

# 10. Reading Asor Rosa's *Scrittori e popolo* today: Populism as Universalist Political Approach

Fabio Guidali

University of Milan

## Abstract

The left-wing literary critic Alberto Asor Rosa provided one of the first analyses of populism in Italy with his book *Scrittori e popolo* (1965), which criticised the communist post-war cultural politics. He stated that universality of culture was a populist issue and welcomed any cultural expression taking a stand in favour of the working class as opposed to society as a whole. This chapter uses his idea of populism to investigate today's populism in Italy and especially the Conte I Cabinet between 2018 and 2019, supported by two populist parties (Movimento Cinque Stelle and Lega), considering it unintentionally universalist.

## 1. Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on Alberto Asor Rosa's analysis of the communist political culture in post-war Italy, which reached its peak in his 1965 book *Scrittori e popolo* (*Writers and the People*). This work is a critical account of Italian literature between the mid-19th century and the mid-20th century, of the relationship between intellectuals and the Italian "people", and of the communist influence on the interpretation of texts and literary production. Himself a former communist militant before 1956 and later again a member of the Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party, PCI) in the 1970s, in that in-between phase Asor Rosa openly used his publications as weapons in the political struggle. To our eyes he has the merit of having both stirred the discussion on populism in the 1960s and provided food for thought on the definition and essence of the term today.

---

### How to cite this book chapter:

Guidali, F. 2023. Reading Asor Rosa's *Scrittori e popolo* today: Populism as Universalist Political Approach. In: Roitman, M., Bernal, M., Premat, C. & Sullet-Nylander, F. (eds.) *The New Challenges of Populist Discourses in Romance Speaking Countries*, pp. 219–236. Stockholm: Stockholm University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/bcj.k>. License: CC BY-NC.

The most common approach towards populism in Italy places political parties and movements at the centre of the analysis (Biorcio 2015; Martinelli 2013; Masala & Viviani 2020; Palano 2017; Tranfaglia 2014). These contributions usually focus on contemporary Italy, especially after the 15-month experience of the Conte I Cabinet between 2018 and 2019, supported by Movimento Cinque Stelle and Lega (Cozzi 2018), which has been labelled a “model” and “political workshop” of European populism (Biancalana 2014; Chiapponi 2017; Lanzone 2014; Mosca & Tronconi 2019; Salvadori 2019; Santoro 2013).<sup>1</sup> Movimento Cinque Stelle and Lega are indeed united by anti-elitism, anti-globalism, alleged disintermediation,<sup>2</sup> and a preference for plebiscitary forms of government. Nevertheless, this chapter does not address populism as a pattern of political representation and democratic government<sup>3</sup> but considers the matter from the standpoint of studies in the history of culture, shifting the spotlight from rhetorical devices and political content onto the underlying structure of cultural discourse, which appears to tend towards universalism, contrary to what might be argued intuitively.

The aim of this chapter is not to dispute eminent theoretical approaches in the field of social sciences and sociology but rather to suggest the productive value of a different perspective. On the other hand, this chapter fully confirms populism in its position within the frame of representative democracy, according to Nadia Urbinati’s explanation. Indeed, at the centre of reflection here is the PCI, a cornerstone of post-war Italian democracy. Though agreeing with Urbinati’s writings on the fact that for populists the “people”<sup>4</sup> is a more inclusive concept than “class” or “nation”, so much so that she defines populism as “una forma di democrazia maggioritaria” (a form of majoritarian democracy) (Urbinati 2020: 9), my working hypothesis challenges her idea of populism as an anti-universalist stance, because on the contrary it considers today’s populism to be unintentionally universalist, provided that a single national community is seen as a “universal” entity.

---

<sup>1</sup> On Italy as a compelling case study on populism see Dominijanni (2017); Molinari (2018). See also Revelli (2015); Orrù (2019). For an interesting comparison between Italy and France see Lazar and Diamanti (2018).

<sup>2</sup> Against this idea see Barberis & Giacomini (2020).

<sup>3</sup> On the link between populism and democratic politics see Laclau (2005).

<sup>4</sup> On the difficult coexistence of “people” and “populism” I here make reference to Rosanvallon (2017). On the changing definition of these two terms see Diamanti (2018); Palano (2019). On citizen participation see Biancalana (2020).

The premise of this chapter is twofold and concerns first an analysis of the connotation of the word “people” for the PCI at the time when Asor Rosa published *Scrittori e popolo*, and second the significance of *operaismo* (workerism), the Marxist political tendency associated with Asor Rosa, which, not by chance, reacted against the same idea of “people” prevailing within the Italian left. The chapter then discusses Asor Rosa’s works, as well as his political path, and introduces the book *Scrittori e popolo* and its preparatory writings, that is, the articles published in two periodicals that were at the origin of *operaismo* in the early 1960s, *Quaderni Rossi* and *classe operaia*, in which the author defined populism as a universalist political approach and rejected it. In the end, the chapter briefly takes into consideration Asor Rosa’s 2015 essay “Scrittori e massa” (Writers and the Masses), an appendix to the latest edition of *Scrittori e popolo*, which calls into question new reflections on the recent political and cultural landscape in Italy and more specifically on the way the word “populism” is commonly used, by proposing to talk about *massa* (“mass” or “crowd”), instead of *popolo*, when analysing features typically identified as “populist”.

