Populists and the Past – the potentialities of historiographic approaches to populism

Gil Manuel Gandarela Gonçalves

Abstract: This paper suggests that the concept of populism can contribute to a renewal of historiographical debates. Often considered too imprecise to offer any analytical value, many historians discard the term or use it in a simplistic and derogatory manner. This dismissal reveals two faults. First, it exposes the lack of dialogue with theoretical contributions from different fields within the "populism studies". Second, it overlooks the particular ways in which populism engages with history. Summoning two works that seek to give populism a history (Finchelstein, 2017 and Rosanvallon, 2020), this paper argues that the term is not lacking a "manifesto" or a concise definition. The "anexactness"(Panniza, 2005) that makes it adaptable to a plurality of contexts allows for a disturbance of set interpretations and concepts, such as "democracy", "nation", or "people". Populist theory exposes the contingency of history's normative foundations, while it revitalizes some important discussions within the field.

Keywords: populism, history, historiography, democracy, Rosanvallon, Finchelstein;

Introduction

Over the past decade, the rise of populist movements around the globe led to the development of what is already being called "populism studies". After all, populist tropes are seemingly everywhere, from the Rassemblement Nationale to the Pope, from the court rooms to medical communication. This dissemination of the term fueled a surge in studies from different fields within the social sciences, offering different theoretical frameworks to make sense of this phenomena and, simultaneously, seeking to give some analytical and normative coherence to a concept that remains elusive.

However, there is a field that is still relatively absent from this seemingly ubiquitous debate, that of History. And this is not by chance. Traditionally, historians are reluctant to accept methodological innovations or epistemological challenges, and the dialogue with other social sciences tends to be sparse. We owe this to the persistent conviction that we can objectively "know" the past though a careful and "impartial" analysis of the facts and to the belief that if we are able to avoid both the vertigo provoked by over-conceptualization and the disruptions induced by a speculative imagination, the past will come to us in its pure form. Historical distancing would therefore be vital, and we should not allow present debates (and what are perceived as present categories) to contaminate the way in which we examine history.

There are, evidently, some exceptions to this insular and bleak description, but this outline still holds true. Despite efforts that date back several decades, the thesis that History should be conceived as a "narrative about the past" (White, 1966), one that is never impartial and that recognizes that facts never speak for themselves (Jenkins, 2004) is not at all consensual. Even when recognizing the contingency of the "methodological pillars" of the field, historians are often inclined to ignore themes and ideas that have the potential to shatter them - the by-now classical Benedetto Croce assertion that "all history is contemporary history" remains, thus, highly provocative. This attitude is partly responsible for the generalized idea that history is something fixed and unchangeable, a perception reflected in the criticisms that have befallen history departments and lecturers currently accused of "politicizing" the field in the name of their own minoritarian agendas[1].

It is true that there have been attempts to set up an "historiographical category" out of populism, stressing the relevance of building a "bridge between historians and the reflections of political scientists, sociologists, and philosophers, in order to launch a critical debate on the in-depth contribution supplied by historians on the category" (Chini and Moroni, 2018). This is all the more urgent since the debates surrounding populism disrupt a set of seemingly consolidated categories that any historian must acknowledge as anything but univocal - such as "democracy", "nation" or "people", to name but a few. In this sense, the dividends that historians can claim by delving into populism studies are threefold: on one hand, historical case studies about populist moments can provide not only the "preliminary work" for political scientists or sociologists to build upon, but also an opportunity for a critical interaction with interpretative models and theories from other social sciences; on the other, current developments within the "populism studies" can urge historians to re-think certain historical events through new methodological and epistemological lenses, given that the multidisciplinary nature of populism studies stresses dimensions that historians often dismiss or minimize (like the role of emotions in politics or the virtues of semiotic approaches to political rhetoric). Finally, given the polemic nature of the term, historians that engage with populism studies must recognize the sheer impossibility of a purely empirical and value-free approach. This does not mean that one must assume a blatantly anti-populist agenda or a defense of populism's virtues against stagnant liberal democracies, as many within academia have done (Zúquete, 2018). But it can push forward the idea that historians hold no duty of "neutrality", one that is both unattainable and, too often, intellectually dishonest – particularly when the

[1] Bolsonaro and Trump's educational politics give us paradigmatic examples of this kind of criticism and contempt for the Humanities. The first, in the eve of his inauguration, stated that one of his goals was "to combat the Marxist rubbish that has spread in educational institutions" (Jeantet, 2019) – he would later announce the withdrawing of funding from university teaching of philosophy and sociology. The second tried repeatedly to cut funding to the arts and humanities (ultimately failing), deeming them "wasteful and unnecessary spending" (McGlone, 2019).

values that underscore certain arguments are disguised as facts or as the produce of an objective and impartial analysis.

