

Populism and its impact on the relationship between democracy and liberalism

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyze the relationship between democracy and liberalism, and the impact that populism has on it. According to Mouffe, the relationship between liberalism and democracy arises from conflict and will continue to cause conflict. The rise of populist movements within a democracy is one of these conflicts. The starting point of this article is the theory of Alexis de Tocqueville, who identifies liberalism with the concept of freedom and democracy with the principle of equality; and according to him, liberal democracy aims at reconciliation and the coexistence of freedom and equality. Regarding populism, the main assumption is that it has a negative impact on the relationship between democracy and liberalism. The methodology used is qualitative, based on the interpretation of the theoretical framework and the analysis of different approaches and attitudes of different authors and studies.

Key words: *democracy, liberalism, equality, populism, constitutionalism*

Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyze the internal contradiction of liberal democracy, which emerges from the growing influence of populism in these societies. The question of whether populism and democracy are truly compatible, has returned

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to the political focus given the continued electoral success of populist parties across Europe and the increasing opportunities they have gained to reach government in recent years. The contention is that the growth of the phenomenon of populism has a negative effect on the relationship between democracy and liberalism.

Contemporary theories on democracy

The term “democracy” is one of the most used and analyzed terms by various authors and philosophers. Nowadays, where democracy is the reality of most countries in the world, the need to know what a democratic system is and how it differs from other systems is just as great. There are many theories and theorists who have tried to explain this concept. Some of them try to explain what democracy is like, others present what democracy could be, and another group analyze how democracy should be. The difference between these three groups of researchers is quite large, since the approach they have to democracy often causes them to have clashes of opinions, thus creating rival theories.

The evolution of the concept of democracy

The origins of the term democracy are thought to date back to Ancient Greece. If we were to analyze democracy from the etymological side, it means the government of the people (demos-people, kratos-order, government). In ancient Greece democracy tended to be seen with a negative connotation (Heywood, 2008). Thinkers like Plato and Aristotle, for example, saw it as a system of rule by the masses at the expense of the wise and wealthy. Until the 19th century the word continued to have pejorative connotations, suggesting a system of “mass rule”. Although in Ancient Greece this was what various philosophers and authors meant by democracy, over time this term evolved and no longer means the same thing. In the following, we will deal with the evolution of the concept of democracy, seen from the point of view of three different thinkers Respectively, Aristotle, Tocqueville and Schumpeter.

Aristotle was the first to bring a complete and revolutionary theory of democracy, which is studied today with great interest by political researchers and not only. Regarding Tocquevill, we can say that his political theory paved the way for the development of the modern theory of democracy. He has been called by various authors not only as “the first theorist of modern mass democracy”, but also as “the classic analyst of modern democracy” (Schmidt, 2012). On the other hand, Schumpeter, with his work that has been considered as “theory of democracy for the elite”, “theory of competitive leaders” or as “theory of competitive elites”, brought a new perspective and explanation of democracy that had reactions and different attitudes from political science researchers and not only. Also, we will

analyze the relationship between democracy and equality, and we will try to answer the question of whether more democracy means more equality.

Democracy and equality

In this section, we will discuss the relationship between democracy and equality. It is difficult to examine this topic because “democracy” is a very vague and comprehensive term. It is often used as an amorphous synonym for good government, including all that is desirable in a state. Of course, when seen in this light, the concept of democracy loses its unique and analytical meaning. If democracy means only excellent and desirable government, we do not need to speak of democracy at all; we should only talk about the forms of equality that should characterize a contemporary state (Post, 2006).

In a democratic society, equality has the following dimensions: a) political equality; b) legal equality; c) moral equality; d) equality of opportunity. *Political equality* means that every person has the right to vote and run for office. No one should have more than one vote and constituencies should have roughly the same population to ensure that every vote is counted equally. *Legal equality* means that all people (citizens and non-citizens) are entitled to the same protection under the law. That is, no one should be discriminated by law because of birth defects such as color, ethnicity, gender, or heritage, or because of personal choices such as religion, group membership, or employment. *Moral equality* indicates that every citizen should be treated with equal respect and dignity in the eyes of the law and government regulations. Among the most important forms of democratic equality guaranteed by equal protection of the law is “*equality of opportunity*”. This means that the law must not unfairly harm anyone in their ability to claim a variety of social goods such as education, employment, housing and political rights.

From classical Greece to the twentieth century, concern about the effects on equality has led to both support and rejection of democracy. Throughout most of human history, most intellectuals not only saw equality as a defining characteristic of democratic government, but opposed it for that very reason. Although Aristotle and Plato disagreed on many things, each of them saw democracy as a form of class rule in which, as Plato said in his book *The Republic*, the majority triumphed. And he agreed with the argument later made by Aristotle in his book *Politics* that constitutions reflect class interests. With the few and the rich in charge, the result is oligarchy. With power in the hands of the majority or the poor (*demos*), the product is democracy. In each case, power is used not impartially but to favor the dominant group or class, that is, democracies work to equalize the living conditions for the majority (Broadbent, 2001).