## 2. Why the “people”?

In order to understand Asor Rosa’s interpretation of *populismo*, it is first necessary to establish the political overtone of the word *popolo* (the people) in post-war Italy. The country had come out of the conflict with a set of fragmented memories: beyond the common background of suffering, death and destruction, Italians had had different political experiences, depending on whether they had believed in the fascist regime and its Nazi ally up until the last minute, or supported the anti-fascist Resistance, or just waited with patience and resignation for the war to come to an end, as the majority did. Nevertheless, the Constitution of the Italian Republic, promulgated in 1947 as the result of a compromise between political groups, especially Catholics, communists, socialists and secular forces, states in article 1: “L’Italia è una Repubblica democratica, fondata sul lavoro. La sovranità appartiene al popolo, che la esercita nelle forme e nei limiti della Costituzione” (“Italy is a democratic republic founded on labour. Sovereignty belongs to the people, who exercise it within the forms and limits of the Constitution”). This marks the unitary character of the people itself. Still, in the early 1960s, this unitary character of *popolo* was reaffirmed both in the philosophical context, for instance in Nicola Abbagnano’s renowned *Dizionario*

*di filosofia*, in which *popolo* is described as “una comunità umana caratterizzata dalla volontà degli individui che la compongono di vivere sotto lo stesso ordinamento giuridico” (“A human community characterised by the will of the individuals who compose it to live under the same legal system”) (Abbagnano (1961) *ad vocem*, mentioned in Asor Rosa’s chapter “Scrittori e massa. Saggio sulla letteratura italiana post-moderna” (2015)), and in the religious context, since the expression *popolo di Dio* (people of God) was used in the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, one of the main documents of the Second Vatican Council, in order to indicate the universal mission of the Catholic Church (Dogmatic Constitution 1964: chapter 2).

The unitary character of the Italian word *popolo* was therefore well present in Italy at the time, and it was even at the core of the PCI’s rhetoric. Founded in 1921, the PCI remained faithful to Lenin’s party model – a centralist political formation for so-called “professional revolutionaries” – in the years of its officials’ foreign exile. But in 1944, while the war was still ravaging Northern Italy, the communist leader Palmiro Togliatti, returning from exile and in accordance with the Soviet Union, announced that Italian communists were now available for a compromise with the other anti-fascist parties and the monarchy in order to ensure proper governance of the country. Togliatti associated this unitary politics with the transformation of his little party into a mass party (Martinelli 1995). The rhetoric around the word *popolo* was then functional to this major change. Indeed, in the 1920s the communist identity had openly been grounded on *classe* (the social class), which was a word choice focusing on the existence of social divisions; after World War II, instead, it was the “people”, with its unitary meaning, which became central in the party’s discourse. For the PCI the “people” was now a homogeneous entity, bearer of positive values, and above all an inter-class formation, so that the word “class” did not find much place in communist discourse anymore. The “*popolo*” as seen by Togliatti and the communists after the war was therefore ready to find compromises and adhere to democratic institutional practices, halting and even refusing a revolution and a drastic transformation of the system. As recently shown (Bassi 2019), this rhetorical understanding of the “people” lasted for over twenty years with some minor changes.

This is part of what *operaismo* (workerism) stood in contrast to. The latter current of thought and political tendency developed within

Marxism from the late 1950s on (Bologna 2014; Wright 2002),<sup>5</sup> in a phase characterised in Italy both by great industrial expansion in the wake of the Fordist/Taylorist model and by the myth of affluence and economic wealth resulting from the growing industrialisation of the country (Castronovo 2010; Causarano 2015). According to *operaismo*, an accurate Marxist analysis of society would deny that industrialisation brings well-being and social integration, as it contributes instead to the stabilisation of the domination of capital over the working class. This analysis was clearly vastly different from communist orthodox thought, which in those years made almost no reference to Marx and was based on historical investigation rather than a sociological and scientific approach (Trotta & Milana 2008; Zanini 2010). In this sense, *operaismo* accused Italian communists of failing to examine changes in the industrial sector and specifically in the places of production. As a consequence, *operaismo* supported a deep renovation within the workers' movement, promoting workers' representative bodies and the autonomous development of grass-roots antagonistic practices in the field of production without any party mediation, in contrast to what had always been the rule as a result of the traditionally close link between unions and parties. In particular, the periodical *Quaderni Rossi*, edited by Raniero Panzieri, who was the original leader of the *operaismo* movement, aimed at bringing to light those forms of resistance and workers' struggles that were independent from unions and party action.

