant moment is located in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century. After the abolition of serfdom (1861), the heterogeneous movement of the *narodničestvo* emerged, which idealised the peasant world and attributed a privileged political role to the *obščina* and the *mir* (the assembly of heads of household). Intellectuals such as Bakunin, Černyševskij and Herzen projected onto it the image of a people that was the repository of authentic values, opposed to capitalist modernity and the Western model¹⁹. In the 1890s, the polemic between the populists and the Marxists — in particular

¹⁵ Jan-Werner Müller. *Cos'è Il Populismo?* EGEA spa, 24 Jan. 2023, p. 19.

¹⁶ Mudde C. *The Populist Zeitgeist. Government and Opposition*. 2004;

¹⁷ Nadia, Urbinati. *Io, Il Popolo. Come Il Populismo Trasforma La Democrazia*. Mulino, 2020, p. 14.

¹⁸ The reconstruction that follows, with some interpretive adaptations, refers to the synthesis set out by Damiano Palano in *Genealogie del populismo Per la storia di un concetto paranoico*, ch. I, pp. 15-42

¹⁹ Venturi, Franco. *Il Populismo Russo*. Mimesis, 21 July 2021.

with the young Lenin — gave the movement a lasting political meaning: Lenin reproached the populists for a moralistic and romantic critique, incapable of grasping the historical dynamics of capitalism²⁰.

Although it lacked some traits considered typical today (such as charismatic leadership), the *narodničestvo* left an important symbolic legacy: the mythologisation of the people, the elite/mass opposition and the moral critique of bourgeois modernity²¹.

The second sequence opens further west, in the United States, with the birth of the People's Party (1891), an agrarian movement born in opposition to the concentration of economic and political power in Washington and to the influence of corporations. Its rhetoric was based on a moral opposition between the honest and productive rural world and the corrupt elite of the metropolis. Anti-party and anti-establishment discourse was intertwined with nostalgic references to an idealised past and, in some contexts, with nativist and racist overtones. Although short-lived, the People's Party left a deep mark on the American political imagination, passing on a rhetorical repertoire — moralism, denunciation of corruption, anti-elitism — that would be reactivated by later protest movements.²²

The third sequence concerns the Latin American populisms of the 1930s to 1950s. The cases of Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina, Getúlio Vargas in Brazil and Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico show a governing populism, founded on charismatic leaderships, redistributive policies aimed at the urban popular classes and a nationalist discourse opposed to foreign interests. The label "populism", applied retrospectively, consolidated the image of a political model in which social mobilisation coexists with strong institutional control.²³

1.5.2 The conceptual turn: the "reinvention" of the 1950s and 1960s

The fourth sequence is not linked to a specific political movement, but to a genuine theoretical turn. In the United States of the 1950s, in the climate of the McCarthyite "witch hunt", scholars such as Edward Shils and Richard Hofstadter reinterpreted populism, turning it from a circumscribed agrarian phenomenon into a long-term cultural category. Hofstadter in particular, in his most important and influential work, *The Age of Reform*²⁴, identified in populism a set of structural traits of American political culture: Manichaean moralism, radical anti-elitism, conspiratorial rhetoric, nativist nationalism and hostility towards liberal institutions. In this passage populism lost its original historical ties and was "reinvented" as a general, negatively connoted concept, associated with illiberal and anti-pluralist impulses.

This semantic shift imprinted a lasting distortion: populism became a polemical category, often used to identify "threats" to liberal democracy.

1.5.3 The European extension and semantic inflation

From the 1970s onwards, the term "populism" also began to circulate in the European context. Pierre-André Taguieff introduced the expression "national-populism" to describe Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National²⁵. The label quickly spread to different phenomena: Jörg Haider in Austria, Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands, Silvio Berlusconi and the Lega in Italy, and other similar cases. As early as 2002 this

20 Caputo, Renato. "Lenin - La Città Futura." *Lacittafutura.it*, La Città Futura, 30 Sept. 2017, www.lacittafutura.it/unigramsci/lenin-2. Accessed 3 Nov. 2025.

21 Damiano Palano. *Populismo*. bibliografica, 13 Apr. 2017, ch. I, pp. 11-19

22 Ibid., pp. 19-30.

23 On this subject see, among others, Loris, Zanatta. *Il Populismo*. Carrocci editore, 1 Feb. 2014; Zanatta, Loris. *Storia Dell'America Latina Contemporanea*. Gius. Laterza & Figli Spa, 11 Jan. 2017.

24 "R. Hofstadter, L'età delle riforme: da Bryan a F.D. Roosevelt (1956), Il Mulino, Bologna 1962, p. 6"

25 Taguieff, Pierre-André. "La Rhétorique Du National-Populisme [Les Règles Élémentaires de La Propagande Xénophobe]." *Mots*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1984, pp. 113-139,

would lead several authors to stress that populism was a term so vague that it could not describe anything precise²⁶.

The emergence of outsider figures, the televisual personalisation of politics and anti-establishment rhetoric contributed to a progressive dilation of the concept. Populism became a catch-all word, capable of designating very heterogeneous leaders, movements and political styles.²⁷

The genealogical path of the term clearly shows that populism does not possess a unitary essence, but is a concept constructed and reconstructed over time, through theoretical rereadings, political disputes and semantic extensions. Isaiah Berlin's famous metaphor of the "Cinderella complex" expresses this ambiguity well: there is a "conceptual shoe", but no "historical foot" that fits it perfectly. Every definition turns out to be either too broad to be useful, or too narrow to capture the variety of historical phenomena.

Rather than a fully fledged ideology, populism takes the form of an essentially contested concept, characterised by certain family resemblances: the direct appeal to the people, the moral opposition to elites, binary polarisation and the tendency towards political disintermediation.

This flexible and adaptive structure explains at the same time the discursive fortune of the term and the difficulty scholars have in fixing its theoretical boundaries. Populism thus emerges as a mobile semantic container, which reflects the tensions of contemporary democracy more than a coherent or systematic doctrine

1.6 Populism: neither an ideology nor a distinctive style. The outdatedness of the concept²⁸

From the 1950s to the present day, many scholars have tried to construct an ideological model of populism, attempting both to place it among the great modern ideological families and to identify a strong core with a precise worldview²⁹. However, none of these attempts has succeeded in identifying a coherent theoretical core or a recognisable system of ideas. The attempt to reduce populism to a coherent ideological system presents structural limits and obstacles that are difficult to overcome³⁰.

First, there is no autonomous doctrinal tradition: there are no founding texts, canonical authors or theoretical corpus capable of constituting a genuine "ideology of populism". As Damiano Palano observes, this absence does not derive from an anti-intellectualist attitude, but from the polemical character of the term and from the pejorative meaning it has acquired, especially in Europe. "Populism" is in fact almost always used for delegitimising purposes, in a sense similar to "demagoguery", and for this reason it is rarely claimed by those to whom it is attributed, except ironically or provocatively³¹. Moreover, the traits most frequently indicated as peculiar to it — the centrality of the people, the legitimisation of political action in the name of the popular will, the defence of the unity of the people against elites or other "enemies" — are not original elements, but belong to the genetic code of political modernity. These are motifs common to many nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideologies, democratic and authoritarian, ranging from Jacobinism to socialism, to nationalism and conservatism.

26 . P.A. Taguieff, *L'illusione populista* (2002), Bruno Mondadori, Milan 2003, pp. 57-58.

27 Isaiah Berlin, *To Define Populism*, The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library, 2013

28 The reconstruction that follows, up to the conclusion, with some interpretive adaptations, refers to the synthesis set out by Damiano Palano, *Populismo*. Editrice Bibliografica, 2017, ch. II, pp. 49-79.

29 On populism as an ideology see, among others, Loris Zanatta. *Il Populismo*. Carrocci editore; Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, Oxford University Press; E. Shils, *The Torment of Secrecy*.

30 The Background and the Consequences of American Security Policies; "D. MacRae, Populism as an Ideology"

31 "Salvini, Sono Orgogliosamente Populista - Ultima Ora - Ansa.it." *Agenzia ANSA*, 30 Dec. 2017, www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/topnews/2017/12/30/salvini-sono-orgogliosamente-populista_3c6ae45b-134c-4945-a3c3-4e10056764b4.html. Accessed 3 Nov. 2025.

The same applies to the organicist conception of the political community, often considered the value core of populism. The representation of “the people” as a homogeneous “whole”, threatened by internal or external forces, is not in fact exclusive to populists, but is rooted in the long tradition of Western thought, which has often described society as an organism endowed with complementary parts, each with a natural and pre-established function.

Nor can aversion to parties be considered a distinctive trait of populism. Before the twentieth century, European political thought rarely recognised positive legitimacy in partisan organisations, which were perceived as factors of division and corruption of political unity. In this sense, the populist protest against “factions” merely reactivates an ancient theme, recurrent throughout the history of Western political thought: nostalgia for the unity of the body politic threatened by pluralism and conflict.

A similar argument applies to distrust of institutions and formal procedures. The anti-institutional attitude is often linked to the initial phases of political movements and tends to dissolve when they take on government responsibilities. It is therefore a contingent element, rather than a structural ideological principle.

Similarly, the opposition between “the people” and “the enemy” — considered one of the most constant traits of populism — takes multiple forms. The enemy may coincide, from time to time, with economic elites, intellectuals, the political bureaucracy, “the caste”, foreigners or financial power. The constant presence of an antagonist shows that the friend/enemy logic is not a peculiarity of populism, but a constitutive dimension of political discourse in general³².

In recent years, the difficulty of identifying a unitary ideological core has become more pronounced with the emergence of new forces such as the Five Star Movement in Italy or Podemos in Spain, which have called into question the belief that populism is a typically “right-wing” form³³. This plurality of experiences has led many scholars to abandon the idea of populism as a twentieth-century “ism” and to conceive it rather as a political mentality or a sort of *forma mentis*, a disposition that cuts across the entire ideological spectrum. Already at the 1967 London School of Economics conference, it was the scholar Peter Wiles who denied that one could speak of a populist ideology, proposing instead to define it as a “syndrome” of recurrent but non-systematic symptoms³⁴.

1.7 The stylistic-communicative track: populism as the language of crisis

A second line of interpretation has shifted attention from ideological content to the forms of political language. Populism, according to this perspective, is not a system of ideas, but a communicative style founded on the direct appeal to the people and on the simplification of political discourse.

Margaret Canovan proposed one of the first readings of this kind, defining populism as a cross-cutting mobilisation tactic: a way of representing politics in moralised terms, capable of going beyond ideological affiliations³⁵. Pierre-André Taguieff then refined this key, describing populism as a rhetorical style that translates the complexity of the political into a binary narrative — the people against the elite, purity against corruption, identity against otherness³⁶.

³² As anticipated at the beginning of the section, these reflections refer to the second part of Damiano Palano's book, *Populismo*. 13 Apr. 2017.

³³ Brancaccio, L., & Fruncillo, D. (2019). Il populismo di sinistra: il Movimento 5 Stelle e il Movimento Arancione a Napoli. *Meridiana*, 96, 129–158. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26897705>

³⁴ “Wiles, A Syndrome, Not a Doctrine: Some Elementary Theses on Populism, in G. Ionesco - E. Gellner, *Populism*, cit., pp. 166–179.”

³⁵ “M. Canovan, Two Strategies for the Study of Populism, *«Political Studies»*, XXX (1982)

³⁶ Taguieff, P.A. *L'illusione Populista*. Mondadori ed., 2006.

From this perspective, populism reflects not an anomaly, but a structural change in democratic communication. With the mediatisation of politics and the spread of social networks, the communicative traits once considered typical of populism — simplification, emotionality, personalisation — have become ordinary elements of political discourse. Populist rhetoric thus appears as the natural language of mediated democracy, where legitimisation is measured by the capacity to “speak to the people” more than by programmatic coherence.

But this track too, while offering useful insights, proves insufficient. First, by reducing populism to a linguistic register, it explains how people speak, but not why they speak that way: it describes the means, not the conditions that make them necessary. The personalisation and simplification of political discourse are not populist inventions, but the outcomes of deeper processes — the crisis of parties, the disintermediation produced by digital media, the fragmentation of the public.

Second, the idea of a sort of populist style risks turning into an inflated and self-referential category: if everything that is direct and emotional is “populist”, then the concept loses analytical depth and becomes a synonym for effective political communication, increasingly spectacularised by the party logics of leadership that we will see in the third chapter and by the evolution of the media environment.

1.8 Conclusion: from populism to the processes of mass democracy

The two tracks analysed — the ideological one and the stylistic-communicative one — both lead to a point of theoretical impasse.

The first, in its attempt to identify a coherent doctrinal content, ends up multiplying cases and emptying the concept; the second, by reducing populism to a political style, describes its expressive forms but does not grasp its structural causes. Populism is neither an autonomous ideology nor a specific language, but the form through which representative democracy is increasingly being realised in the years to come. Its recurrent and adaptive character shows that populism does not represent a foreign body to political modernity, but a systemic effect of democratic logic itself.

In conclusion, this chapter has reconstructed the historical and theoretical path through which populism has been defined, redefined and progressively broadened within the political science debate. In the following chapters I intend to show that populism does not represent an external or pathological phenomenon with respect to democracy, but constitutes instead an internal and functional component of democratic logic as it was configured over the course of the twentieth century.

The notion of democracy adopted in this thesis draws on the Schumpeterian definition – which later became central to the political science debate – that interprets democracy as a competitive method for selecting elites through the vote. This approach finds empirical confirmation in the very evolution of parties: from the model of the mass party, endowed with a pedagogical and integrative function, there has been a shift to increasingly personalised organisations, marked by a growing process of leaderisation and by a strengthening of the role of the executive in contemporary democracies.

Chapter 2 – The fears of the mass and the roots of “realist” democracy

This chapter performs a precise function within the thesis: it does not aim to reconstruct a “history of ideas” as an end in itself, but to show how, starting from the entry of the masses into the modern political sphere, a recurrent theoretical attitude – a fear of the mass – progressively takes hold and leads, author after author, to redefine democracy in an increasingly sober, procedural and “aseptic” sense. In other words, what is of interest here is not only what Tocqueville, Mill, Le Bon, Ortega y Gasset and Lippmann say about the mass, but what this sequence of diagnoses produces in the very way democracy is conceived. The chapter shows how democracy comes progressively to be thought of less as the self-government of the people and more as the management of a problem: the difficulty – or the impossibility – of entrusting the average citizen with competence, rationality and autonomy equal to modern complexity.