Various authors and scholars consider democracy the best form of government, not because it is likely to make the best decisions (perhaps it does), but because



it gives citizens an equal right to make laws. Others also think that democracy has authority that other regimes lack, and that the democratic origin of laws at least sometimes gives us the duty to obey them. Finally, some believe that the two are related: as citizens of a democratic state, we have a moral duty to obey (at least some) democratically made laws because they are the result of an egalitarian procedure (Viehoff, 2014).

According to another view, democratic governance is based on a commitment to political equality. The ideal of political equality states that political institutions should be organized in such a way as to distribute political position equally to all citizens. The task of normative democratic theory, according to the common view, is to articulate an attractive interpretation of the ideal of political equality and then trace its implications for the design and reform of political institutions (Wall, 2006).

What does it mean for a form of government to be autonomous? Democracy is not the same thing as popular sovereignty, a state in which the people exercise ultimate control over their government. Popular sovereignty is also found in forms of popular fascism in which a dictator carries the “true” and spontaneous approval of an entire society. Democracy is also not identical to majoritarianism, in which the majority of people exercise control over their government (Post, 2006).

Equality has always been seen as a core democratic value and for a brief period in the twentieth century it actually became the guiding principle for many governments. After World War II, almost all North Atlantic democracies consciously adopted policies that were radically different from those of the prewar years (Broadbent, 2001). A distinctive element of a democratic society is that it must give equal opportunities to all its citizens in order for the democratic process to work. When a country is democratized, it must necessarily be liberalized, firstly by guaranteeing equal opportunities and freedoms for all. Building on this achievement, the process continues to represent citizens through the creation of inclusive political institutions (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

John Stuart Mill argued that not only does everyone have an equal claim to happiness, but this also “includes an equal claim to all the means of happiness” (Mill, 1954: 58). Equality, he emphasized, is the norm of justice, which first justifies political democracy and then economic and social regulations within a society. Those who want inequality have a responsibility to justify it. According to the libertarian argument, inequalities can occur for a variety of reasons that have nothing to do with merit. But as long as these inequalities are the result of voluntary interactions between people, they are acceptable since no one was forced to do anything. According to Smith, the selfish pursuit of wealth and the injustices that follow are acceptable as long as they lead to greater prosperity for all (Smith, 2012).

Successor consequentialist theorists such as Friedrich Hayek continued along this line of reasoning. Hayek recognized that those who became wealthy through business ventures and capitalism were not always more deserving than others. They simply did a better job of effectively estimating the value that people would place on a given set of products and services (Hayek, 1960). Another justification for inequality is offered by libertarians, who admit that inequality can be developed for arbitrary moral reasons. But we should not try to fix the problem as long as the imbalances are caused by non-coercive means. To do this, a very strong state would have to be created, which would inevitably hinder the freedom of its people. Robert Nozick essentially accepts Rawls's claim that inequalities arise for morally arbitrary causes. Many individuals who are not virtuous succeed, while many others who could deserve better, suffer in poverty (Nozick, 1974). We can embrace Rawls' view that inequality can only be justified if it serves the interests of the least advantaged (ie, as long as it increases the absolute income of the poorest) (Rawls, 1999). Political morality in a democracy has little to do with the morality of the family or personal life. As the ancient Greeks understood, it is about trying to build more equal societies.

Despite democracy, it seems that some people are still treated differently than others. Due to the fact that equality of opportunity is an ex-ante equality, it cannot ensure actual equality. According to the perspective of ex ante equality, opportunities are evaluated based on the situation and possible outcomes for different levels of effort that individuals can exert. Ex-ante compensation is often justified by the need to equalize the value of people's opportunities. As a result, we see nations with relatively high democratic rates enduring great wealth inequality. Although the United States (US) have had representative democratic institutions for a long time, the distribution of wealth is much more unequal than in some "new" democracies, such as some of the Eastern European countries. Brazil also experiences extreme income inequality, while China, whose democratic institutions are questionable, faces a much more balanced distribution of income. Given this, it is logical to question whether the notion that "more democracy equals more equality" is correct, or whether there is more than simple causality (Lambert, 2017).

1.2 Liberalism and its values

Liberalism has been the dominant doctrine of the West for about four centuries, but for a long time it was not called "liberalism". Although the theory originated in the distant past, the word is relatively new. Even though we call Locke or Montesquieu liberals, the term was unknown to them. Liberalism was the result of the dissolution of feudalism and the rise of a market and capitalist society in its place. In its original form liberalism was a political doctrine. He attacked absolutism



and feudal privilege, advocating instead constitutional and later representative government (Mulhall & Swift, 2012).