This paper focuses on two recent works, seminal in the way they intend to historicize populism, albeit following different paths. Federico Finchelstein, in his *From Fascism to Populism in History* (2017), claims that populism theory is in dire lack of history and that, while most social scientists tend to conceive it as a transhistorical phenomenon, we should instead place it in its historical context – by which he means as a post-fascist approach to mass politics. On the contrary, Pierre Rosanvallon, in *Le Siècle du Populisme* (2020), claims that it is imperative to conceptually define populism, giving a "manifesto" to movements that he seeks to historicize within the *longue durée* debates concerning the nature of democratic politics.

Both works have qualities and shortcomings worth stressing. However, what seems most remarkable is the little attention they both pay to one key aspect – the ways in which populist movements themselves interact with historical narratives, using them to gain affective support and to create transversal collective identities. Therefore, this paper aims not only to skim over the main arguments of the abovementioned authors, but also to point out the specific ways in which populisms throughout history have dialogued with the past, placing them as a particularly poignant response to the now discredited liberal democratic thesis of "the end of history" (Fukuyama, 1992).

Fincheltstein – bringing History to populism theory

Federico Finchelstein's work addresses a problem familiar to those who have recently devoted their time to the study of hodiern populist manifestations – the prevalent association of populism to rampant ethno-nationalisms and exclusionary politics in the mediatic sphere. It seems now relatively unproblematic to state that politicians and media outlets informed by liberal democratic traditions have been using populism not as a concept (as contested as it may be) but rather as a name. Better yet, as an insult to all of those who cannot properly be situated within the spectrum of reasonable and sensible ways of doing politics (Rancière, 2006). Moreover, given that most movements that have been labeled as populists in the west during the past decades have embraced themes and policies akin to the far-right, populism seems now inseparable from authoritarianism, racism, and xenophobia, leading to the simplistic conclusion that we are before "proto-fascist" political formations. Even the obvious concessions to this framing (the "far-left" European populisms) are seen as exceptions that prove the rule, showing us where the "extremes" can meet whilst posing an equal treat to the democratic ideals. This work is, therefore, part of a concerted academic effort to combat the most blatantly normative takes on populism, distinguishing it from other political movements, while not obscuring its different manifestations throughout history.

Finchelstein, as an Argentinian historian, is necessarily aware of the different tonalities that populism can assume. However, he did not dismiss the linkages between populist and fascist movements altogether. Instead, he seemed to consider that stressing them was one of the best ways to underline their irreconcilable differences. Contrary to a

binary opposition between fascism and populism, he seeks to stress the "ambivalent democratic nature of the authoritarian populist experience" (2019, p. 61), placing it as the result of a modern historical process "where the intrinsic problems and limitations of formal democracy cross paths with the history of democracy in the interwar and post-war period" (2019, p. 58). This project has some important implications. To put it clearly, if it recognizes that the tensions populist movements inflame reflect the constitutive shortcomings of democratic representation, it also argues that fascism forever changed the nature and terms of those debates. It was therefore not by chance that the first populist movements to reach power did so in the post-war years, positioning themselves as a third-way between liberalism and socialism – Peronism being the most remarkable example. Modern populism was, he claims, genealogically connected to fascism, having reformulated the legacy of anti-illuminist though at the dawn of the Cold War. Both were just "different chapters" of a transnational history of illiberal resistance to constitutional democracies (2019, p.48).