The above situation had an impact on the cultural sphere, too. Indeed, Panzieri also aimed at connecting political analysis and literary criticism, being aware that the parties at that time expressed not only a political orientation but also a cultural project. His objective was to dismiss literary myths, illusions and tactics in the cultural field, which mirrored the broad democratic alliances characterising Italian politics – and above all post-war communism – instead of proposing a revolutionary approach.<sup>6</sup> In order to do so, Panzieri, who was a party official and an ideologist but not a literary critic, recognised the young Alberto Asor Rosa as the one who could expose those cultural myths.

Alberto Asor Rosa (1933–2022) was a promising literary critic – and one of the most prominent of his kind until his last years, as proven by the very recent publication of his critical work in the book series

<sup>5</sup> As a general reference on Marxism in Italy after 1945, see Corradi (2005: 91–148).

<sup>6</sup> Letter by Raniero Panzieri to Cesare Cases, 17 March 1958 (Panzieri 1987: 131).

*I Meridiani*, which accounts for the entering into the literary canon (Asor Rosa 2020). In the early 1950s he was a member of the PCI together with his friend and fellow intellectual Mario Tronti, a Marx scholar and later in turn a central figure in the *operaismo* movement. Belonging to a generation that had not experienced the fascist regime as an adult, Asor Rosa could afford not to be compliant with either the political choices communists had made in the aftermath of the war or the Stalin myth, which was a relevant feature in the PCI after the war. After 1956, following communist approval of the violent invasion of Hungary by the troops of the Warsaw Pact, he left the PCI and was one of the scholars and political thinkers who looked for new paths for reinventing Marxism from within, now that in their eyes the Soviet Union had definitively acquired a conservative and even counter-revolutionary connotation. He started a fruitful collaboration with Raniero Panzieri and nourished his ideas with intense discussions and militancy side by side with Tronti, soon linking the political assumptions of *operaismo* to literary issues, according to Panzieri's indication to associate political reasoning and literature. Indeed, *operaismo* involved a new way of considering any product of a bourgeois society, including cultural ones, and Asor Rosa paved the way for this kind of investigation (Guidali 2021b).

### 3. *Scrittori e popolo* and its preparatory works

The publication of the book *Scrittori e popolo* in 1965 was the culmination of several years of preparatory work whose starting point can be traced back to an essay Asor Rosa published in *Quaderni Rossi* in April 1962. His piece on the relationship between workers and the official socialist culture might seem unusual and marginal in the context of a periodical devoted to theoretical and political interventions on union issues and the world of factories, but in it Asor Rosa was perfectly in tune with the main features of *operaismo*. He highlighted the central aspects in the culture of the Italian workers' movement, and especially in the post-war communist political culture, that is, exploitation of a democratic national tradition and simultaneously marginalising of those elements of Italian socialism that were discordant with historicism in philosophy and provincial naturalism in the arts; these were all aspects that had allowed Togliatti to present Italian communism not as a foreign political force but as the heir of the great national cultural tradition. Asor Rosa ascertained that these cultural choices were

in agreement with the communists' political orientation to reject any antagonistic stance against "bourgeois" culture, that is, the culture of a capitalist-oriented middle class as opposed to the proletariat. In this sense, the communists had allegedly dropped the plan to break with capitalism in favour of shaping a working-class culture. As a consequence, the working class had ended up being just one of the components of a vast *popular* formation.

By underestimating the class components and the existing differences between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, what was left was progressive and humanitarian culture. This is what Asor Rosa deemed *populist*. By this adjective he indicated all that is general, socially ecumenical and all-inclusive, that is, irrespective of the specificity of the working class. But, since for him the working class itself was the essential and most influential part of the people, he rejected this comprehensive approach. On the contrary, for him, rooting for the working class meant being partial, one-sided, even biased in favour of the working class, hence *not populist* (Asor Rosa 1962).

For the sake of my argument, it is worth remarking that Asor Rosa explicitly denied that focusing his thoughts on the working class stood for a new universalism, where the working class would be the new sun around which any other social formation orbits. Indeed, universalism implies the existence of one single system, an idea that Asor Rosa dismissed, being convinced – as any activist of the *operaismo* movement was – that the distinctive aspect of the working class was its separateness from the bourgeoisie. In other words, Asor Rosa approved of and favoured one-sidedness, believing that what is general or universal is misleading, deceptive and a trap set by the capitalist system. Anti-universalism was undoubtedly a hallmark of the international New Left, to which *operaismo* also belonged. The questioning of universal values that allegedly plunged their roots in the history and culture of Europe and its democratic institutions was indeed very common in the years of decolonisation and of the international civil rights movements. The existence of a European cultural reality consistently and organically expressing its main values was at this point strongly challenged; a general cultural relativism was emerging, and with it the end of the faith in shared universal principles (Guidali 2016; Guidali 2021a; Reszler 1976).