The common thread running through the whole chapter is therefore the following: democratisation, understood as the growing access of the masses to politics, is not only celebrated as an extension of equality; it is also interpreted as a structural risk for freedom, for the quality of public judgement and for the stability of institutions. In Tocqueville the threat takes the form of the tyranny of the majority and of conformism: the mass oppresses not only through the law, but above all through the moral pressure that imposes an orthodoxy of opinion. In Mill the problem becomes even more precise: the “tyranny of custom” and social levelling tend to stifle the originality and plurality necessary to a free society, making democracy vulnerable precisely to the extent that it becomes the government of the many.

With Le Bon and Ortega y Gasset the fear of the mass loses its predominantly institutional or moral dimension and takes on a more radical tone: the mass is described as a psychological, emotional, suggestible phenomenon, in which the individual regresses and becomes available to simplification, polarisation and charismatic leadership. Here the question is no longer only “who governs”, but how the mass thinks and reacts: democracy appears exposed, by its very structure, to plebiscitary forms and to dynamics of irrational mobilisation. In this passage, the idea of a competent citizenry – the implicit premise of classical conceptions of popular sovereignty – is weakened further.

With Lippmann, finally, the critique of the mass enters the cognitive heart of modern democracy. The “great society” is not only a theatre of collective passions: it is an informational environment too complex for the citizen to know it directly. Public opinion does not emerge spontaneously from individuals who “see” the facts; it is a mediated, constructed, symbolic product, dependent on information apparatuses and processes of selection. The theoretical effect of this diagnosis is decisive: if widespread competence is a myth and informed participation cannot be presupposed, democracy must be rethought as a system that limits, channels and organises participation, rather than as the realisation of substantive popular autonomy.

It is at this point that the chapter introduces the comparison between Kelsen and Schumpeter as the logical endpoint of the trajectory reconstructed. Kelsen represents the attempt to rescue the democratic idea normatively within modern pluralism: since the people is not an organic unity, democracy can exist only as a procedure of mediation and compromise between organised parts, with parties as the very condition of the political will. Schumpeter, by contrast, carries the sequence of distrust towards the mass to its extreme consequences: he abandons the idea of a rational general will and re-

duces democracy to a competitive method for selecting leadership. The citizen does not “govern”; he periodically chooses between competing elites.

The thesis guiding this chapter – and linking it directly to Chapter 3 – is that, over the course of the twentieth century, it is above all the Schumpeterian paradigm that establishes itself as the realist grammar of democracy in the social sciences and, increasingly, as the de facto structure of Western democracies³⁷. This predominance does not depend only on the theoretical strength of the model, but on its adaptation to historical transformations: massification, the crisis of classical parliamentarism, the mediatization of politics, the weakening of collective affiliations and the growing centrality of electoral competition. Chapter 2 therefore shows how democracy is progressively redefined starting from the problem of the mass; Chapter 3 will show how this redefinition is concretely realised in the metamorphosis of the party form and in the leaderisation of contemporary competitive democracies. In this sense, what is often called “populism” appears less as a sudden deviation and more as the coherent form that democracy takes when, within a competitive paradigm, legitimation depends on winning the consent of the median citizen in a permanent communicative environment.

2.1 Between conformism and the tyranny of the majority: the arrival of the masses and the fears of the elite

Among the first authors to address critically the role of the masses in democratic institutions is Alexis de Tocqueville. Back from his journey to the United States, which lasted about a year, in 1835 he wrote the first part of *Democracy in America*, a work in which he identifies the “progress towards equality of conditions” as the most significant and irreversible feature of modern civilisation. This tendency, Tocqueville observes, does not act only on the forms of government, but shapes the public spirit, orients legislation and forges collective habits and feelings: it is a force that “creates opinions”, generates customs and gives a long-term direction to the whole of social life³⁸.

Tocqueville’s reflection reaches a decisive point when, after describing the innovative potential of American democratic institutions, the author focuses on the internal fragilities of democracy. It is at this level that the two dangers he considers most serious emerge: the tyranny of the majority and the rise of a new type of despotism, destined to characterise the democratic societies of the future³⁹.

Tocqueville stresses how, in the United States, the power of the majority is considered superior to any other political authority and almost free from institutional constraints. This predominance also derives from the local constitutions, which tend to accentuate the “natural strength” of the majority, making the legislative body dependent on its momentary passions. The problem is not only the arithmetical omnipotence of the many, but, in particular, the idea – which Tocqueville considers fallacious – that numerical aggregation would guarantee greater wisdom than the judgement of the individual. The application of the principle of equality to the sphere of intellect leads, in his view, to a dangerous levelling: not all judgements are equivalent, and politics cannot be founded on this illusion⁴⁰.

The dominion of the majority, however, is not limited to public life. Tocqueville identifies an even more insidious phenomenon: the capacity of the majority to shape the thought of individuals, exerting an invisible but extremely powerful social pressure. The majority, he writes, “draws a circle around thought”, within which every individual is pushed to conform. This is not only a political power, but a moral and

37 Palano, D., La democrazia dei pochi. L’eredità dell’anti-elitismo e le sfide alla teoria democratica, <<QUADERNI DI SCIENZA POLITICA>>, 2015; (2): 173-234 [<http://hdl.handle.net/10807/77729>]

38 Reflections contained in the book: Alexis Tocqueville. *La Democrazia in America*. 1835. Utet, 7 Mar. 2017.

39 Italia, Francesca. “Categorie Dispotiche Ne La Democrazia in America Di Alexis de Tocqueville.” *Bibliomanie*, 2022, www.bibliomani.it/?p=2491#easy-footnote-bottom-44-2491. Accessed 20 Nov. 2025.

40 Ibid., book II, ch. VII, *L’onnipotenza della maggioranza negli Stati Uniti e i suoi effetti*, pp. 253-255

cultural power, capable of shaping opinions, customs, feelings and traditions. This influence penetrates so deeply into the conscience of individuals as to constitute a new form of tyranny, subtler and more penetrating than traditional tyrannies⁴¹.

In this context, Tocqueville introduces the theme of “democratic despotism”: a paternalistic form of domination, less visible and violent than classical despotisms, but potentially more pervasive. This “immense tutelary power” takes upon itself the management of citizens’ needs and concerns, offering security and the simplification of daily life in exchange for their renunciation of freedom. Individuals end up passively accepting this tutelage, believing that they remain free while, in reality, they gradually grow accustomed to a system that homogenises ideas and behaviour. This mechanism produces masses of atomised individuals, deprived of their peculiarities and placed side by side without real community ties⁴².

Democratic despotism, according to Tocqueville, aims to replace free choice with standardised models of thought and behaviour. It does not manifest itself through explicit coercion, but through the progressive internalisation of values and principles imposed by the dominant social power. Precisely because it acts in the most intimate areas of subjectivity — conscience, will, moral imagination — this form of domination is harder to recognise and to resist. Once the dimension of individuality has been emptied, it becomes easy for power to extend its influence over a mass of depersonalised individuals⁴³.

What Tocqueville outlines is therefore an anticipatory critique of the mechanisms of homologation typical of democratic mass societies: a process that does not arise from violent oppression, but from paternalism and the search for security, which gradually lead individuals to accept the loss of their own autonomy. His analysis prefigures a problem destined to mark political modernity: the transformation of the people into a mass and the growing vulnerability of public opinion to conformist pressures.

2.2 The critique and the fears of John Stuart Mill

Some twenty years after the publication of *Democracy in America*, John Stuart Mill returns critically to the same fears expressed by Tocqueville, focusing on the pernicious effects that democratic expansion and social homologation can have on individual liberties. In the celebrated *On Liberty* (1859), Mill systematically addresses the problem of the “tyranny of the majority”, a concept he takes directly from the French author but reworks in a liberal key, placing it at the centre of his reflection on the fate of modern democracy⁴⁴.

Mill sees in the United States the paradigmatic example of how social conformism can prove more oppressive than any traditional form of political despotism. Although democracy promises emancipation and individual autonomy, he observes that, once the old hierarchies have been broken, citizens risk becoming prisoners not of the law, but of collective opinion and the social expectations it produces. Even the extended suffrage and the inclusion of the working classes, formally progressive achievements, can generate unexpected outcomes: the homologation of opinions, the dominance of popular prejudices and the erosion of that intellectual diversity which constitutes, for Mill, the very condition of civil progress⁴⁵.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 258

⁴² Ibid., p. 260.

⁴³ A. de Tocqueville, *La democrazia in America*, cit., book II, ch. VII, *L'onnipotenza della maggioranza negli Stati Uniti e i suoi effetti*, p. 261. In this passage too, Tocqueville offers an example of the way in which he uses the terms despotism and tyranny, discussed above.

⁴⁴ The reflections that follow are contained in John Stuart Mill. *Saggio Sulla Libertà*. 1859. Mimesis, 14 Sept. 2023.

⁴⁵ John Stuart Mill. *Saggio Sulla Libertà*. 1859. Mimesis, 14 Sept. 2023, pp 5-6

The threat therefore comes not from an arbitrary sovereign, but from the prevailing opinion which — by its nature — tends to marginalise eccentric thinkers, reformers and critical spirits. Mill fears that creativity and originality, indispensable elements for the vitality of a free society, may be stifled by the social pressure exerted by the majority, and that the “will of the people” may end up neutralising competence and individuality. In such a scenario, mass democracy paradoxically risks producing less freedom than existed under the despotic governments of the past, precisely because cultural oppression is more pervasive and harder to contest⁴⁶.

To counter this drift, Mill identifies competence and education as an indispensable remedy. He imagines the formation of a secular intellectual elite capable of guiding public judgement and identifying rules that are valid in utilitarian terms, that is, rules which, if followed by all, would maximise collective well-being. We thus see the attempt to introduce guarantees against the risks of a majoritarian power devoid of cultural counterweights. From this perspective, Mill also supports forms of plural voting that give greater weight to educated individuals, in the conviction that a competent citizenry is a necessary condition for democracy not to degenerate⁴⁷. Mill’s concern with the “tyranny of custom” is central. In his view, when a majority imposes its own habits and values as universal models, the plurality that feeds the progress of civilisation is lost. Social and cultural homologation not only impoverishes the individual, but undermines the very foundations of free government, since it allows the majority to confiscate silently the rights of minorities, often with general consent. It is precisely the agreement between power and public opinion that makes this type of oppression more insidious than that exercised by a tyrant: it penetrates “into the most intimate details of life”, limiting not only behaviour but also the moral and intellectual sphere of citizens⁴⁸.

Mill therefore insists on the need to preserve dissimilarity, variety and individual character as essential conditions of liberal democracy. If democracy wants to avoid turning into its opposite, it must prevent any group — even the most numerous — from relegating the others to the margins of political and social life⁴⁹. The fundamental problem then becomes that of protecting minorities, not against an external power, but against the social body itself, which spontaneously tends towards uniformity. Only in this way, according to Mill, is it possible to prevent democracy from being corrupted from within and individual freedom — the cornerstone value of Western modernity — from being silently eroded by the dominant opinion.

2.3 Gustave Le Bon and the examination of the crowd

With the publication of *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* in 1895, Gustave Le Bon inaugurated one of the most influential strands of late nineteenth-century social theory: the psychological analysis of crowds. His work represents a turning point with respect to earlier reflections on democracy and forms an ideal bridge between the classical critique and the later twentieth-century theories of the mass. While Tocqueville and Mill focused on the conformist pressure exerted by the dominant opinion, Le Bon shifts attention to the psychological transformation that affects the individual immersed in a crowd⁵⁰. His interest concerns not so much democratic institutions as the emotional, imitative and irrational mechanisms which, in his view, completely redefine human behaviour in collective conditions. For Le Bon, the psychology of the individual in the crowd does not coincide with that of the isolated individual. Entering a large group entails the suspension of the conscious personality, replaced by a sort

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p 7.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Reflections contained in Gustave Le Bon, and Legodigit. *Psicologia Delle Folle*. Massa (Ms), Edizioni Clandestine, 2017.

of “collective soul” that operates according to elementary and pre-rational impulses⁵¹. The anonymity of the crowd reduces the sense of personal responsibility and encourages behaviour that the individual would never adopt alone. This anonymity feeds a process of psychological regression, a descent towards forms of impulsive and uncontrolled action. Suggestion acts in depth, weakening critical capacity: the individual reacts immediately to the emotional and symbolic stimuli coming from the collective environment, in a condition similar to hypnosis. To this is added psychic contagion, the extremely rapid transmission of emotions, beliefs and behaviour, which makes the crowd a cohesive organism, capable of thinking and acting as a single mind⁵².

The result is a radical transformation of subjectivity. The individual loses self-control, feels relieved of responsibility and takes part in a collective entity dominated by emotion. Le Bon interprets this process as a regression to barbarism: the cultured and rational man, immersed in the crowd, becomes once again a being dominated by impulsiveness, violence and fanaticism, but also by heroic impulses and irrational sacrifices. Collective actions are sudden, extreme and simplified; the crowd does not tolerate ambivalence or nuance, knows no doubt and admits no complexity. Its emotionality is unstable and changeable, ready to pass from veneration to hatred. Le Bon compares these states of exaltation to the most radical forms of religiosity, in which total submission to a prophet or a faith cancels any capacity for autonomous judgement⁵³.

A decisive role in the dynamics of crowds is attributed to the leader. According to Le Bon, crowds are not capable of orienting themselves autonomously: they need a guide who knows how to speak to their deepest psychic register. The effective leader does not argue, but acts through images, symbols and simple, repeated words. Ideas do not prevail because they are true, but because they are emotionally powerful. Repetition, symbolic evocation and expressive self-assurance create a sort of magnetism that binds leader and followers in an unconscious and irrational relationship⁵⁴. For this reason, Le Bon observes that the relationship between leader and crowd often takes on the features of enchantment: the unconscious minds of the one and the other influence each other through a hidden and non-rational process. It is no coincidence that, in the twentieth century, his analysis was frequently invoked in the debate on propaganda and mass mobilisation, aware of the mobilising potential inherent in collective psychology⁵⁵.

Overall, Le Bon’s interpretation is deeply pessimistic. The crowd represents a dissolving force, incapable of an overall vision and inclined to violence; it is permeated by authoritarian and intolerant feelings, strengthens hesitant beliefs, amplifies primordial impulses and cancels reflection. For Le Bon, modernity is threatened by the growing dominion of crowds and by the possibility that they become protagonists of the political arena. In this sense, his diagnosis fits fully into the genealogy of the relationship between masses and democracy: while Tocqueville and Mill warned against the conformist power of the dominant opinion, Le Bon warns of the even more radical danger represented by the psychological transformation of the individual in the crowd. In both cases, the entry of the masses into the public space appears as an ambivalent process, capable of strengthening equality but also of producing new forms of political irrationality.