There are, notwithstanding, some concrete differences between the two. And here Finchelstein takes issue with earlier works form Laclau and more recent takes from Zizek. First, he argues that, while populism has a plebiscitary nature, taking part in the democratic game, fascism, albeit also claiming to represent the will of the people, does not allow for the citizen to individually express that will. Instead, the fascist leader was the incarnation and sole executor of that will, an irrevocable power granted by the people during a given foundational moment (2019, p.37). Second, and this is the most significant epistemic split between the two, populism does not resort to violence, at least not to the extent fascism does. Finchelstein claims that, even though populism can be a typology of authoritarian democracy[1], fascism is an ultraviolent dictatorship that seeks not only to ostracize its enemies, but also to physically eliminate them. In the aftermath of the international defeat of fascism, political legitimacy could no longer be granted to a dictatorship. Populism was, then, seen as a way to rewrite the fascist experience (2019, p.139), returning it to a democratic tradition by promoting social participation while maintaining a spirit of intolerance and antipluralism, along with a political theology fueled by a mythical interpretation of history and a conception of politics as spectacle. Violence was essentially constricted to discourse and modern populism, he claims, while pushing democracy to the brink, no longer seeks to destroy it (2019, p.121). The populist leader is not above the law, electoral representation must be granted and, if it is true that institutional mediation is significantly curtailed, he must remain subject to the ballot, even if in a purely ritualized view of democracy. Authoritarian tendencies can prevail, but only within a democratic framework.

[1] Finchelstein imports this apparently contradictory formulation from Dylan Riley, who uses it to state "that fascist political elites claimed a form of democratic legitimacy even as they ruled through authoritarian means. Fascists dismantled parliaments, elections, and civil rights but embraced fully modern state's claim to represent the people or nation" (Riley, 2019, p.3)

In short, this is the historical context that the author wants us to use in order to frame the populist phenomenon to this day. But why does this demand a reexamination of populism theory? Finchelstein contends that most social scientists have used historical case studies as mere illustrations to their theories, instead of critically engaging with them – the works of Margaret Canovan (1981) and Rosanvallon (2007) are seen here as prime examples of this tendency (2019, p. 149). This paved the way for an ahistoricization, patent in two of the most common approaches to populism, both seen as flawed. On one hand, Finchelstein criticized the thesis of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe on the grounds that they had consistently obscured the authoritarian precedents of populism - namely in Latin America - along with the xenophobic resentment of traditional leftwing electors both in Europe and in the US (2019, p. 25). This allowed them to propose a political project based on a flirtation with political myths that, in his view, diminished programs/ideas and forgot the antifascist roots of the left. Finchelstein rejects the suggestion, particularly evident in Laclau's *On Populist Reason* (Laclau, 2018) and Mouffe's *For a Left Populism* (Mouffe, 2019), that populism could be a viable strategy for a declining left. However, his main epistemological opposition to this approach relates to the claim that populism as a discursive practice becomes a synonym for politics itself. By equating the two, Laclau and Mouffe's structuralist ontology gives way to a transhistorical narrative that focuses on the constitutive problems of representative democracy, ignoring the historical process. A similar problem arises in the ideational approach proposed by Mudde and Kaltwasser and with the characterization of populism as a "thin-ideology" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013). Minimal definitions are centered on the opposition between two antagonistic blocks, split in essentially moral terms. Therefore, they end up placing populism outside of history, leading the author to conclude that "context always constitutes an obstacle to high-theory", never allowing for a much-needed critical theory of democracy. The search for the lowest common denominator, although useful when it comes to developing broad comparative empirical research, would obscure the wide variety of articulations between that "populist core" and different ideological and conjunctural backgrounds.

But what exactly characterizes Finchelstein's alternative? Here the methodologies of global history play a central role - an argument that he has since developed (Finchelstein, 2020). He argues that we should renounce the idea that past and present populist experiences can be reduced to a set of regional or national particularities while, at the same time, abandoning diffusionist narratives owing to a tendentially western perspective. Placing populism within an ongoing transcontextual transit of ideas would underline convergent evolutions, bringing to the fore both what was transmissible from one context to another and what was not. Before similar challenges, namely in democracies where inequality thrives, different leaders and movements would erect similar strategies, in explicit or implicit dialogue with one another. That is probably one of the most provocative and relevant contributions of his work. Even if the "world perspective" of his approach remains theoretically underdeveloped, he stresses the multiple (and at times implausible) reverberations of different historical developments

around the world, although with a clear emphasis on the argentinian case. Populism is not a simple "import-export" trend.