A further essay by Asor Rosa in the periodical *classe operaia* in 1964 laid the groundwork for his book *Scrittori e popolo*, which was yet to be published, in an even more direct way. Asor Rosa identified any



kind of culture, even the culture of opposition, with bourgeois culture. Consequently, as he later wrote in *Scrittori e popolo*, it was necessary to overturn the traditional culture of the Italian workers' movement, which had always referred to universality of culture, historicism and socialist humanism, but also to an intrinsically bourgeois national cultural tradition. These cultural politics had indeed been expressly coupled with alliances between political forces and between classes. Therefore, Asor Rosa's refusal of the culture of the classic workers' movement meant purposely rejecting the whole communist political approach from 1944 onwards, which had had moralistic and humanist but not at all revolutionary overtones, and had appealed to coming to terms with the bourgeoisie. Against the communist political culture, which had definitely not made any contribution to the destruction of the bourgeois system, Asor Rosa proposed to focus all cultural intervention on partisanship in favour of the workers. This was what *operaismo* meant by "workers' point of view", that is, the tendentiousness of the perspective (Asor Rosa 1964).

Even more specific on this matter was an essay published again in *classe operaia* in 1965, in which Asor Rosa pointed out that the idea of a universal validity of culture was just the expression of a general social interest, because those who believed in the existence of universal values aspired to do the best for the society as a whole, hence for the bourgeoisie too, and not just for the labourers. Nevertheless, according to him, general social interest ended up representing the interests of capitalist society *per se*. It was therefore necessary to be ferociously partisan and shy away from the idea that there existed a general interest, considering that a universal culture would always play into the hands of capital (Asor Rosa 1965).

All these themes converged in *Scrittori e popolo* (Asor Rosa 2015: chapter "Saggio sulla letteratura populista in Italia"). The book is divided into two main sections and is organised chronologically. The starting point of Asor Rosa's argument is Italian literature in the Risorgimento, the time in Italian history culminating in the unification of the country in the 19th century. Here Asor Rosa pinpointed populism as the positive representation of the people by writers who took it as an idealised model and adhered to it with a sentimental impetus rather than an objective assessment. In this view, populism was also based on the hegemonic role of the middle class, the ideological creation of a national historical bloc leading to concord between the various class components, an exclusive focus on the rural world, and



an anti-labour bias. Examining the works by novelists and political thinkers such as Gioberti, Mazzini, Carducci, Oriani and many other minor authors, as well as Jahier around the years of World War I and mainly Malaparte, Vittorini and Bilenchi during the fascist regime, and offering an in-depth analysis of two post-war case studies (Cassola and Pasolini), Asor Rosa drew a coherent picture of Italian populism, which nevertheless relied on selected and decontextualised literary pieces. At the very centre of the book it is no coincidence that there is a chapter entitled “La Resistenza e il gramscianesimo: apogeo e crisi del populismo” (Resistance and Gramscianism: acme and crisis of populism), which is particularly engaging because in it literary analysis is outrightly replaced by a political dissertation. Indeed, here Asor Rosa examines post-war communist political culture, being interested in what he calls the mix of a populism deprived of any references to social class and a conciliatory, submissive political attitude aiming at a democratic progress – which is all but revolutionary (Asor Rosa 2015: chapter “Prefazione alla seconda edizione”).

Asor Rosa saw the Italian Resistance movement, which contributed to the liberation of the country from fascist and Nazi forces between 1943 and 1945 and dominated the Italian post-war mental landscape with a narrative based on heroic resilience and anti-fascist counterattack, as the protagonist of a phase in which populism and progressivism had become prevalent. Different social strata and all the main parties and political formations of the country had indeed participated in it and agreed on non-revolutionary objectives. The Italian Resistance was therefore a popular, pacifying and progressive phenomenon rather than an antagonistic and revolutionary event, all the more so because after 1944 the Italian communists tactically rejected revolution, accepted pacification and strove to overcome poverty and social oppression, hence maintained a moralistic approach. Not unexpectedly, *Scrittori e popolo* created havoc in the Italian left: though highly regarded among young radical militants, the book was severely criticised by the PCI (Salinari 1965), because nobody could ignore the underlying anti-communist critique expressed in it. Literary references were just an excuse to strike a chord in the PCI and force it towards change.

#### 4. Transposing Asor Rosa's conceptions into today's context

Within the framework of *operaismo*, both the literary aspects and the most contentious elements critical of the PCI in Asor Rosa's book

*Scrittori e popolo* were eventually transient. Indeed, in later writings, Asor Rosa slowly moved further away from the exclusive *pars destruens* of his argument and paradoxically committed to salvaging part of the same bourgeois culture he had been criticising; as mentioned before, he even rebuilt a relationship with the PCI in the 1970s (Guidali 2020). Nevertheless, in this book there are certainly some aspects that remain valid for today's debate on populism, at least as a fruitful point of reference for reflection, especially the definition of populism as an attempt to maintain a universalist approach, a way to siding with the working class. In Asor Rosa's interpretation, the "people", as a socially indistinct formation, appeared to be just a myth, in which the borders between classes were blurred. At the same time, populism was identified with all that is not only rhetorical but also conservative, against any innovation, probably also intimist and closed in itself, as most of Italian literature had been (Asor Rosa 2015: chapter "Scrittori e massa. Saggio sulla letteratura italiana postmoderna"). But populism was also seen as always needing mediation, because populist cultural products were created by intellectuals believing that they spoke instead of but also on behalf of the people, rather than by the people itself; the same could be said today whenever there is mediation by a political leader who pretends they are speaking with a mandate from the whole "people".