51 Palano, Damiano. *Volti Della Paura Figure Del Disordine All'alba Dell'era Biopolitica*. mimesis ed., 2010, pp. 34–35.

52 Carugati, Roberta. “Le Più Famose Dittature Della Storia E Il Fenomeno Della Psicologia Delle Folle.” *State of Mind*, 19 June 2020, www.stateofmind.it/2020/06/psicologia-delle-folle-dittature/. Accessed 21 Nov. 2025.

53 Le Bon, Gustav. *Gustav Le Bon Psicologia Delle Folle*. 1895. PP, 14–15.

54 Ibid., p.36

55 Reflections well documented in the book Gentile, Emilio. *Il Capo E La Folla*. Gius.Laterza & Figli Spa, 20 Apr. 2016.

2.4 José Ortega y Gasset: the diagnosis of mass society

Compared with the other authors, Ortega y Gasset writes in a different context, namely the interwar period, a time in which liberal democracies and the rise of totalitarianisms made the question of the mass more dramatic. Indeed, writing his reflections in the midst of the 1930s, we see an author who witnesses the birth and formation of twentieth-century totalitarianisms. With *The Revolt of the Masses* (1930), José Ortega y Gasset produced one of the most penetrating interpretations of the moral and political crisis of interwar Europe. The work arises from the urgent need to understand how, after years of militarisation and ideological mobilisation, European individuals had progressively grown accustomed to the omnipotence of the state and become willing to follow authoritarian formulas such as Mussolini's slogan "Everything in the State; nothing outside the State; nothing against the State"⁵⁶. The spread of openly anti-liberal attitudes and ideas was, for Ortega, the sign of a deep fracture in Western civilisation: the continent was abandoning its own cultural tradition for new forms of barbarisation, which called into question the moral principles on which European modernity had been built.

In this context, the author identifies the origin of the crisis in the transformation of the modern individual, and in particular in the rise of what he calls the "mass-man". The mass, in his language, does not coincide with the popular class, nor is it a merely quantitative concept: it represents a psychological disposition, a human type satisfied with its own mediocrity, devoid of inner discipline, unaware of the complexity of social life and convinced that all the benefits of civilisation are a natural right. The mass-man makes no demands on himself, does not measure himself against any higher ideal, shuns effort and regards civilisation as a gift that does not need to be guarded or renewed. He is an individual who tends to occupy the public stage without possessing the virtues of leadership, and who claims to guide collective life even though he lacks the necessary cultural and moral tools⁵⁷.

Ortega contrasts this figure with the excellent man, who does not coincide with a social aristocracy but with a model of life founded on self-discipline, on the capacity to take on responsibility and on the constant effort to surpass oneself. The revolt of the masses consists precisely in the rejection of the authority of this principle of excellence and, more generally, in the denial of any form of intellectual or moral superiority. The Europe of the early twentieth century, Ortega observes, was progressively invaded by individuals who claim only rights and reject any duty, thereby emptying the ethical fabric of society and undermining the very bases of democratic coexistence⁵⁸.

According to the philosopher, responsibility for this transformation does not fall exclusively on the masses, but also on the very successes of modernity. Technical progress, science, the liberal state and democracy had generated an unprecedented condition of well-being that had inadvertently "spoiled" the average individual, leading him to perceive as natural achievements that were in fact the fruit of the efforts of creative minorities. From this derives what Ortega defines as a form of "historical ingratitude": the inability to recognise the precariousness of progress and the fragility of the foundations on which civilisation rests.

This collective psychology produces clearly recognisable traits: an infantile hyper-individualism, a widespread inability to accept authority, contempt for competence, the conviction that everyone can speak about everything, the absence of inwardness and self-control. The new information technologies, the popular press and the democratisation of culture contribute to a general levelling downwards,

⁵⁶ The reflections that follow are contained in the book Ortega, José. *La Ribellione Delle Masse*. Testi e documenti, 2017.

⁵⁷ *Novecento filosofico e scientifico*, ed. A. Negri, Marzorati, Milan, 1991, vol. I, pp. 413-417, from which the article "ORTEGA Y GASSET, L'UOMO_MASSA." *Filosofico.net*, 2025, www.filosofico.net/Antologia_file/AntologiaO/ORTEGA%20Y%20GASSET_%20L%20UOMO_MASSA.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

feeding fanaticism, political violence, irrationalism and a growing predilection for extreme simplification. Ortega's reading of these phenomena, though rooted in its time, sounds surprisingly topical⁵⁹.

At the root of the problem lies a crisis of command: the advent of the masses speaks of elites that no longer lead and of masses that, although incapable of doing so, claim to lead. The mass-man, unable to bear emptiness and the lack of direction, proves inclined to let himself be seduced by totalising ideologies that offer discipline, identity and meaning. The European situation of 1930, Ortega observes with lucidity, constitutes the ideal ground for the germination of Nazism and other totalitarianisms.

From this perspective, the only way out is represented by a great continental political project: the unification of Europe. In a very elitist key, Ortega y Gasset believes that only through the reconstruction of responsible elites, capable of taking on the moral and cultural leadership of society, can meaning be restored to European history, the centrifugal energies of the mass be disciplined and totalitarian drifts be prevented⁶⁰. The morality that Ortega invokes — defined as a feeling of submission to the law, awareness of duty and respect for obligation — has nothing authoritarian about it, but represents the very foundation of any civilisation that does not wish to succumb to the pure claiming of rights without responsibility.

The book closes on a note that is at once tragic and hopeful. Only at the moment of the most radical bewilderment, Ortega writes, can man rediscover the problematic nature of life and abandon the illusions that prevent him from seeing the reality of his own chaos. It is from this painful awareness that an authentic desire for order can arise, capable of inaugurating new developments in history. The Europe of the future will be able to live its differences in a unitary context only if it knows how to value them within a renewed collective enterprise, led by elites equal to their task⁶¹.

2.5 The 1920s: Lippmann and the critique of the citizen and of public opinion

Among the most brilliant figures of twentieth-century thought, Walter Lippmann certainly occupies an important place for having grasped and produced, as early as the 1920s, one of the most original and anticipatory contributions to the reflection on democracy and public opinion. This author is particularly relevant to this research because of his original reflections on the role that the new means of communication played within society.

From the end of the First World War, in fact, Lippmann developed a systematic critique of the cognitive premises of classical democratic theory, calling into question the confidence – typical of nineteenth-century liberalism – in the public's capacity to evaluate autonomously and rationally the information needed for political participation⁶². According to Lippmann, indeed, most citizens, immersed in a social world that has become excessively vast and complex, cannot access directly the facts that nonetheless influence their choices: the real political world is hard for the ordinary individual to understand and can be known only through inevitable forms of mediation. It is important to stress that his analyses of public opinion were strongly affected by the events of the First World War, which rapidly shattered the hopes of indefinite and orderly progress that had characterised not only his own positions, but also those of other progressive intellectuals⁶³.

59 Mosconi, Nicoletta. "Ortega Y Gasset - La Ribellione Delle Masse." *Thefederalist.eu*, 2024, www.thefederalist.eu/site/index.php/it/i-federalismo-nella-storia-del-pensiero/602-ortega-y-gasset-la-ribellione-delle-masse

60 Ibid.

61 Final section of —. *La Ribellione Delle Masse*. 1929..

62 Reflections contained in the book Lippmann, Walter. *L'opinione Pubblica*. 1920. Donzelli Editore, 1 May 2018.

63 Rimoli, Francesco, and Giulio M Salerno. *Conoscenza E Potere*. Carocci, 2006, pp. 28 -32. Section written by Giovanni Dessì in the chapter: Opinione pubblica e democrazia: il contributo di Walter Lippmann

For the purposes of my thesis it is useful to dwell on the second part of his main work, namely *Public Opinion* (1920), in which we find a genuine reflection on the democratic system. The American author carries to their extreme consequences the analytical premises developed in the first section of the volume, offering one of the most radical twentieth-century reflections on the cognitive fragility of democratic government. The author starts from the observation that democratic theory has attributed a central role to public opinion, both as the expression of citizens' judgement on matters of collective interest and as a criterion for legitimating government action. However, it has never examined with sufficient rigour the actual conditions through which such opinion is formed. Lippmann denounces the fact that attention has focused mainly on the techniques by which government can obtain or steer consent, neglecting the decisive question: whether the conditions exist for citizens to develop informed and verifiable opinions⁶⁴. In his view, a more realistic public opinion would be possible only by accepting that it requires time, resources, analytical capacity and a method based on documents, measurements and rigorous comparisons. In practice, however, public opinion is formed in an opaque, almost "mysterious" context, inheriting from the imagination of the founding fathers the idea that it expresses the general will⁶⁵.

To clarify the origin of this idealisation, Lippmann devotes several pages to the genesis of American political thought. The leaders of the revolution for independence – Jefferson, Hamilton, Adams – were in fact confronted with the problem, well known to classical political theory, of the limited perspective of the individual: a citizen of Boston cannot have in-depth knowledge of the interests of a farmer in Virginia. The doctrine of the omniscient citizen thus arose as a political response, rather than as an empirical analysis: it was the symbolic affirmation of republican equality, the claim that no one should any longer bow to a higher authority for genealogical or social reasons⁶⁶. Lippmann interprets this position as an attempt to respond to the fundamental problem of political philosophy: the existence of self-centred individuals, bearers of subjective images of the world, and the need to guarantee order and peace among them. Historically, two solutions have been provided. The first, of Platonic and Aristotelian origin, proposes a harmonious and ordered model of society, in which roles and functions are pre-established. The second, typical of the realist tradition represented by Machiavelli and Hobbes, takes conflict as an ineliminable given and addresses it through strategies of power capable of containing it.

The founding fathers knew both of these traditions. Jefferson, more inclined to the communitarian ideal, imagined democracy as an extension of small rural communities, in which direct knowledge of public affairs made the idea of a competent and responsible citizen plausible⁶⁷. Hamilton and Adams, by contrast, perceived the risks of excessive democratic decentralisation and sought to restore government by opposing it to the excesses of direct democracy. The American Constitution thus represents, in Lippmann's interpretation, a compromise between Jefferson's participatory ideal and Hamilton's institutional realism: not a realisation of direct democracy, but an attempt to limit it through a stable representative framework.

The critical point of his analysis, however, concerns the impossibility, under the conditions of the modern "great society", of maintaining the democratic myth of the citizen's omniscience. The breadth and complexity of the contemporary world prevent individuals from accessing the facts directly; they depend on mediators, interpretations and images constructed by others. Democracy, therefore, can no longer be founded on the conviction that citizens possess an intrinsic competence in managing public

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 42-43

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p.43

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

affairs. As an alternative, Lippmann proposes a model founded on a more mature and realistic use of knowledge: a system in which a group of experts – journalists, statisticians, political analysts – guarantees accurate information and rigorous methods for evaluating data. In this way, even a citizen lacking the specific competences required will still be able to demand that public decisions be based on verifiable criteria. Once the myth of omnicompetence has been abandoned, this remains for Lippmann the only form of responsible participation, together with the vote. The demand for control over the ways in which news is produced, and therefore over the formation of public opinion, becomes the cornerstone of his theoretical proposal⁶⁸.

To conclude, taking up the theses of authors such as Michels, Mosca and Pareto, Lippmann agrees that every form of organisation, even those born with democratic intentions, inevitably reproduces an oligarchic structure. The role of the masses is reduced to approval or rejection exclusively at the moment of the vote, but not to participation in and the real definition of choices. This leads to clearly elitist conclusions: if most individuals face the world through images supplied by recognised authorities, then the stability of public life inevitably depends on groups of “the best” able to guide and interpret social complexity. The critique of the symbolic nature of public opinion thus leads Lippmann to a vision of democracy founded not on the widespread competence of citizens, but on the ordering function of elites in the production of meanings and in the management of information⁶⁹.

Lippmann, then, grasped with great lucidity certain tendencies that the First World War had inaugurated and that the authoritarian regimes of the following two decades would consolidate further, permanently changing the relationship between information, citizens and political power. It was precisely in the light of these transformations that a radical reformulation of the idea of democracy began to take shape within twentieth-century thought: the one proposed by democratic elitism, whose first great architect was Joseph Schumpeter⁷⁰. With his avowedly realistic approach, Schumpeter broke the link with the normative tradition that had defined democracy as the expression of the popular will, reducing it instead to the mechanisms through which elites compete for the vote and select the leadership of government⁷¹.

As Lippmann analysed, if the formation of public opinion takes place through cognitive processes that are intrinsically mediated, symbolic and susceptible to manipulation, then democracy cannot be conceived without taking these dynamics into account. Rethinking the meaning of democratic participation today means, ultimately, recognising the distance between the classical ideal of the informed citizen and the concrete communicative structure of mass societies.

The inclusion of Tocqueville, Mill, Le Bon and Ortega y Gasset in this chapter does not respond to a merely historical-reconstructive intent, nor to the wish to accumulate “aristocratic critiques” of democracy. Their function is structural with respect to the general thesis. If in the first chapter populism was treated as an unstable concept that is hard to define, here a decisive step is taken: attention shifts from definitions to the conditions of possibility of the dynamics labelled populist today. In other words, the chapter shows how personalisation, simplification, polarisation, the direct appeal to “the people” and the delegitimation of mediations are not a foreign body that bursts into democracy, but can emerge as recurrent responses to a deeper tension: the irruption of the masses into modern politics and the consequent crisis of confidence in the citizen's widespread competence.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p.44

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp.45-46

⁷⁰ Damiano Palano. *Bubble Democracy : La Fine Del Pubblico E La Nuova Polarizzazione*. Verlag: Brescia, Scholé, 2020, pp. 57-59.

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 60-61

Read in sequence, these authors form a common thread: the fear of the mass does not remain a sociological attitude, but becomes a theoretical engine that progressively pushes reflection on democracy towards increasingly “realist” forms, that is, forms increasingly disenchanted with respect to the ideal of popular self-government. Tocqueville identifies the first core of the problem: democratic equality, while it emancipates, also produces conformism and a majoritarian power capable of shaping opinions and customs to the point of risking a soft despotism. Mill reworks this fear on the liberal side: the main threat is not the political tyrant, but the social tyranny of opinion, which represses pluralism and originality — and therefore weakens precisely the resources that make a non-degraded public debate possible. With Le Bon the focus shifts to the psychological level: the mass transforms the individual, makes him suggestible and exposes him to forms of leadership founded on images, repetition and emotion. Ortega, finally, interprets this transformation as a moral crisis of European civilisation: the mass-man, hostile to competence and lacking inner discipline, occupies the public space without taking on responsibility, opening the way to plebiscitary or authoritarian forms of legitimation.