Where did liberalism come from? Liberalism arose in Europe and other parts of the world as a defense for a new form of living in peace, tolerance, exchange and voluntary cooperation, from which everyone benefits. Liberalism offered a defense to these peaceful forms of living against absolutism. During the debates about the proper form of the state and the organization of power, the ideas of liberalism became stronger, more radical and more influential. Liberalism arose as a defense of the freedom of civil society against the claims of absolute power, against monopolies and privileges, mercantilism, protectionism, war and public debt, and in favor of civil rights and the rule of law. This movement had several sources, such as the idea of individual rights coming from the Salamanca thinkers who defended the market economy and the rights of the Indians conquered by the Spanish, as well as the doctrine of natural law and natural rights offered by German and Dutch thinkers. But we can say that the full liberal movement came to England with the Levellers, who fought in the civil war (1642-1651) alongside the parliamentarians for limited constitutional government, for freedom of trade, for freedom of religion, for the protection of property and for equal rights for all (Palmer, 1959).

In all scholarly discourses, liberalism is interpreted in multiple and contradictory ways: as a vanguard project contested and constitutive of modernity itself, a detailed normative political philosophy and a hegemonic mode of governance, the justifying ideology of unbridled capitalism and the most opulent ideological source of for its limitation. For some, liberalism is a product of modernity, even the telos of history. For others it represents an unfolding nightmare, signifying either the vicious logic of capitalism or a descent into moral relativism. For some others, it is a sign of ambivalence, the ideological prerequisite for living a fairly comfortable life in rich democratic states (Bell, 2014).

Liberalism and liberty

In his reasoning of liberalism in the Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Maurice Cranston, making the inexplicable claim that “By definition, a liberal is a man who believes in liberty” (Cranston, 1965: 458), immediately goes on to note that since different people at different times have meant different things by liberty, “liberalism” is correspondingly ambiguous. Unfortunately, not only do different people at different times interpret differently the concepts that characterize the liberal tradition, but in addition there has always been an intractable disagreement among contemporaries about the proper use of these concepts and thus about the nature of liberalism.

“Liberalism,” says Mr. Broadhurst, “does not intend to make all men equal—nothing can do that. But its purpose is to remove all obstacles created by men, which

prevent all from having equal opportunities” (Reid, 1885: 48). The affirmative part of this definition can be further shortened to “ensuring equal opportunities for all”. But it is necessary to note that “Liberalism does not seek to make all men equal”, that is, that by aiming at equal opportunities, it does not try to produce a uniformity of wealth or an equality of social conditions, but it merely aims to ensure “equal opportunities”, which may result from the removal of “obstacles of human origin”. Mr. Joseph Cowen, in his speech delivered during the general election of 1885, says much the same. From these definitions of liberalism, offered by prominent liberals, we can conclude that the object of liberalism is to ensure “equality of opportunity” for all people, and it follows that any attempt to approximate an equality more extensive, such as equality of wealth or social conditions, would involve a departure from true liberalism, as long as it had the effect of making opportunities unequal. People will always be unequal in wealth, in social position, and even in the degree of happiness due to their fate, as long as they are born with different abilities, in different environments, and with different conditions and sensitivities.

All that “Liberalism” can do is to provide every man with “equal opportunities” for the exercise of whatever faculties he may possess: unfettered by any obstacle which nature has not herself imposed. This expression “equal opportunity” is almost identical to the older and more traditional word “liberty”.

Without liberty, it is clear that people could not choose the time, place, means, or methods of obtaining the necessities of life, and the more crowded a community becomes, and the more artificial the condition of living within it, the greater is the need for liberty for the individual, upon whom depends the responsibility of making a living for himself and perhaps for others. Therefore, as Locke says, “the end of law is not to abolish, or restrain, but to preserve and extend liberty (Locke, 1924: 19). Hayek takes a principled stand on this aspect of liberalism, saying in his book “The Constitution of Freedom” that a “society that does not recognize that each individual has his own values, which he has the right to follow, cannot have respect for the dignity of the individual and cannot really recognize liberty (Hayek, 1960: 79).

In a speech held on political principles, the English liberal politician and journalist, Mr. Joseph Cowen states that by liberty he means much more than liberty of movement, or the liberty to buy at the cheapest price or to sell in the most expensive market. He says that by liberty he means liberty of thought, speech and development. According to him, physical liberty makes us free agents; intellectual liberty gives us the power to act in accordance with our sense of right and wrong; religious liberty enables us to make the decisions of our conscience, our rule of conduct; and civil liberty gives us the possibility of growth. The idea that runs through these definitions is that of self-sovereignty. If our wills do not originate in ourselves, we have no personal liberty; if our convictions are controlled by



our prejudices, and our conscience is controlled by our passions, we have neither mental nor moral liberty; if we have to practice or pay for ways of worship imposed by others, we have no religious liberty; and if any power claims the right to impose laws or taxes on us without our permission, we have no civil liberty (Duncan, 2015). What makes liberals unique is that they support liberty on principle, unlike many others who may be pro-liberty by chance or on *ad hoc* terms.