It could be assumed that apparently partisanship is still a key feature of the political ideas that we would label "populist" today. One simply needs to think of emblematic campaign slogans such as Donald Trump's "America first" or Matteo Salvini's "Prima gli italiani" (Italians first),<sup>7</sup> which might indicate that partisanship is still a fundamental feature of populist policies. Yet one could also call attention to the fact that affirming that one nation comes before all the others is actually a levelling and equalising approach, since within the single nation there are various social and economic situations. Unity is offered by the national community (or the majority of the national community). From this viewpoint, this appears to be an unintentionally universalist approach if the nation is seen as a totality, which would make universalism itself a common thread in today's populist movements, as it was in the past, according to Asor Rosa's analysis.

An example will serve to shed light on this key passage. As is well known, in Europe today there is widespread inequality of income and risk of poverty beyond any difference of nation or region. In order

---

<sup>7</sup> Matteo Salvini is an Italian senator, Italy's former vice-president of the Council of Ministers, and federal secretary of the Lega.

to mitigate the effects of this, the Conte I Cabinet and specifically the Movimento Cinque Stelle insisted on introducing a so-called “Reddito di cittadinanza” (citizens’ income), basically an income for jobless people, in theory associated with a job training path.<sup>8</sup> This measure (which was certainly a burden on the already weakened national budget) was published in a very populist setting, as the then minister of economic development, Luigi Di Maio, a Movimento Cinque Stelle dignitary, exalted on a balcony of the government building – something the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini used to do – and emphatically declared the abolition of poverty. Two years afterwards, the “Reddito di cittadinanza” turned out to be a failure, since only 22% of the people receiving this welfare allowance had signed what is called a pact for professional retraining (Tucci 2020).<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, in 2020 Beppe Grillo, the comedian and co-founder of the Movimento Cinque Stelle, proposed a “reddito di base universale” (universal basic income) (Grillo 2020), actually following in the footsteps of the member of the US House of Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (Relman 2020). This allowance, which actually has an interesting and serious academic analysis as its background (for instance Friedman 1962), would provide subsidies for any individuals, regardless of their economic situation or willingness to work. What is important here is to show that in Grillo’s proposal “universal” stands for “national”.

In the light of all this, one could confirm that nowadays populism, as expressed in this case by the Movimento Cinque Stelle, is grounded on a universalist drive, as Asor Rosa had indicated, in the sense that universalism stands for community rather than globality. Therefore, referring to Asor Rosa’s original understanding of populism could mean overthrowing a common perception of populism as an anti-universalist approach. Indeed, in *Scrittori e popolo* Asor Rosa defined populism as something general and not one-sided, while that same word indicates the exact opposite today, that is, something partial, “sovereignistic” and socially egoistic. In fact, this is what emerges when universalism stands for community rather than globality.

I therefore propose the following hypothesis, which originates from the fact that today’s populism seems unintentionally universalist. In 1960s Italy, the political discourse of *operaismo* was based on the growing political power of the working class in a time of increasing

---

<sup>8</sup> See Ferraresi (2018) as a general reference.

<sup>9</sup> First studies on the implementation of this minimum income scheme are for instance Sgritta (2020); Vittoria (2020).

industrialisation. But today the political discourse lacks well-defined political subjects: this is what makes it harder for anti-populists to fight on equal terms against populists themselves. This is why elements such as fake news and thundering rhetoric in, respectively, the field of content and form, are not *per se* crucial in order to detect populism;<sup>10</sup> they are rather just a major outcome of long-term social change, the signal of which is the disappearance of the working class or a comparable political subject socially defined by its working activity, with strong consciousness of its own class and the desire to assert its rights.