This progression prepares the decisive step taken by Lippmann. With him the critique becomes cognitive and structural: in complex societies the citizen inevitably depends on mediations and images constructed by others. The distance between reality and public perception is not an accident, but an ordinary condition of political modernity. At this level a crucial point for the thesis becomes clear: if public opinion is fragile and mediated, then it becomes understandable why political competition tends to simplify, polarise and personalise; and it also becomes understandable why the appeal to the people and anti-elite rhetorics can work as effective resources within mass democracy.

At this point, the entry into the comparison between Kelsen and Schumpeter marks the logical endpoint of the path. The authors analysed so far construct the problem to which Kelsen and Schumpeter respond: how can a mass democracy hold up if widespread competence is limited and public opinion is vulnerable? The fork is clear-cut. Kelsen attempts to preserve the democratic idea by translating it into a pluralistic procedure: the general will does not pre-exist, but is formed through mediations and compromises between organised parts. Schumpeter, by contrast, takes this fragility on board fully and “dries out” democracy, reducing it to a competitive method for selecting leadership, in which participation coincides above all with the periodic choice of a leader.

It is precisely this outcome — the progressive affirmation of the Schumpeterian paradigm, both at the theoretical level and in the practice of Western democracies — that allows the second chapter to serve as a link to the third. If democracy is progressively conceived as competition for leadership, the party too is destined to change: from a structure of integration and mediation to a competitive device, increasingly personalised and oriented towards the search for immediate consent. Chapter 2 therefore reconstructs the theoretical genesis of this realist reduction of democracy and clarifies why, once this perspective is adopted, the dynamics commonly defined as populist do not turn out to be external deviations, but coherent — and largely predictable — consequences of contemporary mass democracy.

2.6 Kelsen and Schumpeter: two paradigms of democracy compared⁷²

The crisis that struck democracies between the 1920s and the 1940s brought to the fore the theme of the transformation of the parliamentary-elective system, put under pressure by the emergence of mass parties, by trade-union movements and by the profound economic and international reconfigurations of the post-First World War period. Against the background of these changes, and in the wake of the persistent anxieties aroused by the entry of the masses onto the political scene, a broad debate developed

⁷² The reconstruction that follows draws on Damiano Palano. *La Democrazia Senza Qualità: Le Promesse Non Mantenate Della Teoria Democratica*. mimes\ eterotopie ed., 2015, pp. 9–104., especially 63–76

on the very meaning of democracy, on its conditions of functioning and on its normative foundations. It is in this context that the opposition takes shape between the Kelsenian conception of democracy and the “realistic” revision proposed by Joseph Schumpeter: two perspectives that respond to the same problems, but provide very different diagnoses and solutions⁷³.

As Alfio Mastropaolo has shown and summarised, two opposing paradigms emerge from this comparison, based on divergent conceptions of the goals of a democratic regime and of the basic values it must have⁷⁴.

The first, traceable to Hans Kelsen’s writings on democracy, in particular to the contents expressed in *The Essence and Value of Democracy*, written in 1920, defines a democratic model built around representation, pluralism and compromise. The second paradigm, destined to prevail from the mid-twentieth century and to dominate the political science debate, takes shape in the pages of Schumpeter’s *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* and takes the form of a “post-democratic” theory, centred mainly on competition between elites for the popular vote⁷⁵.

For Kelsen, the starting point is the observation that direct self-government of the people is structurally impossible in modern societies. However, this observation does not lead to a minimalist reduction of democracy. Representative democracy and the majority principle are not to be understood as mere numerical mechanisms, but as ways of organising society into groups capable of integrating different interests. The majority principle is significant not because it assigns power to an arithmetical majority, but because it promotes the formation of political groups, fosters the inclusion of the different social fractions and makes possible the transformation of conflicts into compromise. For this reason, in the Kelsenian perspective, parties take on an essential role and the proportional system appears as the device best suited to guaranteeing pluralistic representation. Parliamentary practice thus becomes the place where divergent positions confront each other publicly and can converge towards shared solutions, reflecting the negotiated and conflictual nature of democracy. Although aware of the difficulties of democratic coexistence, Kelsen remains convinced that stable compromises between competing interests can be reached, and identifies precisely in this capacity one of the structural elements of post-Second World War democracy⁷⁶.

This vision is opposed by the Schumpeterian perspective, which constitutes the basis of realistic democracy. In his reconstruction, Schumpeter takes as his premise the arguments of the critics of mass democracy and proposes a radical redefinition of the concept of democracy, removing it from the traditional normative claims of popular self-government, extended participation and the promotion of social equality. To grasp the actual functioning of contemporary democracies, he introduces a sharp distinction between democracy as a method and democracy as an ideology. Democracy is, properly speaking, a political method: an institutional instrument for producing public decisions through competition for the popular vote⁷⁷. In this scheme, the role of the citizen is reduced to the periodic choice between competing leaderships; the voter is depicted as a political consumer without real influence on the definition of the public agenda. The result is a fully elitist vision of politics: “parties and party men”, Schumpeter argues, exist essentially because the electoral mass is incapable of acting autonomously,

73 Damiano Palano. *La Democrazia Senza Qualità: Le Promesse Non Mantenuite Della Teoria Democratica*. mimes\ eterotopie ed., 2015, p. 62

74 A.Mastropaolo, «Democrazia, postdemocrazia, neodemocrazia: tre paradigmi a confronto», in *Rivista di diritto pubblico comparato ed europeo*, vol. 4, 2001.

75 Democrazia e post democrazia, in *ragion pratica*, (1996) n.7, pp.39-58

76 Kelsen, Hans . *Essenza E Valore Della Democrazia*. 1929. Il Mulino ed., Bologna , 1981, pp. 94-144.

77 Schumpeter, Joseph Alois. *Capitalismo Socialismo E Democrazia*. Milan, Etas, 1994, p. 194-257

and political competition takes on the features of a regulated competition between leading groups.⁷⁸ A very similar reflection is reached, as we saw earlier, by Lippmann when he reflects on the American democratic path.

Born as a book of economic theory reflecting on the debate between capitalism, socialism and Marxism, Schumpeter's post-democratic paradigm would significantly influence the political and institutional evolution of the second half of the twentieth century, substantially shaping the political agenda and intertwining with a new way of understanding political coexistence and the role of leadership.

Its most explicit political legitimization is very well represented by the 1975 report of the Trilateral Commission, which offers a reading of the crisis of Western democracies very different from the one proposed by much of the contemporary literature. According to Mastropaolo, this analysis would go on to establish a genuine new orthodoxy⁷⁹. Without postulating a direct causal link, that report nonetheless helped to fix a vocabulary and a set of diagnoses destined to exercise significant influence. For Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki — writing in the middle of the 1970s, in a context marked by economic crises and political tensions — the difficulties of democracies derive not from a deficit of participation, but rather from its excess. The economic success of the post-war period, the expansion of the welfare state and the social mobility of large sections of the population had in fact fed growing and increasingly ungovernable expectations, exerting mounting pressure on political authority.

According to the three authors, the excess of democratic spirit risks eroding the very foundations of social cooperation and destabilising political systems⁸⁰. The remedies proposed – containing participation, reducing the media's power of intimidation, strengthening executives and the stability of leadership – would anticipate the policy lines followed in subsequent decades by many Western governments and, in fact, the transformations that have affected many democracies in recent years.

The weakening of mass parties, the "leaderisation" of political organisations, the growing distance between voters and institutions and the centrality of media-driven campaigns – first televisual, then digital – make up a political scenario increasingly consistent with Schumpeterian competitive democracy. Within this post-democratic paradigm, the marked personalisation of leadership that accompanies the decline of the twentieth-century mass party becomes an evolution aimed at establishing a more fiduciary relationship between leaders and their voters. Within this scenario, the degenerative tendencies commonly associated with the crisis of democracy and typically populist ones, such as political polarisation and leaders who appeal demagogically to the pure people, are not regarded as issues that undermine the democratic character of Western political regimes.

It is in this sense that I would like to turn the focus within the thesis: not judging whether these tendencies are negative or positive in themselves, nor what institutional or cultural solutions might "save" representative democracy; my aim is to show that, given the way democracy has evolved, with progressively stronger executives, an ever greater preference for leaders who stress decisiveness and increasingly polarised and fierce political campaigns, these processes are, in my view, destined to be persistent, central and common in the long run to most democracies of the twenty-first century.

⁷⁸ Damiano Palano. *La Democrazia Senza Qualità: Le Promesse Non Mantenuite Della Teoria Democratica*. mimes\ eterotopie ed., 2015, p. 72

⁷⁹ Crozier, Michel, and Samuel Huntington. *The Crisis Democracy REPORT on the GOVERNABILITY of DEMOCRACIES to the TRILATERAL COMMISSION*. 1973.

⁸⁰ Damiano Palano. *La Democrazia Senza Qualità: Le Promesse Non Mantenuite Della Teoria Democratica*. mimes\ eterotopie ed., 2015, pp.73.

2.7 Conclusion

The massive use of consultants, marketing techniques and communication tools accentuates the distance between citizens and parties, while the new media ecosystem fosters an increasingly direct, immediate and plebiscitary relationship between leaders and voters. As Pippa Norris shows⁸¹, the current communicative ecosystem favours a dealigned electorate and a more immediate relationship between citizen-consumers and increasingly distant political figures, precisely according to the Schumpeterian logic. The evolution of the political party and of political campaigns, as we shall see, has thus ended up fully realising the logic of democracy as competition between elites: a model that has gradually evolved by pushing into the background the aspect of democratic character and the emphasis on democratic ideals typical of the twentieth-century mass party, focusing purely on the choice of leadership⁸². Competitive democracy thus consolidates itself as the dominant paradigm, setting aside the utopias of direct participation.

In this framework populism does not appear as a threat external to democracy, but as the recurrent outcome of its realist realisation. Since the system assigns the central role to elites and makes the vote the main instrument of legitimation, many traits commonly defined as “populist”, namely personalisation, polarisation and simplification, are simply the result of competition between elites in a media environment that amplifies the constant search for consent.

⁸¹ Norris, Pippa. "Un circolo virtuoso? L'impatto di partiti e mezzi di informazione sulla partecipazione politica nelle campagne post-moderne." *Il circuito politico-mediale*. Ed. Angelo Mellone. Rubbettino editore, 2002.

⁸² Ibid., pp.75-76

Chapter 3 – The party: yesterday, today and tomorrow

This chapter takes the political party as the decisive theoretical juncture for answering the central question of the thesis: to what extent do the dynamics now traced back to populism constitute a rupture of representative democracy, or rather a coherent development of its internal transformations? While the previous chapter focused on the entry of the masses into the public space and on the fears aroused by democratisation, here the analysis concentrates on the main organisational device through which that transformation is institutionalised: party mediation. Investigating the transformation of the party therefore amounts to questioning the architecture of incentives that orients and disciplines the dynamics of democratic competition in its contemporary configurations.

The first part of the chapter reconstructs the critical genealogy of the party form through Ostrogorski, Michels and Weber. In these authors the party does not appear as a simple neutral instrument of the popular will, but as an organisation endowed with its own rationality, capable of producing structural effects: concentration of power, distance between leaders and the rank and file, personalisation of leadership. What matters here is not the normative denunciation of degenerations, but the identification of tensions internal to organised democracy. The fracture between elite and mass, the perception of an opaque mediation and the plebiscitary tendency as a response to bureaucratisation are not occasional anomalies, but possibilities inscribed in the party form itself. In this sense, the critical genealogy of the party provides the first element for understanding why the direct appeal to “the people” against the elites should not be thought of as a foreign body in democratic functioning.

The second part of the chapter shows how Schumpeter and Kelsen take the party no longer only as a problem, but as a constitutive element of modern democracy. The Schumpeterian competitive paradigm reduces legitimation to the selection of elites through electoral competition, shifting the axis from participation to performance. The Kelsenian model of the “*party state*”, by contrast, attributes to organised plurality the function of transforming social conflict into legitimate decision. The tension between these two paradigms, strategic competition and pluralistic mediation, runs through the whole twentieth century and constitutes the theoretical framework within which the subsequent transformations are to be read. The third part reconstructs the structural metamorphosis of the party in the second half of the twentieth century and in the twenty-first century. The progressive weakening of social rootedness, de-ideologisation, anti-authoritarian culture and permanent mediatisation do not produce the disappearance of the party, but its reconfiguration: less political community and more competitive machine; less social integration and more dependence on immediate consent; less organisational authority and more personalisation of leadership. It is in this shift that the temporal structure of democratic politics changes, orienting it towards the short term.

The central point of the thesis lies precisely here. The dynamics often described as “populist”, namely polarisation, simplification, the delegitimation of elites and intermediary bodies, and the direct appeal to the people, become intelligible not as pathological deviations, but as coherent outcomes of the incentives produced by the transformation of party mediation within competitive democracy. The chapter, therefore, does not aim to mourn the mass party or to denounce a generic crisis, but to show how the change in the party form has redefined the conditions of legitimation of democratic power, making structurally more likely those dynamics that constitute the empirical and theoretical object of the research: populism.

Before post-war political science theorised its functional centrality, the party form was the object of an eminently critical reflection. The analyses of Ostrogorski, Michels and Weber do not limit themselves to describing the organisation of mass parties, but identify their constitutive tensions: oligarchisation, bureaucratisation, personalisation of leadership. In each of these authors, the party emerges as a device indispensable to mass representative democracy and, at the same time, as the source of a structural distance between citizens and political decision.

This ambivalence is central to the present thesis. While populism is often interpreted as a pathological reaction, or one external to liberal democracy, the critical genealogies of the party form show instead that the elite/mass fracture, the direct appeal to the people and the delegitimation of organised media-tions are dynamics already inscribed in the functioning of organised democracy. Ostrogorski, Michels and Weber thus provide the theoretical premise for reading populism not as an anomaly, but as a possible internal outcome of the structural tensions generated by party mediation.

3.1.1 Ostrogorski: the party machine and representative distance

The first systematic reflections on the party form date back to Moisei Ostrogorski, an author who established himself as one of the severest critics of the oligarchic dynamics within modern parties. In his analyses, the party appears as a “machine” capable of reducing the individual to a role of powerlessness, disintermediating the relationship between voters and government, in effect emptying the promises of popular sovereignty and generating a new form of tyranny: an invisible power, exercised by an unprecedented caste concealed behind republican institutions⁸⁴.