Democracy and liberalism

In political philosophy and theory, the compatibility of liberalism with democracy has long been taken for granted. A large number of authors claim that while liberalism and democracy are inextricably linked, problems in liberal democratic societies arise either as a result of excessive reliance on liberal values to support democratic institutions or as a result of the unequal distribution of democratic opportunities and liberal values. However, the link between liberalism and democracy is currently subject to intense criticism. Some thinkers claim that a certain institution or behavior in a free society prevents the full development of democracy. In their book *On Democracy*, Cohen and Rogers argue that true democracy requires the public to influence government decisions (Cohen & Rogers, 1983). According to some authors, democracy endangers the liberal ideals of individual freedom and rights and weakens the liberal institutions of free enterprise and private property. This is the libertarian position, which Newman critically analyzes in his book “*Liberalism at Wit’s End*” (Newman, 1984). Finally, some intellectuals challenge liberalism itself, claiming that democracy cannot be achieved within a liberal framework. Benjamin B. Barber supports this view of a strong democracy. Strong democracy, as opposed to liberal democracy, is, in Barber’s view, a distinctly contemporary type of participatory democracy better suited to the circumstances of political life. Liberal democracy keeps individuals separated and in pursuit of individual, private interests, in contrast to the efforts of strong democracy to unite them in the pursuit of common goals (Barber, 2003).

The distinction between liberal and democratic notions highlights a one-sided tendency: liberal doctrines ultimately limit freedom to the standards of procedural law while expanding democratic concepts of equality and justice. According to liberal ideology, equality is a procedural idea of every person having the same legal rights. When liberalism becomes procedural, it tends to ignore the deep tensions that exist between pluralistic liberalism and uniform conceptions of democracy. The liberal values renewal, while the democrat aims for social integration. The main difference is that democracy relies on society, while liberalism relies on the individual (Thigpen, 1986).

The relationship between liberalism and democracy is historically contingent and conceptually contradictory. Proponents of liberalism do not seek to clearly

define and articulate, especially in the past, the tension between liberal ideals of freedom and democratic equality. The individualistic principles of liberalism are often at odds with the principles of democracy (Dryzek, 2002). Specific characteristics of liberalism include a desire for individual liberties, a one-sided focus on individual rights, and a wariness of possible overthrows of the democratic majority. On the other hand, the political ideals of democracy, such as equality between citizens, freedom, respect for law and justice, create some kind of tension between these two concepts (Held, 2006).

Carl Schmitt argues that politics cannot be transformed into a “safe phenomenon”, since democratic equality requires inequality. If this essential distinction is ignored, an apathetic individualistic humanitarian ethic is created. The indifferent idea of equality, which does not need an explanation of the relation between equality and inequality, loses its political content; it has been eclipsed by other domains of human interactions (especially economic) in which inequality reigns (Schmitt, 2000). Since equality is defined narrowly and explicitly, primarily as a state of circumstances of equal freedom for people, the conflict between freedom and equality disappears; these ideas become abstract terms. Neutral ideals of equal freedom for abstract persons replace the actual person and the essential political notion of equality.

This is the absolute position of liberalism. The idea of individual equality is defined indifferently. This position advocates minimizing the contradiction between the concepts of liberalism and democracy. As tensions subside, however, the individualistic definition of liberalism becomes more abstract. The ideology of democracy turns into the ideology of liberalism. To preserve and strengthen liberalism, democracy becomes a tool, method and procedure. As a consequence, the neutrality of these policies encourages the apathetic stance of liberalism (Vanberg, 2021).

Despite political life being an expression of active citizenship, liberals insist on neutrality regarding different conceptions of the good. On the basis of individualistic principles, they are separated from the notions of “common good”. This division is based on the negative idea of freedom, whose basic requirement - not to violate the freedom of “individuals” - is too vague. The democratic way of life is characterized by an active, coordinated process of power redistribution and decision-making. According to Michael Walzer, citizens must rule themselves: democracy is a political method of distributing power (Walzer, 1983). A special democratic action determines the commonality (homogeneity) of relations. By deontologizing politics and morality, political liberalization neutralizes the environment for democratic action and preserves the conditions for heterogeneity.

The liberal concept of freedom legitimizes the anthropology of diversity. The utilitarian style of liberalism primarily defines freedom as the absence of external



constraints, or as a negative freedom. Individual freedom is a major priority in neo-military versions of liberal democracy: “Individualism tells us that society is something more than individuals only when those persons are free (Hayek, 1996: 38).” Compared to other values, freedom is an undeniable value associated with natural individual rights. When discussing the dilemma of the individual and society, priority is always given to the individual. “Society” is a minimalist reality, a legal and procedural system carefully defined to reduce barriers to individual self-expression. Everyone should have the same freedom to pursue their interests, as long as no one’s rights are abused. This equality is seen as formal and procedural equality, a constitutional guarantee that no one can exceed what is allowed (Berlin, 1958).

In the second half of the 19th century, the liberal and democratic ideals have merged with each other and this has caused them to often get confused. Thus, even in everyday life, when someone was referred to as a liberal, democratic qualities were often worn and vice versa. As a result, almost everyone mistakes these terms for synonyms. The difference between liberalism and democracy becomes more and more pronounced when the latter begins to be perceived as a maximally equal society. Moving on to a material assessment, we can say that democracy is the introduction of popular power in the state, while liberalism is about limiting state power (Bobbio, 1990).