Moreover, this allows for a decentralization of the analysis. Focusing particularly on the Global South (a term that he uses too simplistically, sometimes reiterating the very dichotomies he takes aim at), Finchelstein sees populism as a phenomenon that has no center, but that first came into its own on the "margins". He rejects both the thesis that Latin American populism was a symptom of the economic atavisms of the region, and those that insulate the current populist wave within a western paradigm. Placing populism as a "global ideology" that emerged from different perceptions of democratic and authoritarian ideals following the end of World War II would, therefore, be the best way to complement the limitations of "minimal" definitions and the overly abstract Laclauian ones, giving them some historical context. Furthermore, it would allow for a reassessment of the negative stereotypes surrounding populism, since placing them within the different circumstances that saw them emerge stresses their different characteristics - not all of them necessarily worth demonizing, even if he considers that modern post-fascist populism is characterized by authoritarian traits that, like in the 1920's and 1930's, can metamorphize into unquestionably antidemocratic and even neo-fascist political ventures.

There are, however, some issues with this undertaking. It remains unclear what, in essence, distinguishes what the author deems as "pre-populists" (movements that he sees as the antechamber of fascism) form modern populisms other that the fact that the latter managed to form governments. If we must agree that both World Wars changed the "horizon of possibilities" for such movements, their antiliberal, anti-elitist, anti-institutional character echoes that of its predecessors - and the same could be said of the particularities of their appeals to the people or the traits of their charismatic leaders. As for the contexts that potentiate their emergence, if Finchesteisn's case seems apt to describe the rise of Peronism or Gaitanism as post-fascist experiments, it is less clear how contemporary populisms were shaped by that particular conjuncture. In that sense, the thesis put forward by Barry Eichengreen (Eichengreen, 2018), rooted in economic history, that states that populism is fueled by the failure to mitigate the nefarious effects of capitalism, allowing for a rise in inequality from which the oligarchy profits, seems more poignant. Case in point, it helps to understand why populism as a post-fascist solution came to power in Latin America, but not elsewhere during the so-called "Age of Moderation", largely due to success (limited as it might have been) of welfare state programs in repelling such solutions (2018, pp. 90-91). In that case, relating current populist manifestations to political formations and movements from the 19th century, born from the recurring crises of capitalism, and addressing moments of great spikes in inequality, low social mobility, absence of alternatives and a generalized sentiment of hopelessness and exclusion, does not seem entirely farfetched. This is not to say that Eichengreen's analysis is more precise - one could even say that, by inextricably associating populism to nativism and emphasizing the economic aspects of populist demands and agendas, his scope is even more limited. After all, it has been suggested rather convincingly that the voters' preference for populist movements only partially and

selectively relates to their objective economic condition (Caiani and Padoan, 2020). But it goes to show that there are different approaches that one can take when trying to write an history of populism and that we should not be too concerned with building a definite chronological frame for a phenomenon that is characterized by its adaptability and permanent mutation. Also, by putting too much emphasis on the linkages between populism and fascism, Finchelstein ends up neglecting some important distinctions between the current populist moment and the one from the mid-twentieth century, ranging from the changes in political communication and mobilization introduced by the new media channels, to the particularities of the post 2007/2008 crisis political landscape. If we can agree that there are rhetorical affinities between Péron and Trump, the fact that the latter, as many of his European counterparts, adopts a blatantly xenophobic agenda along with a dissolution of the social role of the state (aspects that are foreign and even in direct opposition to classical Peronism) is not something of lesser importance. Not to mention the fact that there are today self-proclaimed populist movements on the left with radically democratic and pluralist projects that seem to owe very little to a fascist genealogy (other than the fact that they oppose it wholeheartedly). Bypassing such differences between populisms, in a way, only reenforces a use of the concept that can work as a smokescreen through which ethno-nationalisms and neo-fascists can navigate.

Ultimately, we agree that populism's history should be attentive to global interactions, but not as a continuum - let alone as a linear narrative. This is not to say, as Laclau put it, that "history is rather a discontinuous succession of hegemonic formations", making every present "entirely unrelated to the previous one" (Laclau, 2005, p.226). Instead, it seems to be more useful to return to a Gramscian understanding of the present, one "composed by numerous «times» which neither coincide nor are regulated by a common measure" (Mazzolini, 2020, p.776). This conception of time allows for a broadening of the scope of our analysis of populist moments, diverting the focus away from the "critical" episodes that would make for its rise to power or their demise.

Rosanvallon – giving a theory to populism's history

Rosanvallon does not follow that path either. But he does expand on Finchelstein's continuum in his latest work, *Le Siècle du Populisme*. As an historian deeply concerned with debates around the nature of democracy and political representation, populism would necessarily be an attractive subject - one that he had previously addressed, but never at this length. Unlike Finchelstein, however, Rosanvallon does not seem to think that the debate must be restricted to a well-defined chronological period, considering it to be more interesting to genealogically trace populism back to the history of democracy itself, rather than to a given historical conjuncture. If we are to understand the century of populism (ours), it would not suffice to turn our attention to "le siècle des chefs" (Cohen, 2013).