In many passages, Ostrogorski’s diagnosis directly recalls the concerns of many authors already discussed in the previous chapter, among them Tocqueville, who had glimpsed in American democracy the risk of producing a new despotism. Like Tocqueville, Ostrogorski denounces the presence of a government monopolised by a class which, although it does not formally constitute a caste, operates as a group separated from the rest of society, often embodied by a single man supported by the apparatus and endowed with almost autocratic powers.⁸⁵

The central threat identified by Ostrogorski concerns the impact of such a party machine on the democratic quality of the system: its stable presence between the elected and the electors makes an authentic relationship of political accountability impossible. The elected representative no longer answers to the electorate, but exclusively to the organisational structure that guaranteed his rise⁸⁶. This representative gap tends to reproduce itself as a recurrent condition of mass democracy⁸⁷.

Investigating the situation in the United Kingdom from the Reform Act of 1867 onwards, the author observes the formation of parties that were no longer merely parliamentary, but endowed with territorial roots; in this context, Ostrogorski identifies the caucus as one of the main causes of the concentration of power in the hands of narrow leadership elites.

Turning his gaze to the United States, he notes how the extension of the suffrage in the 1830s and the spread of the spoils system produced mass parties strongly organised around professionals of poli-

⁸³ For an overview of the authors who have addressed the party form and its transformations see Damiano Palano, *La democrazia senza partiti*, Milan, Vita e Pensiero, 2015, and Id., *Partito*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2013, where the author reconstructs genealogically classical and twentieth-century reflection on the political party and its role in representative democracy.

⁸⁴ Damiano Palano. *La Democrazia Senza Partiti*. Vita e Pensiero, 2015, pp. 26–27.

⁸⁵ M.Y. Ostrogorski, *La democrazia e i partiti politici*, cit., p. 500.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 501.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 502.

tics⁸⁸. In them the role of the boss, a genuine political entrepreneur, becomes decisive: the rigid internal hierarchy and the dependence of activists on the political chief outline a model in which the individual is crushed by the power of the machine and deprived of any real influence over the selection of those who govern⁸⁹. While not calling for the elimination of parties, since he considered social complexity incompatible with such a hypothesis, Ostrogorski denounces the profound distortions that the organisational machine introduces into the democratic physiognomy of the political system.⁹⁰

From this perspective, Ostrogorski is central not only because he inaugurates a realistic critique of the internal dynamics of parties, but because he identifies a mechanism destined to re-emerge cyclically in representative democracies: the perception that an opaque and self-referential machine has interposed itself between citizens and political decision. The resulting elite/mass fracture does not yet constitute populism in the proper sense, but it helps to clarify why anti-establishment rhetorics can appear plausible and mobilising. They graft themselves onto an experience of representative distance produced internally by party organisation itself. In this sense, the denunciation of the “caste” should not be read as an anomaly external to competitive democracy, but as a discursive resource that can be activated when popular sovereignty is experienced as having been seized by an apparatus.

3.1.2 Robert Michels: the “iron law of oligarchy”

The critique of the relationship between parties and democracy is further deepened by Robert Michels in his classic of 1911. Unlike Ostrogorski, Michels focuses on the mass parties of continental Europe, in particular the socialist parties, asking whether democratic principles and political equality can be realised within them⁹¹. The author therefore performs an important function by inquiring not into pathological or contingent deviations, but into the structural logic that governs mass political organisation.

Analysing psychological dynamics, cultural differentials and organisational mechanisms, Michels formulates the famous “iron law of oligarchy”⁹²: in order to function, a party needs a stable and efficient organisation; but the construction of such a structure inevitably generates a closed and self-referential oligarchy, which tends to reproduce itself and to consolidate its own power.⁹³ The concentration of competences, the control of information and the professionalisation of leadership thus produce a distance between leaders and the rank and file. The organisation, born as a means of achieving political objectives, thus becomes an end, progressively altering the political line and leading to the abandonment of the original objectives. In the case of the socialist party, Michels identifies in the parliamentary drift and in doctrinal revisionism the direct effects of this ineluctable oligarchic logic⁹⁴. The collective will is progressively replaced by the rationality of organisational survival. Michels’s theory radicalises and systematises the intuition already present in Ostrogorski: the fracture between representatives and represented is not an occasional degeneration, but the necessary outcome of mass political organisation. From this perspective, anti-elite resentment and the denunciation of “oligarchy” should not be interpreted as irrational reactions or reactions external to representative democracy, but as predictable

⁸⁸ On the “Americanisation” of the party, to which we shall return in the final part of the chapter, see Francesco Tuccari, *Ritorno al futuro? La crisi dei partiti politici*, in “Storia del pensiero politico, Rivista quadrimestrale” 1/2014, with particular reference to pp. 148-150, doi: 10.4479/76479

⁸⁹ Antonio Floridia, *Martin Van Buren e l’invenzione del partito di massa*, in “Storia del pensiero politico, Rivista quadrimestrale” 2/2025, p. 275.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 606-607.

⁹¹ Palano, Damiano. *Partito*. Mulino ed., 2013, pp. 189-190.

⁹² For a more detailed discussion of the iron law of oligarchy see Francesco Tuccari, *Organizzate, oppresse e amorfe. Le masse nella «Sociologia del partito politico» di Robert Michels*, in “Filosofia politica, Rivista fondata da Nicola Matteucci” 1/2021, pp. 43-45, doi: 10.1416/100040

⁹³ R. Michels, *La sociologia del partito politico nella democrazia moderna* (1911), Bologna, Il Mulino, 1966, p. 532.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 533.

responses to a structural dynamic. When the distance between base and summit appears inevitable and permanent, the direct appeal to the people against organised elites becomes a powerful and recurrent discursive resource. Michels thus shows how part of the rhetorics today defined as populist are inscribed from the outset in the very functioning of mass parties.⁹⁵

3.1.3 Weber: bureaucracy, leadership, plebiscitarianism

With the end of the First World War, Max Weber observes that the era of parties of notables — characterised by restricted suffrage and the absence of permanent organisational structures — can be considered definitively over. The extension of the suffrage and the need for mass propaganda make inevitable the birth of professional political machines, increasingly oriented towards the conquest and management of consent.⁹⁶ Taking up some of Ostrogorski's intuitions, Weber stresses how the technical rationalisation of the electoral struggle has led all parties, in recent decades, towards bureaucratic forms of organisation, founded on the specialisation of functions, internal discipline and the professionalisation of political activity.

In *"Politics as a Vocation"*, Weber shows how party bureaucracy favours the emergence of forms of plebiscitary democracy, in which a charismatic leader exercises penetrating control over the mass through the organisational machine⁹⁷. The figure of the "plebiscitary dictator" who leads the party from above exemplifies this dynamic and shows how political competition tends to concentrate more and more on the figure of the leader⁹⁸.

However, Weber makes clear that the only alternative to an unbridled charismatic power is the rule of the clique, that is, the oligarchy identified by Michels. Indeed, bureaucratic rationalisation, while limiting personal arbitrariness, produces in turn a structural distance between leaders and the rank and file. Weberian theory thus brings out the structural — and profoundly modern — alternative between charismatic leadership and leaderless democracy, anticipating questions that would long mark the reflection on the political party.⁹⁹

Weber's analysis introduces a decisive step: the personalisation of leadership is not a contingent degeneration, but a functional response to the needs of mass democratic competition. When parties become complex and bureaucratised machines, the leader's charisma takes on the function of symbolically bridging the distance between organisation and electorate. In this framework, the direct relationship between the chief and what we mean by "the people" does not appear as a rupture of the democratic order, but as one of its structural outcomes. The plebiscitary dynamics described by Weber thus constitute a fundamental theoretical antecedent of contemporary forms of political legitimisation, in which the direct appeal to the people becomes a central resource of democratic competition.

Just as in the previous chapter the reflections of Tocqueville, Mill, Le Bon and Ortega y Gasset made it possible to reconstruct the theoretical prodromes of mass democracy, bringing to light the fears, risks and anxieties linked to the irruption of the masses into the public space, the analyses of Ostrogorski, Michels and Weber now allow us to shift our gaze inside its main actor. While in the second chapter attention was directed mainly at the transformation of the democratic subject, the mass-citizen and pub-

⁹⁵ R. Michels, *La democrazia e la legge ferrea dell'oligarchia, Potere e oligarchie*. Antologia 1900-1910, cit., pp. 493-523. Cf. *Sociologia* 1925, pp. 485-521.

⁹⁶ Palano, Damiano. *Partito*. Mulino ed., 2013, pp. 191-192.

⁹⁷ Max Weber, *La politica come professione*, in Id., *Il lavoro intellettuale come professione. La scienza come professione – La politica come professione*, Turin, Einaudi, 2004 (orig. 1919).

⁹⁸ For a precise reconstruction of the Weberian concept of charisma and its implications for the theory of political leadership, see Takis S. Pappas, *Il carisma politico*, «Rivista italiana di scienza politica / Italian Political Science Review», 3/2012, pp. 369-384.

⁹⁹ Weber, Max. *La Scienza Come Professione. La Politica Come Professione*. Giulio Einaudi Editore, 10 June 2014, pp. 86-92.

lic opinion, in this section the focus of the analysis is on the first and decisive organisational channel through which mass democracy takes shape: the political party.

The reflections of Ostrogorski, Michels and Weber constitute, despite their differences in method, historical context and theoretical orientation, a genuine critical genealogy of the party form in mass representative democracy. In all three authors, the party does not emerge as a neutral or transparent instrument of the popular will, but rather as an organisational device endowed with its own rationality, capable of introducing structural tensions into the relationship between citizens, elites and political decision.

Taken together, these analyses outline a coherent picture: the modern party arises as a functionally necessary response to the extension of the suffrage and the entry of the masses into political competition, but at the same time generates a series of fractures that are hard to heal, between participation and organisation, between base and elite, between institutional mediation and the immediacy of consent. These tensions do not represent pathological deviations or contingent failures, but structural effects of organised democracy.

It is precisely on this ground that, over the course of the twentieth century and even more in the twenty-first, anti-establishment rhetorics, direct appeals to the people and forms of plebiscitary legitimation take root. Far from being foreign elements or anomalies with respect to democratic functioning, these dynamics are intelligible as internal developments of the logics identified by Ostrogorski, Michels and Weber. In this sense, their analyses provide the indispensable theoretical premise for understanding both the realistic redefinition of democracy proposed by Schumpeter and the Kelsenian attempt to found the party state normatively, which will be examined in the following sections.

3.2 Party democracy between competition and pluralism

After the “genealogical” diagnoses of Ostrogorski, Michels and Weber, which bring into focus the structural tensions internal to the party form, Schumpeter and Kelsen allow a further analytical leap: they do not limit themselves to describing the organisational risks of the party in mass democracy, but place it at the centre of a comprehensive theory of representative democracy. In other words, while the first authors observe the party above all as a problem—a machine that separates voters from decision, that generates oligarchies and opens the way to plebiscitary legitimations—Schumpeter and Kelsen take it as a constitutive juncture of the modern democratic regime, elaborating two alternative paradigms of legitimation. The comparison between the two authors re-proposes, on different ground, a tension that had already emerged in the second chapter, where Schumpeter and Kelsen were central to the redefinition of the very concept of democracy. While there the fracture concerned the meaning of popular sovereignty and the relationship between decision and general will, here it is reconsidered in the light of their respective conceptions of the party. Their insights into the party form indeed make it possible to deepen and make concrete that theoretical divergence, showing how different models of democracy imply different ways of understanding political mediation and the function of party organisations.

With Schumpeter, the party becomes the functional infrastructure of competitive democracy: politics is interpreted as the selection of leadership through the vote and competition between offers, and party mediation is reduced to an instrument for winning and keeping consent. With Kelsen, by contrast, the party is the very condition of a democratic mediation that is not fictitious: since the people is not an organic unity, only organised plurality and the processual character of compromise make it possible to transform social conflict into legitimate decision¹⁰⁰.

¹⁰⁰Mersel Y. Hans Kelsen and Political Parties. *Israel Law Review*. 2006;39(2):158-181. doi:10.1017/S0021223700013054

For the present chapter, these two authors are central because they allow the twentieth-century metamorphosis of the party to be read not as a simple organisational “crisis”, but as a shift in the principle of legitimation: from the party as integrative mediator (long horizons, collective identities, compromise) to the party as competitive machine (short horizons, strategic adaptation, leaderisation). And it is precisely in this fracture— between the reduction of democracy to competition and the weakening of pluralistic mediations— that the thesis places the emergence of anti-elite rhetorics and direct appeals to “the people”: not as an external pathology, but as a coherent outcome of the incentives produced by competitive democracy and by the transformation of the party form.

3.2.1 Legitimation as competition: party and leadership in Schumpeter’s democratic theory

In the post-war period, the recognition of the role of parties is deeply intertwined with a broader rethinking of the very notion of democracy. This rethinking, although moving along sometimes divergent lines, converges in the construction of a “realistic” theory of democracy¹⁰¹. As shown in the previous chapter, the Schumpeterian definition of democracy as a method for selecting elites exerted a decisive influence on the subsequent political science debate; above all, it helped to place parties at the centre of democratic dynamics, giving them a centrality that can hardly be avoided in the actual functioning of mass representative regimes¹⁰².

If one wants to grasp fully the scope of the Schumpeterian redefinition of democracy, one must insist on a point that is often underestimated: his theory is not only a theory of competition, but first and foremost a theory of leadership. The free vote of citizens does not express a presumed “general will” – which Schumpeter considers a fictitious construct – but the acceptance of a guide. The electoral act does not create a government in the sense of a substantive collective decision, but selects a leading man, giving him the authority necessary to dominate his own party and, where appropriate, Parliament. In this configuration, the relationship between leader, party and voters constitutes «the essence of the democratic method»: democracy is competition for leadership.¹⁰³

Understanding this approach means asking about the nature of such competition. Schumpeter’s language is traversed by a constellation of military metaphors: politics is likened to war, parties are armies, the leader is a commander. However, stopping at the agonistic metaphor would be reductive. Even more decisive is the parallel that Schumpeter draws between political leadership and economic entrepreneurship. Parties are not ideological communities, but organisations operating in a political market; leaders do not merely respond to pre-formed demands, but actively help to construct them. Collective interests, even when they exist in latent form, do not emerge spontaneously: it is up to the leader and his agents to organise them, select them, shape them and include them in their competitive offer. In this sense, the analogy with the market is profound: just as the entrepreneur innovates and creates new needs, so the political leader structures and orients the preferences of the electorate.