According to the writings of Norberto Bobbio in his book “*Liberalismo e Democracia*”, democracy is one of the three answers to the question “who has sovereign power?” In other words, who commands the state? The answer of democracy is “The majority, the people”. On the other hand, liberalism is one of two answers to a particular question: “How is sovereignty exercised?” This means: how do those who are in charge of the state actually exercise power? The liberal answer is: “Whoever commands, commands only certain things and has limited authority (ibid.)!”

These two questions - “who is the sovereign?” and “how do they rule?” - are therefore heterogeneous and their responses have a long history as independent variables. For example, before the seventeenth century, no state was either liberal or democratic (in ancient Athens, at the height of its “democratic” phase, less than 30% of the adult population had the right to vote) (Thorley, 2005). In the nineteenth century, there were liberal but not democratic nations in Western Europe, but now there are liberal and democratic states in the same region. More disturbing, also because it directly contradicts the common misconception that conflates liberalism and democracy, is the fact that democratic but not liberal states have existed and continue to exist around the world, including Europe, since the nineteenth century and continue to exist today too.

In 1840, the liberal thinker Alexis de Tocqueville prophesied this latest development, which he called “majority rule.” A large and overwhelming majority

of the citizens of a state can elect a despot who abolishes freedom of the press, dissolves opposition parties, and orders the arrest and execution of opponents, and not only elect him in the first place, but continue to vote for and support him in different ways. If the mind is clouded by the powerful statement that “if an idea or action is acceptable to the majority (of my family members, classmates, co-religionists, my national group, “the people”), then it is right,” it is difficult to perceive such realities. Since tyranny has been seen as unfair for thousands of years, it seems inconceivable that there could be anything resembling a “popular tyranny” (Tocqueville, 1969).

Norberto Bobbio, on the other hand, even if he believed that he could not accept a democracy that lacked the inviolable rights protected by liberalism, believed that “it was unlikely that a non-democratic state would guarantee fundamental freedoms” (Bobbio, 1990: 6-7).

Equality and liberty

The concepts of liberty and equality have been constantly debated by an overwhelming number of authors, and the results of these debates, for the most part, have been inconclusive. This shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone. First, the people participating in the discussion are rarely particularly clear about what their topic is, which results in misunderstandings almost all the time. Discussion also has a tendency to proceed by merely stating principles rather than trying to discover an underlying basis for them; as a result, incompatible conclusions reached by different discussants are immune to rational objection or qualification, which, once again, makes disagreement unsurprising. Last but not least, participants in a discussion almost always have special interests or a personal agenda, both of which make it difficult to conduct a responsible and unbiased analysis (Machan, 2002).

If there was a real battle between equality and liberty in today's society, according to the statements of a prominent living philosopher, liberty would give way to equality (Dworkin, 2000). From this conclusion it naturally follows that the two are competitors, a view which has been strongly and repeatedly refuted by a number of writers in recent times. This is something that needs to be clarified now. Due to the fact that there are several aspects that must be distinguished in this context, the question of whether or not these two are competitors cannot be immediately answered with a “Yes” or “No” (Machan, 2002).

Let us analyze the egalitarian position regarding this discussion. Their theses are two: 1) liberty does not produce equality, and 2) equality is liberty. For egalitarians, liberty does not help or add anything to equality. While in the equality-liberty relationship we have a symbiosis, where equality gives liberty at the same time. So they deny the importance of liberty and attribute all the credit to equality. But



is such a thing true? The thesis that liberty does not produce equality is stable, especially equality in outcome. But it is not correct to say that liberty is not needed and that it is merely a complementary element of equality. Slaves are equal, but they are not free. In this way, we must accept the importance and value of both equality and liberty (Sartori, 2017).

Regarding the second thesis, ie that equality is a form of liberty, this should be defined more clearly. If we say that some equality can be presented as liberty, this is true (eg, equal laws for citizens is a form of liberty).

So, we can say that liberty and equality are complementary to each other and this has been proven by the development and experience of liberal democracy. As we mentioned before, Tocqueville identifies democracy with equality and liberalism with liberty. But this does not mean that democracy is only equality and liberalism only liberty. Liberal democracy is a tangle of two strands, liberalism and democracy. If we pull the liberal thread, it does not mean that all kinds of equality disappear, since liberalism itself is based on juridical-political equality and is against any equality bestowed from above. Liberty is a vertical extension while equality is a horizontal extension. The logic of equality can be described as unequal opportunities to become equal, while the logic of liberty is the opposite: equal opportunities to become unequal (ibid.: 205).

Liberal democracy and the end of history

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the global political map underwent profound changes. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the crises of communist governments in Eastern Europe created new topics in political debate. During this period, a new topic of discussion appeared in world politics: “The end of history”. It advanced several arguments for and against the future of liberal democracy. In 1992, Francis Fukuyama published *The End of History and the Last Man*, a book in which he explained the concept. According to Fukuyama, the twentieth century was marked by the struggle between liberalism and absolutist ideologies, such as fascism and Marxism. Liberal democracy was threatened by two great opposing ideologies, fascism and communism, which presented radically different conceptions of a decent society. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, liberal democracy lost its opposing ideology, namely communism (Bijukumar, 2008).