## 5. Final remarks

After the first edition of *Scrittori e popolo* in 1965, Asor Rosa republished his book in changing historical situations (see Asor Rosa 1988), but not until 2015 did he add a new and up-to-date essay, “Scrittori e massa” (Writers and the Crowd), denouncing the apolitical storytelling, the close connection between literary production and mass media, and the prevailing influence of editorial and marketing staffs over writers as main features of the contemporary literary landscape in Italy (Asor Rosa 2015: chapter “Scrittori e massa. Saggio sulla letteratura italiana postmoderna”).<sup>11</sup>

This text reconsiders *Scrittori e popolo*, which was written when Italian capitalist development was in full swing and the workers’ struggles had reached their first peak, at a time characterised, instead, by progressive deindustrialisation, the growth of the service sector, and a general stagnation of the economy, as experienced in Italy from the 1980s onward. According to Asor Rosa, the main consequence of this radical change was to dissolve the borders between social strata, which used to generate a specific social identity (productive middle class, intellectual middle class, working class etc.). This would mean that nowadays it is not possible to take the side of a specific class anymore, as *operaisti* did, because society lacks any opportunity for collective identity. Moreover, he focused on the role of elites (either political or intellectual), which had also disappeared, condemning society to remain without any reliable point of reference. As of 2015, Asor Rosa suggested that the best way to talk about the current situation was to use the word *massa* (crowd or mass) instead of *popolo* in order to emphasise the fact that distinctive traits were starting to fade, to the benefit of

<sup>10</sup> On these aspects, see Manetti (2018); Sedda & Demuru (2018).

<sup>11</sup> Palano (2015); Giarrettino (2016).

levelling features and the inclination to hand over authority to a leader as a way of experiencing democracy in a passive way. *Massa* was for Asor Rosa the quintessence of mediocrity.<sup>12</sup>

Needless to say, Asor Rosa's opinion on this matter had nothing in common with the so-called "wisdom of crowds", according to which better decisions are taken by members of a group rather than by single individuals (Surowiecki 2004). Indeed, what counted for him was not a theoretical decision but the will to struggle against an undesired system and to be revolutionary – something a shapeless crowd would not desire. For this reason, he maintained that the words "populism" and "anti-populism", which he had used a lot in *Scrittori e popolo*, were now devoid of meaning. Instead, he suggested that Italians might use the neologism *antimassismo* (anti-crowdism), and identified something normally connected to *populismo* with "*massa*", not with the lexically adjacent *popolo*, calling for reflection on the words we commonly use today. This all aimed to account for the end of the time of the "democratic people" and the beginning of the time of the "post-democratic crowd", as a consequence of deep transformations in the structures of knowledge and of artistic creation, as he shows in the main sections of *Scrittori e massa*.

Asor Rosa's shift from *popolo* to *massa* is significant and accounts for the fact that populism as defined in 1965 in *Scrittori e popolo* (a socially indistinct feature) does not apply to current phenomena which are usually labelled *populisti* today. This is not a mere terminological quarrel, because it rests on a thought-provoking reference to *popolo* as a general social subject. Current research on populism in the field of political sciences or sociology is certainly not called into question, but it is suggested that we cannot meditate on populism without considering universalism, provided that we define a single national community as "universal". The question remains open, but it is important to ponder whether we can still talk about "populism" when what we are considering is not a "people" anymore but an amorphous mass. Asor Rosa's

---

<sup>12</sup> This reflection on *massa* only partially harmonised with the thoughts of Toni Negri, internationally the most renowned representative of post-*operaismo*, who, together with Michael Hardt, had chosen a term from the same word family, that is, *multitudine* (multitude), to describe the "new imperial world order" (Hardt & Negri 2004). This choice corroborated the importance of the issue for thinkers coming from the original *operaismo* movement, but Hardt and Negri were convinced that social differences remained within the multitude, while Asor Rosa did not agree on this point. On the context and recent rediscovery of former *operaisti* see Gentili (2012); Lisciani Petrini & Strummiello (2017); Montefusco (2019a); Montefusco (2019b).

contribution is therefore stimulating, and forces us to consider universalism as a crucial issue when considering “populism” today.

## Bibliography

- Abbagnano, N. (1961): *Dizionario di filosofia*. Turin, Unione tipografico-editrice torinese.
- Asor Rosa, A. (1962): “Il punto di vista operaio e la cultura socialista”. *Quaderni Rossi* 1(2): 117–130.
- Asor Rosa, A. (1964): “Fine della battaglia culturale”. *Classe operaia* 1(2): 17–19.
- Asor Rosa, A. (1965): “Quattro note di ‘politica culturale’ – Elogio della negazione”. *Classe operaia* 2(3): 39–40.
- Asor Rosa, A. (1988): *Scrittori e popolo. Il populismo nella letteratura italiana contemporanea*. Turin, Einaudi.
- Asor Rosa, A. (2015): *Scrittori e popolo 1965. Scrittori e massa 2015*. Turin, Einaudi.
- Asor Rosa, A. (2020): *Scritture critiche e d’invenzione*, (ed.) L. Marcozzi. Milan, Mondadori.
- Barberis, M., Giacomini, G. (2020): “La neo-intermediazione populista. Popolo, istituzioni, media”. *Teoria politica. Nuova serie Annali* 10: 317–340. <http://journals.openedition.org/tp/1372>
- Bassi, G. (2019): *Non è solo questione di classe. Il “popolo” nel discorso del Partito comunista italiano (1921–1980)*. Rome, Viella.
- Biancalana, C. (2014): “Il populismo nell’era di internet. Retorica e uso del web nel Movimento 5 Stelle”. *il Mulino* 1: 53–62.
- Biancalana, C. (2020): “Il populismo rafforza la partecipazione dei cittadini? Prospettive di ricerca sul nesso tra populismo e partecipazione”. *Iride* 1: 93–102. <https://doi.org/10.1414/97121>
- Biorcio, R. (2015): *Il populismo nella politica italiana. Da Bossi a Berlusconi, da Grillo a Renzi*, Milan-Udine, Mimesis.
- Bologna, S. (2014): “Workerism Beyond Fordism: On the Lineage of Italian Workerism”. *Viewpoint Magazine*, 15 December 2014. <http://viewpointmag.com/2014/12/15/workerism-beyond-fordism-on-the-lineage-of-italian-workerism>
- Castronovo, V. (2010): *L’Italia del miracolo economico*. Rome-Bari, Laterza.