The voter, therefore, does not select in the strong sense of the term; he merely accepts or rejects a candidacy already defined within organisational structures that filter and preselect the available options. The initiative belongs solely to the politicians, not to the mass. Parties themselves are organisational responses to the incapacity for widespread collective action: they regulate competition as trade associations regulate the market, setting rules, coordinating resources, managing competition. In an unstable and highly variable political environment – typical of mass democracies – figures akin to entrepreneurs

¹⁰¹ D. Argeri, *La teoria della democrazia nel pensiero di J.A. Schumpeter*, Naples, ESI, 1988, p. 92.

¹⁰² Damiano Palano. *La Democrazia Senza Qualità: Le Promesse Non Mantenate Della Teoria Democratica*. mimes\ eterotopie ed., 2015, pp.73.

¹⁰³ Giovanni Damele, *Il leader in Joseph Schumpeter: condottiero o venditore?*, in “Quaderni di scienza politica” 2-3/2020, p. 312., doi: 10.48271/99537

or even speculators thrive, capable of “speculating” on the fluctuations of public opinion and of turning contingencies into opportunities for power.¹⁰⁴

This entrepreneurial dimension makes it possible to read the centrality of the party in Schumpeterian theory in a more nuanced way. The party can function as a firm that invests in innovative leaderships, exploits positional rents, coordinates resources and capitalises on consent. Its function is not to integrate society stably into the state – as in the Kelsenian model – but to compete effectively for control of the levers of decision. From this perspective, democratic legitimation derives not from the quality of mediation, but from the regularity of competition.¹⁰⁵

And it is precisely here that Schumpeter’s relevance to the present thesis becomes evident. If politics is competition for leadership in a market of opinions, if leaders construct and orient preferences, if legitimation is reduced to the periodic acceptance of a guide, then the dynamics of personalisation, simplification of conflict, polarisation and direct appeal to “the people” do not constitute pathological deviations. They appear, rather, as strategies consistent with a model in which political success depends on the entrepreneurial capacity to organise consent in an unstable competitive environment. So-called populism can thus be interpreted not as a negation of Schumpeterian democracy, but as one of its possible intensifications, above all when competition takes place in contexts marked by electoral volatility and the weakening of traditional organisational mediations.

The Schumpeterian proposal thus becomes an unavoidable point of reference for the contemporary theorisation of electoral democracy. It makes it possible to understand why, in political modernity, the democratic quality of a system no longer depends on the original participatory ideal, but on the capacity of parties to give shape to a regulated, stable and periodic competition. And it is precisely this centrality of party competition – and not of direct participation – that constitutes the most lasting legacy of Schumpeterian theory in the European political science debate of the post-war period.¹⁰⁶

With Schumpeter, the theoretical path begun by Ostrogorski, Michels and Weber finds a systematic formulation: the distance between elites and citizens, the personalisation of leadership and the reduction of participation to the electoral moment are no longer read as pathologies, but as constitutive elements of democratic functioning. In this framework, the rhetorics that oppose “the people” to political elites do not appear as a rupture of the democratic model, but as strategies fully compatible with competitive democracy. When legitimation is played out entirely in the competition for votes, the direct appeal to the people, the simplification of conflict and polarisation become rational instruments of political struggle. So-called populism thus emerges not as a negation of democracy, but as one of the forms through which it is realised in its realist paradigm.

3.2.2 Kelsen: the party as the condition of the democratic will

If Schumpeter redefines democracy as competition for leadership, Hans Kelsen represents the most coherent attempt to found the party normatively as a constitutive condition of representative democracy. Kelsen’s starting point is as realistic as Schumpeter’s: the people is not an organic unity, but a heterogeneous set of individuals bearing divergent interests. However, while in Schumpeter this observation leads to reducing democracy to a method for selecting elites, in Kelsen it opens up the problem of mediation.

For Kelsen, the general will does not pre-exist the political process, but is formed through it. It is not the immediate expression of a homogeneous collective subject, but the procedural result of the con-

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 315–316.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 326–327.

¹⁰⁶Palano, Damiano. *Partito*. Mulino ed., 2013, p. 211.

frontation between partial wills. It is within this framework that the party takes on a decisive role: not as a competitive machine, but as the organised form through which segments of society transform interests and orientations into articulated political proposals¹⁰⁷.

The party is not an accidental element of democracy, but one of its constitutive organs. It acts as a bridge between society and the state, guiding the process of forming the political will that finds its formalisation in Parliament. Far from being a distortion of popular unity, party pluralism represents the only realistic alternative to the fiction of an undivided people. Where there are no parties, or where they are delegitimised in the name of the unity of the people, no more authentic general will emerges, but rather the uncontested dominion of a single part that presents itself as the whole¹⁰⁸.

In this sense, Kelsen offers an anticipatory theoretical response to anti-party rhetorics: the idea that parties betray the people presupposes an organic and pre-political conception of popular unity that modern democracy cannot sustain. Only organised and institutionalised conflict between parties makes it possible to transform social pluralism into legitimate decision. The general will is not a given, but a procedural resultant of compromise¹⁰⁹.

Here the structural difference with respect to Schumpeter emerges. For the latter, parties are instruments functional to the competition for leadership; their integrative function is secondary to the selection of the chief. In Kelsen, by contrast, the primary function of the party is the substantive mediation of conflict: without parties capable of organising interests and negotiating compromises, democracy loses its pluralistic foundation. While in Schumpeter legitimation derives from the regularity of competition, in Kelsen it depends on the quality of the process of will formation through organised pluralism.

This divergence is central to the present thesis. The Kelsenian model finds its historical expression in the party state of the post-war period, when the great political organisations stably integrated society and institutions. However, precisely the centrality attributed to the party as exclusive mediator makes the model vulnerable to subsequent transformations. When parties lose social rootedness, become de-ideologised and turn into electoral machines or agencies absorbed into the state, the mediating function that Kelsen regarded as the condition of the general will tends to weaken¹¹⁰.

In this gap between theory and historical transformation, a decisive analytical space opens up for understanding contemporary dynamics. If the party is no longer able to carry out effective mediation, the promise of procedural pluralism may appear empty; the direct appeal to "the people" against party elites then becomes intelligible as a reaction to a perceived crisis of mediation, not as an abstract rejection of democracy. From this perspective, the rhetorics today defined as populist do not simply stand outside the Kelsenian model, but emerge at the moment when the social and organisational conditions that made it operative fall away.

The comparison between Schumpeter and Kelsen thus makes it possible to clarify the fracture that runs through the entire twentieth-century trajectory of the party. On the one hand, the competitive paradigm, in which the party is the infrastructure of leadership; on the other, the pluralistic paradigm, in which the party is the condition of the democratic will. The progressive affirmation of the former and the historical weakening of the latter constitute one of the structural premises through which the transformation of the party helps to make plausible dynamics of personalisation, polarisation and direct ap-

¹⁰⁷ *La politica e gli Stati*, a cura di Raffaella Gherardi, Nuova edizione, Rome, Carocci Editore, year of publication, pp. 359–364 (contribution by Giorgio Bongiovanni on Kelsen).

¹⁰⁸ Palano, Damiano. *Partito*. Mulino ed., 2013, pp. 212–213.

¹⁰⁹ Kelsen, Hans. *Essenza E Valore Della Democrazia*. 2004.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 64

peal to the people. Not as an external rupture of the democratic order, but as an internal development of its forms of legitimation.

3.3 Structural changes of the party in the second half of the twentieth century: from society to the state

The comparison between Schumpeter and Kelsen has shown two alternative ways of legitimating representative democracy: as competition for leadership or as pluralistic mediation of social conflict. To understand which of these paradigms has progressively oriented Western democracies, it is now necessary to shift the analysis from the theoretical to the morphological level, examining the concrete transformations of the party form in the second half of the twentieth century.

The reconstruction that follows does not have a merely descriptive purpose. The transition from the mass party to the catch-all party, and then to the professional-electoral party and the cartel party, signals a shift in the principle of legitimation: from social integration to competition for consent. When territorial rootedness and ideological identification weaken, the party tends to turn into an organisation oriented towards strategic adaptation and institutional management.

It is in this change that the thesis places the emergence of the dynamics today defined as populist. Personalisation, polarisation and the direct appeal to “the people” are to be understood not as external ruptures, but as coherent developments of a party form increasingly centred on competition and less on mediation.

3.3.1 The mass party as the historical realisation of mediation

If Kelsen provides the theoretical-constitutional legitimation of the party state and Schumpeter proposes its functional reduction to a competitive machine, post-war political science describes the historical moment in which these two paradigms are embodied and, progressively, separate. The organisational evolution of the party in the second half of the twentieth century does not in fact represent only a structural transformation, but a change in the principle of legitimation of representative democracy.

In the 1950s, Maurice Duverger’s analysis identifies the mass party as the dominant organisational form of political modernity. Strongly structured, widely spread across the territory and supported by a professional leadership, it appears as the moment of maximum institutionalisation of democratic mediation in the twentieth century¹¹¹. The mass party is not, in Duverger’s reading, a normative ideal, but the historical outcome of societies still traversed by relatively stable collective affiliations. Its central function is not only to compete, but to integrate: to organise interests, to socialise politically, to build lasting identities. In this sense, it represents the realisation closest to the Kelsenian model of organised pluralism, in which the general will emerges from the confrontation and compromise between structured collective subjects¹¹².

However, precisely the historically situated character of this party form reveals its fragility. When the social conditions that sustained its integrative function fall away, the model of pluralistic mediation also comes under strain.

The turning point is grasped by Otto Kirchheimer in 1966. The catch-all party does not simply represent a degeneration of the mass party, but signals a deeper change in the logic of democratic competition.

¹¹¹ Damiano Palano. *La Democrazia Senza Partiti*. Vita e Pensiero, 2015, p. 32.

¹¹² Duverger M. (1961), *I partiti politici*, Comunità, Milan (orig. ed. 1951)

The weakening of ideological affiliations and the increase in social complexity push the party to orient itself more and more towards maximising electoral consent in the short term¹¹³.

The function of integration is progressively replaced by a function of strategic adaptation: the party no longer forms stable identities, but intercepts variable preferences. The central leadership is strengthened, the role of the activist is reduced, communication takes on growing weight. In this shift, the Kelsenian paradigm of mediation progressively gives way to the Schumpeterian paradigm of competition for leadership¹¹⁴. This is not yet a rupture, but an internal reconfiguration: the party remains central, but its dominant rationality changes.

Subsequently, from the 1970s onwards, the decline of activism and the spread of the media — in particular television — accelerate this transformation. As Angelo Panebianco shows, the professional-electoral party fights mainly to obtain public office, entrusting its survival to communication techniques and the analysis of public opinion¹¹⁵. The organisation no longer socialises politically, but translates signals coming from the electorate into simplified offers¹¹⁶.

In parallel, Katz and Mair bring to light a second decisive process: the progressive penetration of the party into the state. While in the phase of mass parties society and state appeared distinct, from the 1980s onwards parties detach themselves from their social roots and become increasingly integrated into public institutions¹¹⁷. State funding, the management of administrative resources and oligopolistic cooperation between the main political forces produce the configuration of the cartel party.

The result is paradoxical: while parties lose social strength, they increase their institutional power. Mediation does not disappear, but is emptied of its integrative dimension. The party becomes less and less a bridge between society and the state and more and more an agency for managing competition and public resources¹¹⁸.

3.3.2 Implications for the thesis: from pluralism to immediate consent

In this trajectory — from the mass party to the catch-all party, from the professional-electoral party to the cartel party — what we witness is not simply an organisational “crisis”, but a shift in the principle of democratic legitimation.

In the Kelsenian model, legitimacy derives from the capacity of parties to organise pluralism and to transform conflict into compromise. In the paradigm that progressively takes hold, legitimacy is concentrated more and more on effective competition for consent. When the integrative function weakens and competition becomes permanent and mediatised, politics tends to “shorten” its time horizons.

It is in this context that the structural space opens up for dynamics of personalisation, simplification of conflict and direct appeal to the electorate. What in public debate is described as a “populist crisis” can be read, in the light of this transformation, not as an external or pathological factor, but as the coherent outcome of a system in which the party has progressively internalised the Schumpeterian logic of competition for leadership, while weakening the pluralistic mediations that had tempered its effects.

113 O., Kirchheimer. *La Trasformazione Dei Sistemi Partitici Dell'Europa Occidentale*. Bologna, Il Mulino, 1979, pp. 243–267.

114 Whiteley, Paul F. “Is the Party Over? The Decline of Party Activism and Membership across the Democratic World.” *Party Politics*, vol. 17, no. 1, 11 June 2011, pp. 21–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068810365505>.

115 Panebianco, Angelo. *Modelli Di Partito. Organizzazione E Potere Nei Partiti Politici*. Bologna, Il Mulino, 2025.

116 A. Mastropaolo. “Donde Vengono E Dove Se Ne Stanno Andando I Partiti Politici? - Carocci Editore.” *Carocci Editore*, 4 July 2022, www.carocci.it/prodotto/dondevengono-e-dove-se-ne-stanno-andando-i-partiti-politici-di-alfio-mastropaolo- pp.37-55.

117 Bardi, Luciano. *Partiti E Sistemi Di Partito : Il Cartel Party E Oltre*. Bologna, Il Mulino, 2006, pp. 33–58.

118 Raniolo, Francesco. “MITI E REALTÀ DEL CARTEL PARTY. LE TRASFORMAZIONI DEI PARTITI ALLA FINE DEL VENTESIMO SECOLO.” *Italian Political Science Review / Rivista Italiana Di Scienza Politica*, vol.30, no. 3, Dec. 2000, pp. 553–582,

The metamorphosis of the party in the second half of the twentieth century does not therefore mark the end of representative democracy, but the redefinition of its incentives. And it is precisely in this redefinition — rather than in a sudden deviation — that the present thesis places the emergence of the anti-elite and plebiscitary rhetorics characteristic of the contemporary phase.

3.4 The transformation of the party in twenty-first-century democracy

The reconstruction carried out so far has shown how the political party was, over the course of the twentieth century, at once a problem and a foundation of representative democracy: on the one hand an inevitable device of mass organisation, on the other a place where tensions are concentrated between elites and citizens, between mediation and decision, between pluralism and leadership. The comparison between Schumpeter and Kelsen has made it possible to clarify that these tensions do not concern only the organisational structure of parties, but the very principle of democratic legitimation: competition for leadership or pluralistic mediation of conflict.