Significantly, Rosanvallon notes that there have been generally three different historiographical approaches to populism (2020, pp. 21-24). The first uses as a touchstone the word itself, reflecting on the different assertions imprinted on it during its first known uses (usually the Russian Narodniks and the north American People's Party, to which he

adds the French "Manifeste du Roman Populiste"), while trying to grasp what could be seen as an original common meaning. However, he considers that these parallel histories, with no connection between them, do not help us to understand the contemporary phenomenon, since they relate to radically different contexts, far too distant from what we now understand as populism. A more useful approach would be to study the history of movements and regimes that, albeit not labeling themselves as populists, could help us understand the "the dynamics of the essential constituents" of populism, echoing many of our present concerns. The "Second Empire" (Bonapartism), Peronism and Gaitanism, all of them with a strong plebiscitarian nature and professing an anti-liberal agenda that pitted the people against the oligarchy, provided an apt historical genealogy. In his words, "if the present is always unprecedented and if we should mistrust analogies that diminish that trait, there is also food for thought in these three evocations"[2] (2020, p. 24). However, it is the third approach, the one shaped by global history, that can deepen the scope of such comparisons. This apparent agreement with Finchelstein is limited at best. For Rosanvallon, a global history of populism is a history that sees the past as a "repertoire of aborted possibilities, a laboratory of experiences that invite us to think about failures, turnarounds and «feels»" (2020, p. 25). It cannot be, unlike in the case of his Argentinian counterpart, a history of an ideal model from which we could derive a clear source and then trace a linear path to its complete and definite concretization. This different take has a lot to do with the way Rosanvallon defines populism: as a limit (borderline) form of democracy. And there is not, evidently, such thing as a linear history of democracy. The atemporality of its language, that can be seen as a precursor to globalization itself, is what makes populism a global phenomenon, adaptable to different contexts and political cultures.

But what exactly characterizes this limit form? On one hand, its opposition to two other limit forms of democracy: minimal democracies and essentialist democracies. The first reduces democracy to the defense of Human Rights, accompanied with the routine election of representatives and leaders – encouraging, therefore, the formation of elective oligarchies (2020, pp.154-155). The second conceives it as the setting-up of a power-society responsible for the edification of "good" – a conception that too often allows for a turnaround towards a totalitarian regime (2020, p.156). Populist democracy would, thus, propose an alternative to these constrictions of the democratic ideal, usually defending the virtues of what Rosanvallon calls an "immediate democracy". It would be the best and only way to make a sovereign people discard the corrupt elites altogether, surpassing through the superlative instrument of the referendum (some would say plebiscite) the limitations imposed by the internal dynamics of party politics and, thus, re-enchanting democratic politics. Unlike direct democracy, that presupposes some kind of assembly, immediate democracy reduced the citizen to the elector, a periodical ritual of unanimity that seeks to rebuild a lost sense of unity. This referenda-based approach to democracy would, in his view, lead to a series of contradictory decisions and political paralysis. Politics, for Rosanvallon, is an enterprise that must be conceived in the long term, and

[2] The translation from the original French is the author's responsibility;

representative democracy is the only way to achieve coherence (one could almost say rationality) in the duration. As he put it in a concise aphorism, "deciding is not wanting" (2020, pp. 174-175). This is a sort of appeal to "patience" that mimics those usually made from the institutionalist political center, in response to the radical demands made by some populist movements. What they fail to understand is that they are reacting not to a status quo that is delaying the delivery of their promises, but to one that no longer as a project of any kind. They are reacting to the "end of history" and to the narrative that insistingly claims that "there is no alternative".