- Causarano, P. (2015): "La fabbrica fordista e il conflitto industriale", in Musso, S. (ed.), *Storia del lavoro in Italia. Il Novecento 1945-2000, La ricostruzione, il miracolo economico, la globalizzazione*. Rome, Castelveccchi: 59-101.
- Chiapponi, F. (2017): *Democrazia, populismo, leadership. Il Movimento 5 Stelle*. Novi Ligure, Epoké.
- Corradi, C. (2005): *Storia dei marxismi in Italia*. Rome, Manifestolibri.
- Cozzi, M. (2018): *L'Italia s'è persa. M5S e Lega, i due populismi. Il tramonto della sinistra*. Bari, Cacucci.
- Diamanti, I. (2018): "Alla periferia della crisi. Il populismo e il disagio della democrazia rappresentativa". *Stato e mercato* 1: 117-126, <https://doi.org/10.1425/89852>
- Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium. Solemnly promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on November 21, 1964 ([http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html))
- Dominijanni, I. (2017): "Fare e disfare il popolo. Un'ipotesi sul caso italiano". *Teoria politica. Nuova serie Annali* 7: 87-109. <http://journals.openedition.org/tp/525>
- Ferraresi, M. (ed.) (2018): *Reddito di inclusione e reddito di cittadinanza. Il contrasto alla povertà tra diritto e politica*. Turin, Giappichelli.
- Friedman, M. (1962): *Capitalism and Freedom*. Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press.
- Gentili, D. (2012): *Italian Theory. Dall'operaismo alla biopolitica*. Bologna, il Mulino.
- Giarrettino, A. (2016): "Per una critica della letteratura. Considerazioni su Scrittori e popolo 1965 Scrittori e massa 2015 di Alberto Asor Rosa". *Bollettino di italianistica* 1: 144-160.
- Grillo, B. (2020): "Reddito di base universale: è arrivato il momento", [beppegrillo.it](https://www.beppegrillo.it), March 30, 2020, <https://www.beppegrillo.it/reddito-universale-e-arrivato-il-momento/>
- Guidali, F. (2016): "Rediscovering the European Identity Approach: Umberto Campagnolo and the Periodical Comprendre in the 1950s". *Zeitgeschichte* 43(6): 365-378.
- Guidali, F. (2020): "Transitioning Culture from Apparent Death to Reawakening: Alberto Asor Rosa's Political Conceptions in the 1960s".



- History of European Ideas* 27(5): 785–800, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2020.1842626>
- Guidali, F. (2021a): “Ambiguités des engagements pour l’Europe dans la Nouvelle Gauche: le cas de Claude Roy. Une vie entre littérature et politique”, in Norci Cagiano, L. (ed.), *L’Europe des écrivains. Des Lumières à la crise actuelle*. Rome, Tab: 173–178.
- Guidali, F. (2021b): “Intellectuals at the Factory Gates: Early Italian Operaismo from Raniero Panzieri to Mario Tronti”. *Labor History*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0023656X.2021.1955095>
- Hardt, M. & Negri, A. (2004): *Moltitudine. Guerra e democrazia nel nuovo ordine imperiale*. Milan, Rizzoli.
- Laclau, E. (2005): *On Populist Reason*. London and New York, Verso.
- Lanzone, M. E. (2014): “The ‘Post-modern’ Populism in Italy: The Case of the Five Star Movement”, in Woods, D. & Wejnert, B. (eds.), *The Many Faces of Populism: Current Perspectives*. Bingley, Emerald.
- Lazar, M. & Diamanti, I. (2018): *Popolocrazia. La metamorfosi delle nostre democrazie*. Rome-Bari, Laterza.
- Lisciani-Petrini, E. & Strummiello, G. (eds.), (2017): *Effetto Italian Thought*. Macerata, Quodlibet.
- Manetti, M. (2018): “Costituzione, partecipazione democratica, populismo”. *Rivista AIC* 3, [https://www.rivistaaic.it/images/rivista/pdf/3\\_2018\\_Manetti.pdf](https://www.rivistaaic.it/images/rivista/pdf/3_2018_Manetti.pdf)
- Martinelli, A. (2013): *Mal di nazione. Contro la deriva populista*. Milan, EGEA.
- Martinelli, R. (1995): *Storia del Partito comunista italiano. Il “Partito nuovo” dalla Liberazione al 18 aprile*. Turin, Einaudi.
- Masala, A. & Viviani, L. (eds.) (2020): *L’età dei populismi. Un’analisi politica e sociale*. Rome, Carocci.
- Molinari, M. (2018): *Perché è successo qui. Viaggio all’origine del populismo italiano che scuote l’Europa*. Milan, La nave di Teseo.
- Montefusco, A. (ed.) (2019a): *Italia senza nazione. Lingue, culture, conflitti tra Medioevo ed età contemporanea*. Macerata, Quodlibet.
- Montefusco, A. (2019b): “Scrittori, Popolo, Italian Thought”, in Montefusco, A. (ed.), *Italia senza nazione. Lingue, culture, conflitti tra Medioevo ed età contemporanea*. Macerata, Quodlibet: 73–98.
- Mosca, L. & Tronconi, F. (2019): “Beyond Left and Right: The Eclectic Populism of the Five Star Movement”. *West European Politics* 24(6): 1258–1283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1596691>

