Introduction: Populism, Political Representation and Social Media Language

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In 2019, the research network ROMPOL published a first volume in the field of political discourse analysis: Political Discourses at the Extremes. Expressions of Populism in Romance-Speaking Countries. The main objective of that first edited volume was the study of the rise of populism in some Romance-speaking countries in Europe, primarily in Spain and France, and in Latin America, with the cases of Venezuela and Mexico. Important issues such as racism, ideologies and religions were treated through the prism of populism. In this new volume, that previous work on the emerging populism in Europe and in Latin America has been deepened and broadened, focusing this time on the expressions of populism in Italy, France and Spain for the European region, and in Brazil for the Latin American region. Romance-speaking countries are worth studying and comparing because of all their similarities. Being predominantly Roman Catholic countries, they share religious values and beliefs. France, Italy and Spain are neighbors and have similar climates and therefore common lifestyles and social traditions. The French, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish languages all derive from Latin and share many features that increase the mutual understanding between the countries. France, Italy and Spain are all Mediterranean countries and therefore share political issues related to their geographic location, of which immigration from North Africa is the most important. Boat refugees and immigration in general have been one of the most central political questions during the last decades in Europe and particularly in Mediterranean countries; this issue is commonly linked to the emergence of populist movements in this area. Since the 1960s, their economies have also suffered in similar ways from the consequences of an

era of deindustrialization, to a higher extent than Germany and North European countries have. All these cultural and political matters together are motivations for studying the expressions of populism in the national politics and media of these countries. When it comes to Brazil, it is also interesting to observe and compare with a country that shares with France, Italy and Spain many of the values mentioned above but which at the same time stands outside of the European context. It represents a Lusophone and Latin American perspective where we find other reasons and motives behind the growing populist movements, such as extreme socioeconomic gaps, a "*caudillo*" tradition of strong fatherlike and person-oriented leaders in the population and sometimes institutionalized corruption. The following lines of investigation are explored:

- comparative studies of the expressions of populist discourses, and of their emergence and circulation in the media within the abovementioned geolinguistic areas;
- analyses of seduction strategies and rhetorical means used by different populist figureheads in the countries in focus;
- studies of social media productions with a focus on the notions of information vs misinformation and the dissemination of fake news, in the light of specific discursive events; and
- investigations of the political representation of and the relations between populism and direct democracy, mainly through the so-called citizens' initiative referendum (RIC) in France.

The chapters of the book provide insights for a better understanding of the expressions of populism emerging within the countries named above as well as the way social media participates in its dissemination and circulation. The volume The New Challenges of Populist Discourses in Romance Speaking Countries is the result of interdisciplinary and comparative studies on political discourse, in particular on the forms of expressions and the development of populism in Romance-speaking countries.

The main aim of this second volume with populism in focus is to identify, explore and compare expressions of populism in some countries in the parts of the world that speak Romance languages; the volume comprises studies from different academic disciplines such as discourse analysis and cultural and media studies. The interdisciplinary approach is essential for shedding light on the phenomenon of populism in all its complexity and diversity. Our scope has been to enlarge the analyses

of the emergence of populist discourses over time and across political borders and genre by including countries unexplored in our previous volume, Brazil and Italy.

Populist discourses may generally be characterized by a deep polarization of positions and a disproportionate use of accusations. The classical rhetoric of arguments based on a combination of *logos, pathos* and *ethos* is often abandoned in favor of speeches alluding to a higher extent to emotions, rather than rational thinking, in order to arouse people's feelings. This is a strategy for granting one's own position and disqualifying those of others, supported by the use of strongly value-laden words and hyperbolic expressions. Populist discourses frequently reinforce existing antagonisms and undermine the traditional political argumentative style, based on the matter-of-fact confrontation of opinions in the public space. Populist leaders often present themselves as the unobstructed spokesmen of the people, with whom they form a community of "we/us" in the battle against "them." This pairs with the strong polarization mentioned earlier.