Fukuyama, unlike Hegel and Marx, thinks that history does not end with the development of a society without communist classes, but with the triumph of “democratic capitalism” - liberal democracy (Fukuyama, 1989: 6). Fukuyama argues that liberal democratic capitalism can serve the desires of citizens through the freedom to vote and the recognition of rights by the moral liberal state. The end

or goal of history is the “thirst for knowledge” realized through liberal democracy. The end of history has occurred because the universal and homogeneous state that embodies mutual recognition fully satisfies their desires. Fukuyama defines liberal democracy as “a legal state that recognizes specific individual rights or freedoms from government control” and “the right of all individuals to vote and participate in politics” (Fukuyama, 1992: 42-43). According to Fukuyama, increasing industrialization can result in liberal democracy. In this context, he presents three different forms of argument. First, only democracy is capable of reconciling the complex system of competing interests that a contemporary economy generates. Second, effective industrialization creates middle-class communities that require political engagement and equal rights. Third, trying to govern a technologically evolved civilization causes dictatorship or one-party control to deteriorate over time (ibid.: 216).

Fukuyama argues that liberal democracy offers a superior path to modernization and growth. He believes that the emergence of stable liberal democracies has been influenced by cultural influences. The degree and type of national, ethnic and racial awareness of a country is the first. Before a stable democracy can be formed, a strong sense of national unity is essential. Second, the country’s religious principles should be beneficial to liberal democracy (ibid.: 216-217).

Illiberal democracy?

With the end of the Cold War, the progress of democracy has slowed significantly. At the same time, there has been a disturbing trend, even in parts of Europe, of a “backsliding” of liberal democracy, that is, a dissatisfaction with the real benefits of democratization in terms of economic well-being. More frightening is the claim made by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt in early 2018 that democracies continue to be destroyed not by tanks and generals, but by democratically elected governments (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). This disenchantment with liberal democracy in Eastern Europe is evident from the Democracy Index rankings, where the entire region has regressed since 2006. This trend is worrying as almost 25 years of democratization in Central and Eastern Europe have not produced a completed democracy (Democracy Index 2017, 2018). Furthermore, the rise of populist, nationalist and indeed illiberal political groups in various European countries demonstrates this trend. The term “illiberal democracy” refers to nations that nevertheless adhere to the trappings and rituals of democracy, such as elections, but whose actual practice is problematic in terms of free and fair elections, civil and political rights, and, most importantly, law enforcement.

The seemingly straightforward process of defining common words like democracy is, in reality, quite difficult. If we are content with the literal definition,



“rule of the people”, a full description of the variety of this type of regime in the modern sense is still lacking. Similarly, relying only on the conduct of elections does not tell us much about the conditions or quality of any government, so other characteristics are required to define the democracy of any given nation. The result is a phenomenon known as “surname democracy” (Collier & Levitsky, 1997). According to T. F. Rhoden, the term “democracy” requires, in many cases, additional information in order to be a more or less true representation of reality, or an adaptation on the current basic meaning of the term (Rhoden, 2015: 563).

It seems that we have to agree with Zakaria on this point, that when we use the term “democracy”, we are often referring to much more than to leaders elected by the people. In fact, Zakaria’s definition of liberal constitutionalism—separation of powers, rule of law, and most importantly, civil liberties—seems to be what is commonly understood by the word democracy (Zakaria, 1997). According to Rhoden, current concepts of democracy have liberal elements, even if they are ineffective in reality. In an ideal world, civil liberties and the rule of law are linked to free elections and civil liberties. That is, elections lead to civil liberties, which in turn lead to the rule of law (ibid.: 571).

By itself, democracy is not synonymous with effective governance. In fact, in the absence of constitutional liberalism, the implementation of democracy in divided countries has actually fueled ethnic strife, nationalism and even war. Even if we can agree on the definitions of democracy, we have a new challenge. Between liberal democracy and outright authoritarianism lies a zone of uncertainty. Even according to the Democracy Index, most governments are neither full democracies nor authoritarian regimes, but lie between these two groups (Democracy Index 2017). Some scholars use so-called “reduced subtypes” of democracy or authoritarianism to help navigate the perilous seas of endless and often contradictory definitions (Collier and Levitsky, 1997).

To add to the confusion, elections, the central democratic procedure, have a significant legitimizing role regardless of our initial position. Therefore, the methods of democracy have been accepted almost worldwide, even if the essence of liberalism has not been accepted (Rhoden, 2015: 569). Appeals to the notion of majority rule are likely to remain the prevalent norm among nations, therefore, we accept that democracy can be seen as the only fully viable form of government (Diamond, 2002). The number of “thinner varieties of democracy” has been increasing due to the fact that the techniques of the democratic process are easy to import and adapt, although the liberal substance is difficult (Møller & Skaaning, 2010).