Another important feature of these movements is that, unlike traditional parties that represent the interest of specific groups, they claim to represent the will of the society as a whole, the true will of the people. Rosanvallon, from his political and institutional perspective, finds two particularities of the populist democratic project and its vision of political representation: the populist construction of the "people" and the way in which the "people" identifies with the leader ("l'homme-peuple"). As for the first, he notes that populist movements erect the "people" as the central figure of democracy. However, as he immediately observes, in this general sense, "every good democrat"(2020, p.31) would be a populist. What defines the populist appeal to the people is, in his view, the fact that it neither refers to a "social people" (people as a class, as the proletariat) nor to a people as a "civic body" (the unity of the citizens before a given political regime or constitutional principles). These two conceptions of the "people" do not coincide, but they are part of a same narrative that sees democracy as both a regime and a form of society (2020, pp.32). The current populist wave, thriving amidst high absenteeism and individuation, would be exemplary of a situation where the "people" seems "unfindable" (2020, pp.33), paving the way for discourses that propose its rebuilding in different molds. The political projects put forward by Laclau and Mouffe would be a case in point, as a post-Marxist declination of populism that claims that main question organizing the contemporary social division is no longer that of private property and the control over the means of production, but those introduced by new debates, such as gender politics, identity politics and discrimination. (2020, p. 33). A return to dormant ethno-nationalisms could be another way to recreate and unify a people in different terms. But in order to achieve that unity amongst a plurality of demands, something has to articulate them. Here Rosanvallon borrows the Laclauian idea of empty signifier, applying it to the populist leader. In a mirrorlike effect, the leader becomes a pure-signifier, paradoxically depersonalized in the sense that he is absorbed in its functionality. He is not only the elected or the delegate, "he is the one that renders the people present, figuratively, the one that gives it a shape and a face." (2020, pp. 52-53). More than a program or a set of reforms, populist politics relies on an embodied discourse with existential dimensions that appeals both to affects and reason.

And that brings us to one of the other key arguments employed by Rosanvallon. The role of passions and emotions in populist politics. Underscoring the contributions of the "affective turn" in the "cognitive sciences", he relates the rehabilitation of the study of emotions to an age where well defined classes and social divisions have vanished. The

statistical categories that we used to employ in order to make sense of the reality fail us in a time characterized by incertitude (2020, p.65). And in that particular domain, historians have a particularly relevant role, since that have been stressing the propelling role of emotions and passions, mostly absent of what are generally considered "historical record", in different historical episodes. Rosanvallon sketches three types of emotional appeals to which populist appeal. To the first he calls "emotions of position", that would translate into a general feeling of democratic resentment, attribute to the insensibility and obliviousness of the governing elites. The second type are "emotions of intellection", the kind privileged by populism. These emotions relate with a conspirative vision of the world, as they are an attempt to restore some coherence to all that is perceived as undecipherable, as a way to fight back a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness regarding the woes of humanity (2020, p. 69). Misconceptions, if clear and precise, can provide simple answers to seemingly unsolvable problems. Finally, there are "emotions of action", calls for a sentiment of mistrust in order to chase governments out of office, rejecting any possibility for dialogue and deliberation.

Taking this into account, Rosanvallon goes a step further and sketches what he considers to be the main elements of a "populist personality". Although he considers that there is no survey or model that can grasp conclusively its traits, the author believes that it is reasonable to hypothesize that these emotions and passions are decisive. Adhering to the populist creed is to take part in a community of "resistants" to what is perceived as the "dominant way of thinking", capable of rewriting the world in an almost religious fashion. The tendency to rally under "polemic truths" would, therefore, be one of the constitutive elements of such a personality (2020, p. 73).

All things considered, Rosanvallon manages to build some compelling arguments that work as a complement to the overwhelming amount of works that try to make sense of the populist phenomenon exclusively from the point of view of electoral sociology. On one hand, model approaches are prone to self-confirmation, since the variables picked already reveal a set of preconceptions, that too often say more of the researcher that builds them than of the phenomenon under analysis. On another, by seeing populism as a mere "symptom" of something else (a generalized crisis of representation or the failure of the party system), we are not able to grasp the key features of the populist appeal. Too often characterized as a "thin" or "flabby" ideology, terms that already carry with them judgements of value, populism's mobilizing capacity and versatility remain under problematized. However, the author's proposition to address this problem departs from some of the same misconceptions of the very approaches he criticizes. And this leads to some questionable methodological choices. Right from the get-go, Rosanvallon notes correctly that, contrary to what some call "full-ideologies" (like socialism, liberalism, anarchism…), populism does not possess a proper manifesto or a foundational theoretical work. But instead of taking that hint in order to question the validity of thinking of populism as an ideology of any kind, Rosanvallon proposes to write a "first sketch of that lacking theorization" (2020, p. 20). And what is more, he does that not because he is a fully-fledged populist, but, on the contrary, because that would be the best way radically

criticize populist tactics. After all, the idea that you can only reflect and dissert about subjects that are perfectly arranged and delimited (that have proper manifestos) is a paradigmatic example of the constraints that classical historiographic methodologies place on this kind of phenomenon's, typified by their ambiguity. Basically, in order to make sense of populism, we would have to strip it from one of its prime characteristics, its "anexactess"[3] (Panizza, 2005).