The rise of populist discourses in many countries in the last decades may have been due to changes in political communication. The constant and overwhelming diffusion of information in all types of media and the relativization of truth that comes with it, along with a less clear political division on a left–right scale, may favor persona-based political alternatives and the strong polarized messages that we see today. The question of how to reach voters in the actual media buzz is an issue that is far more important today than some decades ago, and the exposure of face and commentaries has increased exponentially; this in itself may promote a certain style of politician. In populist movements there is as a matter of fact a very strong focus on leadership, which is also a recurrent theme in this book, alongside the new media landscape impact on political discourses.

An interesting question is whether these discourses illustrate an ongoing shift of power. Albert Hirschman (1970) proposed a theory on the way citizens express their political commitment, where he defined three basic modes of participation, summarized in three words: *loyalty, exit* and *voice*. When there is a shared consensus between citizens and the political elite, the institutions remain stable, and citizens are loyal to their leaders. In this perspective, loyalty reflects a situation of trust between citizens and political elites. When there is a strong disagreement, a "dissensus" (Rancière 2010), then citizens might find alternative ways to express common concerns; this is the "voice" option. The strategy

of voicing means that the political system is under pressure from new, emerging political forces. The system benefits from this kind of inter-action between the political elites and the citizens but there is a risk of integrating the voicing strategy to legitimize the existing system. In other words, the voice strategy might fail and provoke more dissatis-faction. Therefore, individuals might prefer to choose the "exit" option by expressing a form of radical disloyalty and a reaction to the way politics is done. The question is whether populist discourses reinforce a voicing strategy with the expression of a deep dissatisfaction with the elites or if they indicate a transformation of political systems with the concentration of powers in the hands of alternative leaders (Fagerholm 2020: 32–33). In this latter case, it would be possible to see populist discourses as strategies for replacing traditional elites (Hawkins 2019: 61). Robert A. Dahl proposed a theory of polyarchy in liberal democracies where different social groups compete for ac-cess to political power (Dahl 1971). Populism could be seen here as a strategy of rupture to legitimize this new access. The three scenarios *loyalty, exit* and *voice* developed by Rancière are interesting to bear in mind throughout the reading of this book, since they represent the dynamicity in language itself: speaking is an act of mind and can lead to re-actions among the people of a dissatisfied community.

Along these lines, some of the recurrent themes in the 13 studies included in the volume are the denunciation – by populist voices – of the so-called elites' corruption, as well as those elites' incapacity to solve concrete political and economic issues. It is also the escalation and the reinforcement of populist discourses as an expression – act – of extreme criticism and even hatred against traditional political leaders. These populist voices look for scapegoats and claim proximity with *the* people, depicted in the discourse as a uniform authentic group. Other issues treated in the volume are the focus on traditional values, national symbols, ethnicity and a nostalgia for a bygone era, which are efficient topics for arousing feelings and favoring a sense of unity. The interplay between some of these matters is further explored in the book. The book's chapters show in fact the extent to which populist discourses in-troduce a system based on features such as one-sidedness, through the act of designating a common threat and/or enemy, and on the strong focus on the rejection of the adversary's legitimacy.

As mentioned above, the studies presented in this volume deal with different geographical areas within the Romance-speaking world, focusing on the growing populist discourses in the political arena.

We have therefore chosen to present the 13 chapters according to the territory they investigate, in alphabetical order: Brazil, France, Italy and Spain.

Part 1: Populist Styles in Brazil

Authors: Thomas Johnen, Carlos Piovezani, Luzmara Curcino & Thiago Augusto Carlos Pereira

Thomas Johnen (Programa eleitoral em formato de Power Point: A proposta do programa de governo de Bolsonaro nas eleições presidenciais brasileiras de 2018) conducts an analysis of the political program of Bolsonaro, showing how the president's discourse promotes the protection of certain values such as private property as the supreme moral good instead of the protection of human life, and the necropolitics (Mbembe 2016), whereby citizens lose their own right to life, that his administration pursues. Hence, the universalist horizon (human rights, environment and equality) is pushed back in favor of conservative values representing the concerns of a small group of well-born Brazilian citizens.