Thus, there is a serious risk of “pseudo-democracy”, given that elections can often be controlled and influenced (Diamond, 2002). As Çullhaj contends “the schism that is taking place in [post-communist] countries, between democracy

and liberalism, shows how difficult it is to build a democratic ethos” (2019, pp.55). In many cases, elections and other democratic institutions are simply modified models of authoritarianism, not a flawed version of democracy, with the dual objective of legitimizing the incumbent’s control and protecting him against democratic reforms. It is also important to highlight the different attitudes of the regimes towards the law, especially when the new policies are at odds with the current legislation or even the constitution. Once the disagreement becomes apparent, this kind of effort should be thwarted in a liberal democracy. However, illiberal governments, especially in Hungary, seem to work differently. Instead of abandoning or revising such plans, the alternative is to change the composition of the constitutional court (or any other government body) in order to limit its jurisdiction. In the end, it is the Constitution that is seen as requiring change, not the newly enacted illegal legislation. The purpose of constitutions and laws is not to be followed, but to be changed to suit the political needs of the ruling party (Nyyssönen & Metsälä, 2021). As Zakaria reminds us, the rule of law is compromised if legislation is used only for political purposes, and the power to easily change a state’s legal system to suit any need, places certain members of society above the law (Zakaria, 2003).

The return of populism as a threat to liberal democracy

The liberal heritage (rule of law, respect for individual freedom, minimal government, etc.) and the democratic tradition (equality, popular sovereignty, etc.) combine to create liberal democracy. Consequently, it is possible to create a liberal state that is not democratic. But a democratic state without liberal leanings is also viable. The relationship between liberalism and democracy, according to Mouffe, arises from conflict and will continue to cause conflict. The rise of populist movements within a democracy is one of these conflicts (Mouffe, 2000). Populism is probably one of the most overused and misused words in and out of the academic world. Sometimes it seems like almost all politicians, at least the ones we disagree with, are populists.

There is a belief that populism must have something to do with the people who originally called themselves populists. Consider the Russian Narodniks of the late nineteenth century and their philosophy of Narodnichestvo, which is often translated as “populism.” It was a movement of Russian students and intellectuals who idealized the rural peasantry and believed that they should form the basis of the revolution to overthrow the Tsarist regime. Another movement that is considered populist was the agrarian movement in the USA in the 1890s that later became the People’s Party. The movement was created to oppose the demonetisation of silver



and was the first to arouse skepticism towards the railways, banks and political elites. They adopted the name “populist” from the Latin word “populus” (the people) and their message was to “get rid” of the plutocrats, aristocrats and all the “crats”, establish the power of the people and everything would be fine (Canovan, 1981). Although the term populism appears in both cases as a description of itself, the two situations were extremely different. The Russian Narodniks were a group of middle-class intellectuals who supported a romanticized picture of rural life, in contrast to the US Populist Party, which was primarily a mass movement led by farmers advocating a dramatic change in the system political (Hofstadter, 1969).

The local commune was seen by Narodniks as a political model for the nation as a whole. In addition, they promoted a “return to the people” for leadership and political input. Different scholars believe that there must be a reason why “populism” evolved simultaneously in Russia and the United States in the late nineteenth century. The idea that populism was closely related to agrarianism or that it was necessarily a revolt of reactionary, economically backward groups in rapidly modernizing societies arose from the fact that both movements were concerned with farmers and peasants. This idea persisted at least until the 1970s (Müller, 2016).

The roots of “populism” in the United States in particular still lead various scholars to believe that populism must be at least partly “popular” in the sense of favoring the less advantaged or bringing the excluded into politics. This idea is supported by a look at Latin America, where populist proponents have always emphasized the inclusive and emancipatory nature of their movement in what is still the continent’s most economically unequal region.

Populism and democracy: allies or opponents?

Attitudes regarding the relationship between democracy and populism are diverse. A group of authors see populism as a threat and opponent of democracy. For them, democracy clearly has a good connotation, but populism generally has a negative connotation. Populism is seen as a danger to democracy as it violates its basic principles and strives for an authoritarian system as an alternative (Müller, 2016). The main differences between democracy and populism give us a clearer picture to understand the points where these two concepts differ, which prompts the authors to think that they are opponents.

A liberal democracy must provide certain basic civil and political rights in addition to being an electoral democracy (that is, a democracy in which individuals have full voting rights and frequent, free and fair elections are held, the results of which are unpredictable). They include the freedom to pursue one’s interests, to have views in politics, society and culture and to be allowed to do so without

government interference. Minorities must be respected no matter how “unpopular” they may be because of the inviolability of these liberties, with their rights often enshrined in a constitution or otherwise protected by legislation. Political rights provide people with the opportunity to be actively involved in their nation’s politics through membership in organizations, lobbying, demonstration, and other means. Freedom of expression, diversity of information and civic pluralism support and are enhanced by the enjoyment of full political rights by the people. The democratic ideal requires that the authority of the majority be limited and regulated, even if it is in some sense sacred, in order to ensure that it never results in tyranny over others (Sartori 1987: 32).