- Orrù, P. (2019): "Il linguaggio della politica italiana tra antieuropeismo e populismo digitale". *Nuova Antologia*, 620, 2289, 1: 322–331.
- Palano, D. (2015): "Intellettuali senza popolo. Leggendo 'Scrittori e massa' di Alberto Asor Rosa". *TYSM* 28. <https://tysm.org/intellettuali-senza-popolo-leggendo-scrittori-massa-alberto-asor-rosa>
- Palano, D. (2017): *Populismo*. Milan, Editrice bibliografica.
- Palano, D. (2019): "L'invenzione del populismo. Note per la genealogia di un concetto 'paranoico'". *Storia del pensiero politico* 2: 273–296. <https://doi.org/10.4479/94328>
- Panzieri, R. (1987): *Lettere 1940–1964*. S. Merli, L. Dotti (eds.). Venezia, Marsilio.
- Relman, E. (2020): "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Demands the Government Distribute a Universal Basic Income and Implement 'Medicare for All' to Fight the Coronavirus", *Insider*, 12 March 2020. <https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-aoc-demands-universal-basic-income-other-radical-measures-2020-3?IR=T>
- Reszler, A. (1976): *L'intellectuel contre l'Europe*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France.
- Revelli, M. (2015): *Dentro e contro. Quando il populismo è di governo*. Rome-Bari, Laterza.
- Rosanvallon, P. (2017): *Pensare il populismo*. Rome, Castelvecchi.
- Salinari, C. (1965): "Un piccolo-borghese sul piedistallo", *L'Unità* 42(86): 8.
- Salvadori, M. L. (2019): *Le ingannevoli sirene. La sinistra tra populismi, sovranismi e partiti liquidi*. Rome, Donzelli.
- Santoro, G. (2013): *Un Grillo qualunque: Il Movimento 5 Stelle e il populismo digitale nella crisi dei partiti italiani*. Rome, Castelvecchi, 2nd edition.
- Sedda, F. & Demuru, P. (2018): "Da cosa si riconosce il populismo. Ipotesi semiopolitiche". *Actes semiotiques* 121. <https://doi.org/10.25965/as.5963>
- Sgritta, G. B. (2020): "Politiche e misure della povertà: il reddito di cittadinanza". *Politiche Sociali* 1: 39–56. <https://doi.org/10.7389/97334>
- Surowiecki, J. (2004): *The Wisdom of Crowds. Why the Many Are Smarter than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies and Nations*. New York, Random House.
- Tranfaglia, N. (2014): *Populismo. Un carattere originale nella storia d'Italia*. Rome, Castelvecchi.
- Trotta, G. & Milana, F. (eds.) (2008): *L'operaismo degli anni Sessanta. Da "Quaderni rossi" a "classe operaia"*. Rome, DeriveApprodi.

- Tucci, C. (2020): “Reddito di cittadinanza, ecco come potrebbe cambiare”, *ilsole24ore.com*, September 29, 2020. <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/reddito-cittadinanza-ecco-come-potrebbe-cambiare-ADXrOGs>
- Urbinati, N. (2020): *Io, il popolo. Come il populismo trasforma la democrazia*. Bologna, il Mulino.
- Vittoria, A. (2020): “La ‘scomparsa dei poveri’. Una prima valutazione di policy sul Reddito di Cittadinanza”. *Politiche Sociali* 3: 525–544. <https://doi.org/10.7389/99014>
- Wright, S. (2002): *Storming Heaven. Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*. London and Sterling, VA, Pluto Press.
- Zanini, A. (2010): “On the ‘Philosophical Foundations’ of Italian Workerism: A Conceptual Approach”. *Historical Materialism* 18(4): 39–63. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156>