Carlos Piovezani's study (La malédiction des populistes: discours sur la parole populaire au Brésil) of the media representations of the former Brazilian president Lula's discourse discloses the existence of a certain class contempt through the numerous examples of how the media makes fun of Lula's working-class – "populist" – language and forms of expressions. This tendency of mocking the *vox populi* dates back to the birth of democracy and has appeared in many different guises; during the last two centuries fascist leaders all over the world have benefited from the idea of the prevalent disrespect of the people's voice. This, however, does not prevent a reiteration of discrimination of the people's voice such as the one Piovezani points at. According to the author, the label "populism" is used in Brazilian media as a strategy of social distinction to delegitimize people in power.

In their study, **Luzmara Curcino** and **Thiago Augusto Carlos Pereira** (Livros e populismo anti-intelectualista na eleição de Bolsonaro no Brasil) do not consider populist discourses in Brazil as transient phenomena but as a thorough strategy in today's Brazil. The authors cover the same field and period as Thomas Johnen (Chapter 1), although this study does not mainly deal with Bolsonaro's discourse but focuses on how some editorial strategies that promoted authors within the new right-wing segment had a clear impact on the national

political scene (e.g., the references by Bolsonaro to bestsellers from Olavo de Carvalho). There has indeed according to their findings been a deliberate attempt on behalf of the leader to establish a new political order with new political references. In the case of Brazil, the election of Bolsonaro seems to have been promoted by a broader and anti-intellectual discourse promoting old-fashioned values and ways of living.

Part 2: Far Right's Discourses and Political Representation in France

Authors: Denis Jamet & Bérengère Lafiandra, Morgane Belhadi, Christophe Premat

Denis Jamet and **Bérengère Lafiandra** (Représentations de l'immigration dans le discours politique français. Étude comparative des discours de Marine Le Pen et d'Emmanuel Macron (2015–2019, France)) study the representation and the conceptualization of immigration in far-right political discourse in France. Their quantitative big data analysis aims to identify the way immigrants were depicted in Marine Le Pen's speeches between 2015 and 2019 as well as the rhetorical strategies involved in these representations, and to compare them to those used by Emmanuel Macron's in his speeches.

In a slightly different approach, **Morgane Belhadi**'s study (La représentation populiste. Du leader au peuple : identification, incarnation et mise en scène. Le cas des affiches électorales du Front/Rassemblement national) performs an analysis of the visual iconographic representations in the posters of the Rassemblement National in France and their matching to the accompanying verbal message. The psychoaffective dimension of the multimodal representations reveals how political leaders rely on emotions to gain influence.

Christophe Premat (De quoi le RIC est-il le nom? Les commentaires de la presse française sur l'usage du référendum d'initiative citoyenne (1995–2020)) reflects on the "acronymization" of the Citizen Initiative Referendum (RIC) in France during the yellow vests protests. He tries to figure out why the RIC became a motto for the political protests and why it became impossible to use the expression "popular referendum initiatives." A thorough study of a corpus of journalistic texts from the daily press shows that this lexical elaboration is due to the construction of a counterdiscourse rejecting the last reforms of the representative system in France.

Part 3: Populist Voices in Italy: Between Tweets and History

Authors: Valeria Reggi, Alessandra Barotto & Claudia Roberta Combei, Virna Fagiolo, Fabio Guidali, Michele Colombo

Valeria Reggi (Anger, Fear and Extreme Polarization in Italian Political Discourse: A Multimodal Study of the Tweets by Matteo Salvini and His Supporters during the European Elections) highlights the polarization effects of far-right populist discourses exposed in Italian-language tweets. Her findings illustrate how the recurrent language patterns perform a provocative and aggressive style in their posts. The more transgressive and therefore upsetting these discourses are, the more efficient they are.