The subsequent historical phase has shown how the mass party represented a contingent equilibrium between these two logics, an equilibrium progressively eroded by de-ideologisation, mediatisation and the growing integration of parties into the state. It is in this passage that the decisive theoretical knot of the thesis lies: understanding whether the dynamics today labelled “populist” constitute a pathological rupture of the democratic order or the coherent outcome of the transformation of the party form and of the incentives of competitive democracy.

The concluding section of the chapter therefore takes as its object not the “crisis” of the party in a nostalgic sense, but the structural redefinition of its functions in the twenty-first century. The hypothesis guiding the analysis is that the combination of weakened social mediation, centralised leadership and permanent competition has shortened the time horizons of political action, making simplification of conflict, polarisation and the direct appeal to “the people” structurally more likely. From this perspective, populism is not taken as an external factor, but as a possibility internal to a democratic model in which the party, transformed into a competitive machine and a state-absorbed actor, operates in a continuous and highly volatile communicative environment.

3.4.1 A critique of the diagnosis of party crisis

In the concluding part of this chapter it is first necessary to carry out an operation of conceptual clarification. Public debate and a substantial part of the literature tend indeed to read the transformations of the contemporary party through the suggestive but ambiguous category of “crisis”. This diagnosis is often based on an implicit comparison with the mass party of the post-war period, taken as the normative model of reference¹¹⁹. This comparison, however, is largely misleading. To speak of a crisis of the party in fact presupposes an idea of a good or “realised” party, generally identified with the organisational form that characterised the European experience of the three post-war decades: a strongly ideologised, socially rooted party, endowed with a pedagogical function and capable of mediating stably between society and the state.¹²⁰ As several authors have observed, among them Hans Daalder, the recurrent use of the rhetoric of crisis risks concealing real transformations beneath implicit normative judgements, diverting the analysis from an understanding of the new operational logics of the party form. Asking whether the party is “in crisis” is therefore not the same as asking about the state of health of a specific party organisation in a given political system. More radically, it means asking

¹¹⁹ Piero Ignazi, *La sfida impossibile. I partiti di fronte alla crisi di legittimazione*, in “Ragion pratica, Rivista semestrale” 1/2021, pp. 48-51, doi: 10.1415/100813

¹²⁰ Damiano Palano, *la democrazia senza partiti. Vita e Pensiero*, 2015, pp. 72-73.

whether the party form, as such, is going through a phase of irreversible obsolescence or a structural transformation. From this perspective, crisis should be understood not as decline, but as a change in functions, resources and mechanisms of legitimation.¹²¹

3.4.2 The misunderstanding of the model of reference

As Tuccari analyses, many contemporary diagnoses share two problematic assumptions. First, they tend to identify the decline of the twentieth-century mass party, largely of socialist or communist inspiration, with the decline of the party tout court. Second, they systematically underestimate another party tradition, the American one, founded on the model of the party machine oriented almost exclusively towards electoral competition.¹²²

If this interpretive key is adopted, what is often interpreted as a crisis of the European party appears rather as a process of "Americanisation" of the party systems of the Old Continent. A process, moreover, that reproduces dynamics already observed by Ostrogorski more than a century ago in the American context: centralisation of power, weakness of associational roots, subordination of ideology to the needs of competition.

The transformations under way, therefore, do not signal the disappearance of the party, but the reconfiguration of an organisational form that remains anything but marginal in contemporary democratic systems.¹²³

3.4.3 From social decline to institutional strengthening

A further element that invites us to problematise the diagnosis of crisis concerns the asymmetrical distribution of party strength. From the 1970s onwards, numerous observers have shown how the decline of the party on the ground — the party as a community of members and activists — has been amply offset by the strengthening of the other two organisational faces: the party in central office and the party in public office.¹²⁴ While social and territorial rootedness has weakened, the integration of parties into state institutions has instead intensified. Through public funding, the occupation of institutional posts and the control of administrative resources, contemporary parties have acquired an unprecedented capacity for intervention and financial stability. As Katz and Mair show, the cartelisation of party systems produces the paradox whereby organisations that are less and less socially legitimated are at the same time more and more powerful at the institutional level¹²⁵.

In this sense, we are not facing weak parties, but parties that are strong in a different way: less rooted in society, but more deeply integrated into the state, and therefore more exposed to logics of legitimation founded on immediate results. The metamorphosis is real, but it does not coincide with a terminal crisis of the party form.¹²⁶

3.4.4 Competitive democracy, short-termism and consensus-seeking policies

Having established these elements, the decisive point is not simply to observe that the contemporary party is more exposed to the logic of the short term, but to understand why this happens. In my view,

¹²¹ Daalder, H. (1992), A Crisis of Party?. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 15: 269-288.

¹²² Tuccari F. (2014), *Ritorno al futuro? La crisi dei partiti politici. Storia del pensiero politico* -1, pp.133-150.

¹²³ Damiano Palano. *La Democrazia Senza Partiti*. Vita e Pensiero, 2015, p. 74.

¹²⁴ Ibid., pp.75-76.

¹²⁵ Katz, R., Mair, P. (1995), Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy, The Emergence of the Cartel Party, in «Party Politics», 1, 1, pp. 5-28.

¹²⁶ Katz, Richard S., and Peter Mair. "The Evolution of Party Organizations in Europe: The Three Faces of Party Organization." *American Review of Politics*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1 Jan. 1994, p. 593, <https://doi.org/10.15763/issn.2374-7781.1993.14.0.593-617>.

the most radical change consists not only in organisational transformation or in the mediatisation of politics, but in the combination of two deeply intertwined processes: de-ideologisation and the anti-authoritarian culture that took hold from the 1960s onwards.

In the twentieth-century model, intense ideological identification and the strong hierarchical structuring of organisations guaranteed leaderships a relatively wide margin of autonomy. The mass party was not only an electoral machine, but a political community endowed with a shared horizon of meaning¹²⁷. Membership was not founded exclusively on utilitarian calculation, but on lasting affiliations that made it possible to sustain decisions that were unpopular in the short term. The far-sighted choices made by De Gasperi, Adenauer or De Gaulle are intelligible precisely in the light of this arrangement: a party capable of “holding” over time because it was supported by a strong collective identity and by an organisational discipline recognised as legitimate¹²⁸.

The cycle of mobilisation of the 1960s and 1970s cracked both these foundations. On the one hand, progressive de-ideologisation weakened the grand narratives capable of structuring political identification; on the other, the anti-authoritarian critique delegitimised the very principle of hierarchy, centralism and internal discipline¹²⁹. The twentieth-century party, conceived as a “modern prince” capable of educating and orienting society, was struck by a contestation that called into question its symbolic authority even before its organisational efficiency.

The result, however, was not a substantive democratisation of internal party life. The dissolution of intermediate structures and the weakening of activism did not produce a more autonomous and deliberative base, but a broader and less organised audience, directly connected to the top through the media. A paradoxical configuration thus took hold: less ideology and less organisational authority, but more personalisation and greater dependence on immediate consent. In the absence of stable affiliations and recognised mechanisms of discipline, the leader’s legitimisation can only rest on a continuous verification of consent.

It is in this combination of de-ideologisation and anti-authoritarian culture that the tendency towards short-termism is rooted. When collective identity weakens and hierarchical authority loses legitimacy, political survival depends more and more on the capacity to intercept volatile preferences and to adapt rapidly to the moods of the electorate. Policies oriented towards immediate consent – often labelled “populist” – do not therefore represent a moral deviation or an external pathology, but the coherent outcome of a system in which the cultural and organisational conditions that made it possible to sustain long-term decisions against the tide have fallen away.

3.4.5 Conclusion. Populism as an internal outcome of the transformation of parties

In the light of what has emerged, it therefore appears problematic to interpret the transformations of the contemporary party in terms of a crisis of democracy or of a degeneration attributable to the irruption of populism. Competitive democracy continues to function according to its own fundamen-

¹²⁷ With reference to Antonio Gramsci’s conception of the party as «educator» and «collective intellectual», understood as a central subject in the formation of cultural and political hegemony. Cf. A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, critical edition ed. V. Gerratana, Turin, Einaudi, 1975;

¹²⁸ Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, New York, Penguin Press, 2005 (on the political climate of the post-war period and on the renewed centrality of mass parties as instruments of democratic reconstruction and social integration).

¹²⁹ On the anti-authoritarian significance of the cycles of mobilisation of the 1960s and 1970s, cf. Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement. Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994. On the link between anti-authoritarianism and its impact on the twentieth-century party form, cf. Damiano Palano, *Il partito del mulino*, Rome, Carocci, 2013, series «Il lessico della politica», pp. 226–227.

tal rules; what changes are the incentives, the social conditions and the communicative environment within which it operates.¹³⁰

The party has not disappeared, nor is it destined to do so. On the contrary, it stably occupies the centre of the political stage, integrated into state institutions and endowed with unprecedented resources.¹³¹ However, this centrality is accompanied by a loss of capacity for social mediation and by a growing dependence on immediate consent. The “crisis” of the party, if one wishes to call it that, concerns not its existence, but the quality of the policies it is incentivised to produce.

In this sense, the problem is not whether it is possible to return to the mass party of the post-war period — a historically unrealistic hypothesis — but whether and how mechanisms can be rebuilt that are capable of reintroducing longer time horizons into democratic competition without presupposing a return to organisational forms that are historically exhausted.

The transformation of the party reflects an irreversible historical condition, linked to the democratisation of access to information, to communicative disintermediation and to the end of the great ideological affiliations.

Twenty-first-century democracy, therefore, is not in crisis because it produces short-term policies; rather, it produces short-term policies because the way in which political competition is structured and legitimated has changed. Understanding this dynamic means shifting the analysis from nostalgia for the organisational forms of the past to reflection on the concrete conditions that shape the functioning of contemporary democracies. It is on this ground — that of structural incentives, forms of competition and devices of legitimation that it becomes possible to question critically the future of representative democracy, without resorting to moralising or nostalgic categories. Finally, it is in this sense that anti-elite and plebiscitary rhetorics do not require the hypothesis of a ‘foreign body’ called populism: they are compatible with the incentives of competitive democracy and with the transformation of its mediations.

¹³⁰On the changes in contemporary public debate and their impact on the forms of political representation, on party competition and on the functioning of democracy, cf. Mark Thompson, *La fine del dibattito pubblico. Come la retorica sta distruggendo la lingua della democrazia*, Italian trans. by G. Carlotti, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2017.

¹³¹Damiano Palano. *La Democrazia Senza Partiti*. Vita e Pensiero, 2015, p. 76

4. Conclusion

This thesis has advanced a strong and counter-intuitive hypothesis with respect to the dominant vocabulary of public debate: what is today named populism does not designate, in the first place, an external pathology of representative democracy, nor an accident that interrupts a presumed “normal” course of liberal politics. Rather, it signals a recurrent mode of functioning of democracy when democracy is understood and practised according to the competitive paradigm, and when the forms of mediation that made pluralistic compromise and a long-term horizon sustainable change (or weaken). While populism is often described as a negation of democracy, the overall argument developed here relocates it as an internal outcome of competitive democracy: not the “other” of democracy, but one of its structural possibilities, which becomes more likely and more visible in an emotional media ecosystem and in a historical phase marked by disintermediation, short-termism¹³² and leaderisation.

The conclusion does not therefore aim to go back over the results of the chapters by way of a summary, but to make explicit the demonstrative link that runs through them: (i) the conceptual instability of populism is not a contingent defect of the literature, but the symptom of the fact that it names a cluster of adaptive practices and rhetorics; (ii) these practices are intelligible in the light of the transformation of mass democracy towards a competitive realism, which reduces legitimation to the periodic selection of leadership; (iii) the metamorphosis of the party form and the evolution of the communicative ecosystem make these practices not only available, but often rational, rewarding and even inevitable as effective strategies of competition; (iv) in this framework, the decisive political problem is not to “eradicate” populism (a category too mobile to serve as an analytical target), but to understand how to reintroduce intertemporal constraints and credible mediations into a system that structurally tends towards the short term. This is where the final step lies: the decisive function of elites—not as a counter-people, but as a factor capable of innovating languages, selecting possibilities, building institutions and introducing long-term horizons into an environment that incentivises immediacy.

1. From the “shoe” to the mechanism: why the instability of populism is a clue, not an obstacle

The starting point of the thesis—the definitional difficulty of populism—should not be treated as a merely methodological premise. “Semantic inflation” and the “Cinderella complex” are not accidents that can be remedied with a finer definition; they indicate that the concept tends to function as a retrospective label, often a polemical one, applied to different phenomena that share a family of resemblances: moralisation of conflict, people/elite antagonism, the promise of disintermediation, dichotomous simplification, personalisation.

This instability becomes theoretically productive if it is interpreted as a signal: populism names a set of discursive and organisational resources that can be activated in various configurations. In other words, if populism escapes ideological capture (it has no canonical doctrinal corpus, it does not coincide with a stable family of programmes), this happens because it is less an “ism” and more a register of legitimation that operates within a democracy that has already made the appeal to immediate consent central. The point is not to deny the difference between movements and leaders classified as populist, but to

¹³² Improta, M., & Mannoni, E. (2024). Government short-termism and the management of global challenges. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 27(2), 612-627.

recognise that the label tends to condense dynamics that belong to modern democracy, above all when it is traversed by crises of mediation and by transformations of the devices of representation¹³³.

A first concluding thesis follows: populism cannot be taken as the primary explanatory cause of the democratic “crisis”, because it is often the named effect of deeper processes. The concept—precisely because it is mobile—can be interpreted as an index of structural transformations: when it appears everywhere, it is plausible that it is registering a mutation in the form of competition and legitimation. In this sense, the conceptual genealogy of the first chapter does not prepare a “better” definition, but shifts the ground: from the taxonomy of actors to the reconstruction of the mechanisms that make certain rhetorics and certain strategies likely.