The basis of populism is undoubtedly “the people” as a political subject, and this feature is also more controversial since it is difficult to arrive at a clear and consensus definition of “the people”. The fact that “the people” are hostile to the “establishment” or the “elite” is not very helpful as such words are vague and context dependent. Populism embraces the foundations of democracy and popular sovereignty, seen simply as the exercise of majority power, but is wary of constitutionalism to the extent that formal, limited institutions and structures make it difficult for the majority to carry out their will. He has a more pessimistic attitude towards liberal safeguards for marginalized people and groups (Henrik, 2020).

Democracy allows the majority to elect representatives whose decisions may or may not be in line with what the majority of citizens anticipated or desired, while populism claims that the decisions of a populist government cannot be called into question since “the people” have chosen like this. Democracy assumes that choices made after following democratic processes are not inherently “moral” in the sense that all resistance must be seen as immoral, while populism assumes that there can be a morally sound choice even when there are strong moral disagreements (Müller, 2016). Populism can undermine the “check and balance” of liberal democracy and the separation of powers using the idea and practice of popular sovereignty. Also, populism can encourage a plebiscite transformation of politics, which undermines the authority and legitimacy of elected and unelected political bodies that are essential to “good governance”, such as central banks and inspection offices, as well as political institutions such as parties and parliaments. Ironically, the majoritarian, anti-elite thrust of populism can easily promote a shrinking of “politics” and lead to a shrinking of the actual democratic space by promoting an opening of political life to non-elites (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012).

Another group of authors see democracy and populism as allies and complementary to each other. According to them, there is a clear and favorable relationship between populism and democracy. Populism encourages popular sovereignty and majority rule, at least in principle. Or, as John Green puts it,



“Populism is democratic at its core, even though many populist leaders (once they come to power) may not be democratically minded.” Therefore, populists are often thought to play a particularly useful role in the early stages of democracy by providing the voice of the people, criticizing the authoritarian elite, and promoting the holding of free and fair elections (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). The link to representative democracy is also very useful. According to these authors the claim that populism is fundamentally opposed to representation has been made by some writers, but it is exaggerated. Despite the fact that many populists protest against their country’s representatives or claim that the system of representation is ineffective and should be expanded by plebiscite means, they object only to the wrong form of representation—not to representation in general. Populists are willing to accept representation from “the people”, not from the “elite” (remember that this distinction is moral, not situational) (Mudde, 2004).

Concluding remarks

The ambivalence of the relationship between populism and liberal democracy is a direct result of the internal contradiction of liberal democracy, which is the conflict between the democratic promise of majority rule and the reality of constitutional protection for minority rights. Populism is definitely on the side of majority rule in this conflict. Furthermore, populism is antagonistic to diversity and the protection of minorities as it is a fundamentally monist ideology that says there is a “general will of the people”. As a result, populism is based on the idea that politics takes precedence over all other institutional centers of power, including the judiciary. After all, the “general will of the people” - that is, *vox populi, vox dei* - cannot be limited by anything, not even constitutional guarantees (ibid.: 1175). Moreover, it is possible that populism develops in part as a result of democracy itself. Since the latter is based on the regular holding of free and fair elections, it provides a channel through which the population can express their dissatisfaction with the political system. In addition, democracy creates ambitions that, if unfulfilled, can result in political unrest and provide an enabling environment for populism to flourish. Populism needs strong leadership and can come into conflict with liberal democracy. Independent institutions such as the judiciary play an important role in the protection of fundamental rights and this should be independent of politics. But this means that they can also take decisions that are not popular: popular movements accuse these institutions of threatening the sovereignty of the people. Populism is seen as a danger, but also as a possible remedy for politicians who are too far removed from “the people” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). The intriguing illustration that Benjamin Arditi suggests to show the connection between

populism and democracy may have some merit. According to Ardit, populism is similar to a drunken participant at a dinner party who exhibits poor table manners, is rude and may even start “flirting with the spouses of other guests”. However, it is equally possible that he is telling the truth about a liberal democracy that has forgotten its fundamental goal of people’s sovereignty (Arditi, 2005).

In our opinion, democracy cannot be an ally of populism, since the principles and beliefs of these two entities conflict and harm each other. Populism has the potential to encourage the development of a new political cleavage (populists vs. non-populists), which prevents the formation of strong political coalitions, and can result in the moralizing of politics, which makes it very difficult (if not impossible) reaching agreements and compromises. It is true that liberal democracy is in danger, but this is not a sufficient argument to demand a new solution, much less the establishment of a populist government. Various authors consider populism as a “medicine” for politicians who have moved away from the people. I would, in fact, call populism a “disease” of liberal democracy. And we cannot claim to replace liberal democracy with its “disease”, but we must try to improve it and correct the possible defects it has. Populism shows a number of contradictions. First, populism rejects political parties, but is itself a political movement and, in most countries, a political party. It also criticizes the political elites, but he himself is represented in the elections by a charismatic leader. If democracy had anything to do with populism, it would be to avoid underestimating it. Regardless of insults, ridicule or rejection, populism is a very important ideology and political logic, and this is shown by its presence in the political systems of a significant number of countries in the world.

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