In a similar approach, **Alessandra Barotto** and **Claudia Roberta Combei** ("Outlier" latenti nelle costruzioni a lista: il caso del discorso politico su Twitter) work with the same material as Valeria Reggi; their study is carried out on the tweets within a certain time period of four (often characterized as) populist politicians in Italy: Giorgia Meloni, Matteo Renzi, Matteo Salvini and Nicola Zingaretti. The authors investigate, in an approach similar to Reggi's, the way political communication is managed via Twitter, but focus on what they call "semantic deviations" elsewhere described as typical for populist discourses. The transgressive markers appearing in these politicians' tweets appeal to emotions rather than to logic reasoning and real argumentation.

Virna Fagiolo (Populismo e linguaggio della politica: I discorsi populisti in Italia negli anni Novanta) takes us back to the 1990s and performs a series of analyses on 21 speeches by political figures of that period: Francesco Cossiga, Umberto Bossi and Silvio Berlusconi. The populist label she assigns to these discourses are based on specific rhetorical devices and seduction strategies typically associated with populist discourses, as well as on the recurrent themes of their speeches: freedom, the desire for change and the people's revenge.

Fabio Guidali (Reading Asor Rosa's Scrittori e popolo today: Populism as Universalist Political Approach) reveals the emergence of populism within the left-wing literary critic Asor Rosa's writings in the Sixties. This author illustrates the tension between the universalist aspect of populism (the society as a whole) and the interests of the working class, and how this conception of populism can be applied to the analysis of populist discourse of contemporary Italy, specifically the speeches produced within the Conte I Cabinet (the 65th cabinet of the Italian Republic, led by Giuseppe Conte) between 2018 and 2019.

Michele Colombo explores from a historical perspective (*Populism in Italy before 1992*. An Analysis of Parliamentary Speeches by Guglielmo Giannini, Marco Pannella, and Umberto Bossi) the parliamentary speeches of three Italian politicians considered populists: Giannini, Pannella and Bossi. These speeches were performed in the years before 1992, which was when the traditional Italian parties collapsed and fell apart. Colombo shows that hyperbolic expressions belong to the rhetorical devices that help us identify and understand the form and essence of populist discourses. He sustains that the populist discourse satisfies the political forces that aim to reshape the political representation.

Part 4: Podemos and Vox's Language and the Process of Othering in Spain

Authors: Carmen Llamas Saíz, Ana Pano Alamán

There is not always uniformity when it comes to the addressees of populist discourses; some discourses emphasize a universalist scope by defending the interests of the people as a whole, while others defend the interests of a specific social group. In both cases, however, there is often a strategy of victimization through the creation of a scapegoat. Left – as well as right –populist discourses tend moreover to overuse words like *citizens* and *people*. This is a tendency carried out in **Carmen Llamas Saíz**'s study (Podemos y Vox: selección léxica y marcos de interpretación en el programa electoral), a comparison of the recent electoral programs of the Spanish political parties Podemos and Vox. The recurrent use of these strong value-laden words points to the rise of neoconservative feminism in Spain, bringing forth an ideology that highlights traditional old-fashioned values.

Ana Pano Alamán (Series enumerativas y populismo en el discurso político español en Twitter) also digs into the strategies of intensification of populist discourses in Spanish political discourse through tweets. The classical us–them polarization with a radical process of othering well match the way Twitter is configured. A meticulous analysis of enumerative sequences and their argumentative functions within a corpus of tweets of Pedro Sánchez, Pablo Casado, Pablo Iglesias, Albert Rivera and Santiago Abascal reveals general tendencies about the creation of antagonistic attacks and counterattacks between the politically opposed groups involved in political communication.

Looking at the chapters together, it becomes clear that one can't reduce populist expressions and discourses to political leaders placed in

the category of "outsiders". The different chapters disclose and explain how the migration of political communication from traditional media to social media boosts the rise of a populist style. This seems to go hand in hand with the tendency of politicians to renew their images and break some of the bureaucratic links of the representative system. If populist discourses challenge the traditional institutionalized political system – and their traditional communication channels – by privileging direct expressions and transgressive behaviors, the public space and political discourses run the risk of being transformed and reduced to an arena of accusations, bullying, menace and smear.

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