Additionally, if Rosanvallon wanted to build a strong theoretical framework for populism, he had to dialogue much more with the theory that already exists and that he neglects. For example, when criticizing Mouffe's work for defending principles of unanimity and picturing and homogenous "people", he fails do understand the difference between "unity" and "homogeneity" (Katsambekis, 2020), while completely bypassing some of her previous work where the defense of pluralism (rooted on the idea of "agonism") appears front and center (Mouffe, 2006). That lapse is particularly evident, since the critique of populism that he develops later in the book is rooted on the very idea of homogeneity, that he ties to totalitarianism. Moreover, when he ventures in the thankless task that is providing "solutions" for our democratic qualms, he often echoes Mouffe's works, especially when he calls for an "interactive democracy" that would rend the power accountable, allowing for a permanent popular participation, not content with periodical electoral acts (2020, p. 186). Finally, and contrary to some of his affirmations through the book, he continues to reiterate the linkage between populism and authoritarianism, seeing is as a threat to democracy, albeit one that is an integral part of democracy itself.

Populist uses of the Past

"If we give them a past we create a cushion or pillow for their emotions."

(*Blade Runner*, 1982)

It is remarkable that both these contributions fail to address a facet to which no historian should be indifferent. That is, the way in which populist movements engage with the past and with history. The new wave of populisms has shown, rather emphatically, that resorting to evocations of the past - either exalting moments of national glory or those where there was an idealized sense unity amongst the people that had since been lost - is one of the most effective ways to build a strong identarian attachment to a movement. And that has, at times, clear implications vis-a-vis the historian's craft, remembering us, historians, that what we do is not apolitical or impervious to ideology. Nor should it be.

Contemporary populist discourse usually reveals a profound distrust in the knowledge of specialists, "mouthpieces" for the elite that disseminate only what is perceived as "official" knowledge - one that too often seems to go against the best interest

[3] A concept drawn by Deleuze (inspired by Husserl) that seeks to define a state or a thing that is inexact, not due to faults, errors or lacks, but in essence. In his words, "vague or nomad", morphological essences. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1989, p.367);

of the people. Although liberal democracies (a formulation that, not that long ago would be deemed as an oxymoron) claim to defend pluralism, it is important not to ignore that its mission, since its inception, has been to make the "will of the people" predictable (manageable). And that project is best achieved through a control over what is "allowed" in the public sphere. The overwhelming way in which the term "populism" is used by the media, as we have seen, is a testament to the closure of the "horizon of possibilities" enforced by the media and, particularly, by "opinion makers" (an apt categorization) that cannot fathom how scenarios that they have painted as either ridicule or catastrophic are "imposed" by the will of the oblivious and ignorant "mob". Media coverage of Brexit or Trump's election was, in that regard, poignant.

These attitudes must be framed by a narrative that has gained traction during the last quarter of twentieth century – that of Thatcher's TINA, later corroborated by Fukuyama's "end of history". To summarize, this is the conviction that all political concerns that divided humankind had been surpassed, and with it political conflict. In this hypertrophied present, politics became a synonym for administration and politicians, turned technocrats, allowed for an increasing number of decisions to be taken with little to no democratic legitimacy - some austerity measures undertaken in different countries during the aftermath of the 2008 crisis provide good examples. Populisms are also a response to this creed, led by those that feel like this was not quite the "ending" they had envisioned and, therefore, appeal to "a return of history", one that would allow for a future different - sometimes radically so - from the present (Sá, 2021). This overall context has led to the establishment of new utopian "visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-unborn and so inexistent future" (Bauman, 2017).