2. Democratic realism as matrix: from the general will to the selection of leadership

The second chapter showed that the turning point is not populism, but the transformation of mass democracy and of its self-understanding. The diagnoses of Tocqueville and Mill, then the more radical ones of Le Bon and Ortega, bring into focus a constitutive tension: the entry of the masses simultaneously produces an extension of political equality and new fragilities (conformism, majoritarian pressure, emotional vulnerability, attraction to leadership). Lippmann takes a further leap: the question is not only moral or psychological, but cognitive. The “great society” exceeds individual capacities of knowledge; public opinion is formed through images, mediations, simplifications. This framework prepares the fundamental assumption of democratic realism: we cannot go on thinking of democracy as the informed self-government of a competent demos. It is here that the comparison between Kelsen and Schumpeter takes on the value that the conclusion must fix definitively. Kelsen accepts the non-organic character of the people but turns it into an argument in favour of mediation: organised pluralism, proportional representation, compromise as the form of legitimacy. Schumpeter accepts the same premise but draws the opposite conclusion from it: democracy is a competitive method for selecting leadership; the citizen is mainly a voter; the general will is a fiction; politics is competition between offers. These are not two terminological variants, but two incompatible criteria of legitimation: in Kelsen legitimacy depends on the procedural quality of will formation (compromise and pluralism), in Schumpeter on the regularity of the competition for command.

The decisive point, for the thesis, is that many traits commonly attributed to populism are consistent with the Schumpeterian paradigm, not with its negation. If democracy is the competitive selection of leadership, then the simplification of conflict, the direct appeal, personalisation and polarisation do not appear as accidental deviations: they are rational strategies for winning consent in a competitive environment. In this framework, what public discourse calls “populism” tends to coincide with the radicalisation of elements already present in the realist paradigm. Populism does not break the assumption that “the people decides”, because that people—in the competitive model—decides above all by selecting; and it selects through signals, narratives, identifications.

This conclusion requires a reformulation: the problem is not that populism reintroduces the mass into politics by breaking liberal mediation; it is that competitive democracy, by reducing legitimacy to electoral performance, makes the mass-leader relationship the fulcrum of politics¹³⁴. Anti-elitism can coexist with the centrality of elites because it operates at the symbolic level: it does not eliminate the elite, it replaces it, and legitimates it as “authentic” against a “corrupt” elite. Populism, from this perspective, is

¹³³Bilancia, Paola. *Crisi Della Rappresentanza Politica Nella Democrazia Contemporanea*. 2018.

¹³⁴“The Leader as Catalyst: On Mass Movements and the Mechanics of Institutional Change.” *Warwick.ac.uk*, 2025, warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/research/centres/cage/publications-backup-ce/workingpapers/2010/the_leader_as_catalyst_on_mass_movements_and_the_mechanics_of_institutional_change/

not anti-elitism in the sociological sense; it is often a struggle between elites over the definition of the people and its enemies.

3. The party form as hinge: from integrative mediation to competitive machine

The third chapter provided the empirical and morphological ground that makes it possible to anchor the thesis to a concrete institutional transformation: the metamorphosis of the party form. The critical genealogy (Ostrogorski, Michels, Weber) shows that the fracture between base and summit, bureaucratisation, personalisation and the plebiscitary risk are not contemporary inventions: they are inscribed in the party form as a mass organisation. Ostrogorski sees the party machine as a device that interposes an opaque apparatus between voters and decision; Michels systematises the oligarchic dynamic; Weber anticipates the function of the charismatic leader as a response to bureaucratic rationalisation and as a possible plebiscitary outcome. What the conclusion must retain is not the accusation, but the structure: an organised democracy produces tensions that make an appeal against organisation itself plausible.

Schumpeter and Kelsen take up these problems and raise them to the level of a comprehensive theory. The thesis has insisted on this passage because it makes it possible to interpret the transformation of the party not as a simple “crisis”, but as a shift in the principle of legitimation. At the historical moment in which the mass party realises, at least partially, integrative mediation (collective identities, socialisation, recognised disciplines), Kelsenian democracy appears practicable: the general will as the procedural resultant of compromise between organised parts. But that model was sustained by contingent social and cultural conditions: stable affiliations, less fragmented media ecosystems, recognisable symbolic authorities.

The trajectory described by post-war political science—from the mass party to the catch-all party, from the professional-electoral party to the cartel party—shows the direction of change: weakening of the party on the ground, strengthening of the party in public office; de-ideologisation; centralisation; professionalisation; absorption into the state. This set of changes does not coincide with the “end” of the party: it coincides with its reconfiguration as a device of competition and institutional management. In argumentative terms, this passage is central because it allows a precise inference: if the party loses the capacity to produce long-term identity and discipline, and if legitimation is concentrated on the continuous winning of consent, then politics is temporally “shortened”. The short term is not a moral defect of leaders; it is an effect of incentives.

Here lies the demonstrative core of the thesis: what is called populism emerges as the coherent result of a structure in which (i) integrative mediation weakens, (ii) competition becomes permanent, (iii) leadership becomes personalised, (iv) the voter is treated as the recipient of a continuously adapted offer. The direct appeal to the people and the delegitimation of intermediate elites are therefore not an “attack from outside” on representative democracy; they are strategic responses to a system that rewards simplification and polarisation as instruments of mobilisation. In other words: when democracy is mainly competition for consent, anti-elite rhetoric and the people/enemy dichotomy become forms of political efficiency.

4. The concluding step: from populism as a label to populism as a function

At this point, the conclusion must carry out a reconstructive theoretical operation: to move populism definitively from a descriptive category to a functional category. Populism designates a set of functions typical of competitive democracy under conditions of weak mediation:

1. Function of simplification: reducing the complexity of the agenda and of conflicts to perceptible alternatives, compressing ambivalences and mediations.
2. Function of identification: constructing a collective subject ("the people") and an antagonist ("the elite", "the caste", "enemies"), offering symbolic belonging in contexts of dealignment.
3. Function of acceleration: turning competition into a permanent campaign, shortening decision-making horizons and increasing the weight of immediacy.
4. Function of disintermediation: promising direct leader–people contact as symbolic compensation for the loss of substantive representation.
5. Function of legitimization: replacing procedural legitimacy (compromise, organised pluralism) with performative legitimacy (authenticity, decisionism, the capacity to get things done).

These functions do not require an autonomous populist ideology. They are activated as a strategic repertoire within a competition in which victory depends on the control of attention, emotion and identity, and in which party and parliamentary mediation is perceived as opaque or ineffective. The thesis does not deny that these dynamics can generate illiberal outcomes or conflicts with the rule of law; what it contests is their interpretation as a "deviation" from democratic functioning. They are compatible—and at times optimal—within the competitive paradigm.

This approach also makes it possible to clear up a misunderstanding: recognising populism as an internal outcome is not the same as normalising it normatively. The thesis does not say that populism is "good" or "right"; it says that it can be explained without resorting to the category of anomaly. The advantage of this theoretical move is that it shifts the political question: not "how to eliminate populism", but "which institutions and which mediations can reduce the incentives that make it functional".

5. The media ecosystem, post-truth: the medium as a possible accelerator of populism

The conclusion must also incorporate an element that runs through the entire thesis as an interpretive "light": the contemporary media ecosystem, understood not as a simple neutral channel but as an environment that structures democratic competition. In a line consistent with McLuhan, the medium does not merely convey content: it reorganises the conditions of perception, attention and salience of the political¹³⁵; and, as Postman observes, it tends progressively to transfigure the public sphere into a regime of entertainment, in which visibility is rewarded more than argumentative complexity¹³⁶. This is decisive because, if competitive democracy (in the Schumpeterian sense) reduces legitimization to the selection of leadership and shifts the political struggle onto the terrain of preference formation, then competition inevitably becomes competition for attention: emotional intensity, simplification, antagonism and personal narrative coincide with the communicative forms most compatible with the attention market. In this framework, there is no need to resort to a moralistic diagnosis of "cultural decay": what changes is the structure of communicative selection. The radical democratisation of content production makes the median statistically dominant (previously more filtered by barriers to access)¹³⁷,

¹³⁵With reference to the writings on the role of the media in structuring social and political experience see, among others, Marshall McLuhan, *Gli strumenti del comunicare*, Milan, Il Saggiatore, 1967; Id., *Il medium è il messaggio* (with Quentin Fiore), Milan, Feltrinelli, 1968.

¹³⁶With reference to the analyses of the transformation of public communication into spectacle and of the impact of electronic media on the rationality of political discourse see Neil Postman, *Divertirsi da morire. Il discorso pubblico nell'era dello spettacolo*, Venice, Marsilio, 2002.

¹³⁷Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. "ASERIncontra | La Democrazia Compiuta E l'Inattualità Del Liberalismo, Dialogo Con Michele Boldrin." YouTube, 21 Mar. 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=So3YEB9mMRE. Accessed .

and what works for the median tends to colonise the entire public space, because it maximises consent with the minimum of cognitive resistance¹³⁸. It is here that the reference to Ortega gains precision: the “mass-man” is not only a moral figure, but a political type whose strength grows when technology amplifies his presence and when public discourse conforms to his rhythm¹³⁹. Within this environment, post-truth does not designate the “end of truth”, but a change in the cognitive infrastructure of the public sphere¹⁴⁰: disintermediation, the weakening of information professionals, opaque algorithmic selection, speed of circulation, echo chambers and information cascades in which social plausibility prevails over verifiability¹⁴¹. Consequently, democratic competition also becomes perceptual and epistemic competition: not only programmes against programmes, but frames against frames, criteria of credibility against criteria of credibility. Here Lippmann returns as a juncture: public opinion is always mediated, but today mediation is decentralised and often lacks institutionalised responsibilities; and in this context the moralisation of conflict and anti-elitism become rational strategies of legitimation (“we the authentic” against “they the manipulators”), while polarisation takes the form of a device of belonging and fake news that of a structural externality of an ecosystem that rewards speed, affinity and emotional intensity. The media ecosystem, therefore, does not “create” populism: it increases its likelihood, its strategic convenience and its intensity, making competitive democracy more dependent on emotional and identity dynamics and turning many rhetorics labelled populist into ordinary outcomes of a permanent communicative arena¹⁴².

6. Leaderisation and the direct relationship: the plebiscitary as a functional solution

The link between the media ecosystem and the transformation of the party form culminates in a central device: leaderisation. Weber had already shown how bureaucratisation can produce a demand for charisma that symbolically bridges the distance between machine and mass. The contemporary phase reproduces this mechanism under new conditions: weakening of intermediate structures, electoral volatility, permanent campaigning, direct connection. Today the leader does not simply “choose” to speak directly to the people: he is often forced to do so because political effectiveness is measured by the capacity to maintain visibility and trust in a continuous communicative circuit¹⁴³.

This dynamic changes the structure of democratic accountability. In a model mediated by robust organisations, accountability was filtered through affiliations and disciplines: the cost of an unpopular decision could be absorbed by collective identities and long-term narratives. In a model built on the leader’s prominence, accountability becomes more immediate but also more unstable: it rests on a continuous verification of consent. Hence short-termism: not as an individual sin, but as the effect of a circuit in which the leader is constantly exposed to the moods of opinion and in which political survival depends on performance.

This is a further demonstrative point: populist rhetorics are not deviations from leaderisation; they are often its grammar. The direct appeal to the people is not mere style; it is a technique of legitimation that replaces weakened mediations. The denunciation of the caste is not mere indignation; it is a way of at-

¹³⁸Arendt, F. (2024). The Media and Democratization: A Long-Term Macro-Level Perspective on the Role of the Press During a Democratic Transition. *Political Communication*, 41(1), 26–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2238652>

¹³⁹Dinnin, A. (2019). Ortega y Gasset, Democracy, and the Rule of the People. *Hispanic Research Journal*, 20(6), 548–565. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682737.2019.1787612>

¹⁴⁰Casadei, T. (2019). The irruption of post-truth. *Governare La Paura. Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 1. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1974-4935/9411>

¹⁴¹See M. Ferraris, *Postverità e altri enigmi*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2017; L. Russo, *Postverità* Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2018.

¹⁴²G. Cosentino, *L’era della post-verità: media e populismi dalla Brexit a Trump*, Reggio Emilia, Imprimatur, 2017.

¹⁴³Hubert Treiber, Riflessioni sul concetto di carisma in Max Weber, in “Materiali per una storia della cultura giuridica, Rivista fondata da Giovanni Tarello” 2/2005, pp. 361–380, doi: 10.1436/20699

tributing to the leader the function of a “purifier” who recreates trust in the absence of credible structures. Polarisation is not mere aggressiveness; it is the elementary form through which identity cohesion is maintained in a fragmented public sphere.

7. Elites as innovation and as intertemporal constraint

The final part of the conclusion highlights a variable that I consider fundamental: not in the illusion of a return to the mass party, nor in a moralism against the masses, but in the transformative role of elites.

A conceptual clarification is essential here: to speak of elites does not mean invoking a social aristocracy or a government of the best in a paternalistic sense; it means recognising a structure: in every political order, some actors have asymmetric capacities to define agendas, languages and institutions, and to introduce constraints. Competitive democracy does not eliminate elites; it places them at the centre of competition. Schumpeter, in this sense, is not an author to be overcome morally; he is an author to be radicalised analytically: elites do not compete only to occupy offices, they compete to innovate the political offer and to define the field of perceptible options¹⁴⁴.

This reading makes it possible to formulate a strong thesis that is nonetheless compatible with realism: the stability and future quality of democracy depend on the capacity of elites to introduce intertemporal horizons into a system that tends towards the present. In other words, if the media ecosystem and permanent competition make short-term strategies rational, the crucial question becomes: who can sustain long-term policies and narratives without being immediately punished by volatility? Historically, the answer has been: elites capable of building mediations, institutions and identities that absorb costs in the present for future benefits¹⁴⁵.

The innovative function of elites can be read in a Schumpeterian key: just as the economic entrepreneur produces new needs and restructures the market, the political and cultural elite produces new languages, new symbolic coalitions, new criteria of reality, new forms of legitimation¹⁴⁶. When a model prevails, it does not prevail because it is “true” in a normative sense, but because it manages to impose itself as convincing and organising. Hence the theoretical consequence: liberal democracy itself can be interpreted as the contingent outcome of elite competitions that were won by defining rules, rights and institutions. It is not a guaranteed destiny; it is a historical result. This does not amount to justifying any elite whatsoever. The conclusion must introduce a criterion: elites become a factor of stability when they do not operate as a closed extractive group (which feeds anti-elite reactions), but when they produce credible institutions and constraints that transform conflict into decision without reducing it to a permanent plebiscite. The difference is not moral, it is functional: an elite that lives only on immediate consent and emotional communication takes part in the spiral; an elite that introduces intertemporal constraints (rules, structural public policies, institutional investments) can slow it down.

In this sense, populism as anti-elite rhetoric does not eliminate the centrality of elites: it confirms it. It is often a struggle to replace one elite with another and to redefine the agenda. The point, then, is not to deny elite conflict, but to make it compatible with the long term: to build elites that can compete without reducing politics to entertainment and without destroying the mechanisms of mediation.

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