In a general sense, populism can appear to be a step in the right direction, reactivating an understanding of democracy based on the virtues of confrontation and deliberation, allowing for the imagination to wonder about the endless possibilities that tomorrow has to offer. However, there are some important caveats that follow a clear left-right divide. Leftwing populism usually turns to the past seeking a pure democratic ideal that would facilitate the entry of a set of new demands into the political agenda, reinforcing the representation and political participation of "minorities" that the "traditional left" tended to ignore. Rightwing populism, on the other hand, is essentially reactive, usually appealing for a return of political confrontation, but this time both against demo-liberalism and the intellectual and cultural elites that are enforcing a minoritarian progressive and leftwing agenda against the will of the people. This striking contrast is evident, for instance, in the recent debates around the removal of certain statues from the public space, a gesture that some see as move towards a needed decolonization, and others as an iconoclastic attack on their identity and heritage. "Official Histories" are, therefore, rejected in the name of a "true" one that the elites reject or do not want the people to know about. This is a kind of retropolitics that rises against the "rationalist" culture of illustration, often replacing the word by the symbol and the emotion.

But in either case, populist uses of the past are based on the reimagining of a "locus amoenus" where the people stood united around and ideal of society or a sense of "mission." Golden ages become all the more oneiric in times when the idealized homeland/heartland seems harder to find. This turn to a paradise lost - that *returns* the power to the people - provides a way to transform discomfort into comfort and insecurity in security, something that is best achieved by nurturing a sense of nostalgia that intensifies the identity of a group and, simultaneously, rejects all that is external. In the process of identity construction, history becomes a useful instrument, acting as guideline between the present and the future and as an intermediary between a collective memory and a longing for hope (Elçi, 2021).

It is true that, to a degree, this use of the past as a way to obtain an emotional adherence to a certain political cause is not exclusive to populism. In the same way that vehement appeals to the people's sovereignty are not. In fact, what these debates force us to realize is that, contrary to what most of the anti-populist discourse would have us believe, emotions are never absent from political performances. They are not just a means to an end, but an integral part of political life (Eklundh, 2020). However, populist movements are better equipped for this exercise in "political alchemy" (Fuentes, 2021), since their propensity to work as a platform that aggregates a wide array of people requires and ability to assemble different legacies and memories, no matter how contradictory, into a same "history", able to act as a mobilizer against the eternal-present offered by the logocentric elites. The way in which the Front Nationale recuperates Jaurès and Marx in order to turn the ideals of republicanism and laicism into an anti-muslim rhetoric, or the way in which Syriza mimicked the "Oxi" moto from Metaxas during its anti-EU referendum are significative examples of the "symbolic promiscuity" (Fuentes, 2021) of contemporary populisms - one that can be extended with no great effort to past ones as well. It is as if the lack of a doctrinal corpus that Rosanvallon takes issue with is compensated by a rich, diverse, and conflicting symbolic universe.

Conclusions

The past does not change, but our questions do. Although populism is not a novel phenomenon, the recent "populist wave" was detrimental for the development of a field of studies that addresses a previously undervalued set of issues. Having become a buzzword within the social sciences in the wake of the present critique of liberal democracies, "populism" is used to describe forces and dynamics that are far from new and that were previously described through different labels. Hence the reason why historians should more confidently draw upon the idea to discuss past movements and conjunctures. Even if the consecration of "populism studies" is not an enterprise without faults, perhaps risking the reification of a concept that can be better understood if decentralized (Cleen and Glynos, 2021), historians should not remain oblivious to its many contributions. In fact, the difficulty to encapsulate normatively populist moments can allow for a much-needed epistemic shift in the way we conceive historiography, forcing a deepening of the dialogues with other social sciences in the process. Populism is a "travelling idea", and history can add something to its evolution if the usual emphasis

given to moments when populist movements gain nominal political power is balanced with a consistent effort to explore the different spheres of society where its hegemony is built and that give populists "a social authority sufficiently deep to conform society into a new historical project" (Hall, 1988). Exploring sources like personal archives and oral testimonies from supporters, for instance, can reveal how these movements can be build up from the bottom up. Finally, the disputes over the "popular" consent surrounding interpretations of certain historical episodes and the way in which populists use the past are part of this "wide and differentiated struggle", one that historians should not ignore, not only because it is in many ways innovative, but particularly because it sometimes results in efforts to rewrite history for the advancement of political projects that directly threaten institutions and academics that fight back.

*Gil Manuel Gandarela Gonçalves, Institute of Contemporary History (IHC – NOVA University Lisbon), E-mail: gil.goncalves@campus.fcsh.unl.pt ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3303-8238. This paper has been financed by Portuguese Public Funds through FCT (Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology) in the framework of the project PD/BD/142953/2018.

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