

# Populism as a model of “polarized democracy”: Pierre Rosanvallon’s theory of populism in contemporary debate

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## Abstract

This paper examines Pierre Rosanvallon’s contribution to understanding populism by adopting two approaches: the first one is the internalist approach, comprising an analysis of his book *Le Siècle du populisme* (2020) and its comparison with his theory of changes in contemporary democracy (2006-2015). The second approach consists of comparing *Le Siècle du populisme* with the works of other authors on the subject. The paper is divided into three parts. First, we analyze *Le Siècle du populisme*, focusing on the two aspects that we consider the most original: the typology of “limit forms of democracy” and its ways of degradation and his critique of populism. In the second part, we contrast this work with his theory of changes in contemporary democracy. In the third part, we contextualize Rosanvallon’s work within the literature on populism, exploring the author’s idea of populism *vis-à-vis* democracy. We also compare his interpretation with three of the main contemporary works on the subject: that of Nadia Urbinati involving theory of democracy, and that of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, leading theorists of “leftist populism”, targets of Rosanvallon’s criticism. Then, we argue that what distinguishes his contribution to populism research is the scope of his theory, able to encompass tensions and complexities in the study of democracy and that offers a way out of the theoretical ambiguities of previous studies on populism.

**Keywords:** Pierre Rosanvallon, populism, contemporary political theory, Nadia Urbinati, Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau.

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## Introduction

“Populism is revolutionizing twenty-first-century politics. But the disruption it brings has not yet been assessed with any degree of accuracy.”<sup>1</sup> With these words, Pierre Rosanvallon begins *Le Siècle du populisme*, his most recent work, in which he takes on the ambitious mission of developing a theory of populism. From the observation that the great ideologies of modernity had been associated with founding oeuvres that linked critical analysis to visions of the future, Rosanvallon states that his aim is to allow a “radical confrontation” of his theory with the “populist idea [...], the rising ideology of the twenty-first century” (2020, p. 14).

The aim of this article is to examine Rosanvallon’s theory of populism and, consequently, its contribution to understanding that political phenomenon. There are two possible approaches to that end. The first one, which can be called “internalist”, comprises a rigorous analysis of *Le Siècle du populisme*. Although relevant, this analysis is not sufficient. It must be expanded by considering the author’s broader studies on democracy comprising several volumes published on the subject over the last 30 years, notably his trilogy on the intellectual history of democracy (Rosanvallon, 1992, 1998, 2000) and his tetralogy on the mutations of contemporary democracy (Rosanvallon, 2006, 2009, 2011, 2015). This comparison is crucial: we contend that the full understanding and apprehension of the theory of populism developed in *Le Siècle du populisme* is inseparable from previous studies on democracy, insofar as populism is a “limit form of democracy” among others, resulting from a simplification of the democratic ideal. The second approach, which we call “externalist”, consists of comparing *Le Siècle du populisme* with other studies on populism, written by Rosanvallon’s peers and interlocutors.

In recent years, historians and political theorists have built upon Rosanvallon’s work, as two compilations recently published can attest. *La Démocratie à l’œuvre: autour de Pierre Rosanvallon* (Al-Matary; Guénard,

<sup>1</sup> English translation by Catherine Porter in: Rosanvallon, Pierre. *The populist century: history, theory, critique*. Transl. by Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021. p.1.

2015) offers analyses of various aspects of Rosanvallon's work. The book, however, was published before *Le Siècle du populisme* and in the same year as *Le Bon gouvernement* (Rosanvallon, 2015b), thus leaving out these two works, as well as *Notre histoire intellectuelle et politique* (1968-2018) (Rosanvallon, 2018). More recently, *Pierre Rosanvallon's political thought: interdisciplinary approaches* (Flügel-Martinsen et al., 2019) was published, comprising an edited collection whose focus is the Rosanvallonian method and the author's work on democracy. This book includes an examination of *Le Bon gouvernement*, as can be seen in Anna Hollendung's (2019) chapter on democratic action. This volume also includes scholars who have been exploring Rosanvallon's work for some time, such as Wim Weymans and Paula Diehl, who both write especially on the problem of representation. Weymans (2005) sought to examine how this concept offers a solution to the tension between abstract principles that must guide a collectivity and its concrete reality. In another article, Weymans (2007) examined the concept of "crisis of representation", building on a comparison between Rosanvallon's thought and that of Quentin Skinner, focusing on the role of history in understanding the present (2007). Diehl (2019) also focused on the concept of representation, as well as on that of "people" to analyze how they help to explain populism. It is, therefore, a study of populism in Rosanvallon's work before the publication of *Le Siècle du populisme*. Diehl's approach differs from that proposed by Rosanvallon (2011) in "Penser le populisme", since she argues that populism displaces the idea of democratic representation, placing the latter on the limits between democratic and anti-democratic dynamics. For Diehl, this dynamic differs from that of totalitarianism – which Rosanvallon compares populism in his 2011 article – and populism always remains an ambiguous phenomenon. Despite the importance of Diehl's contribution, it must be noted that it is based on a piece by Rosanvallon which was considerably revised in *Le Siècle du populisme*.

Finally, it is important to mention the work of William Selinger, who, in addition to addressing the problem of representation in an article written

with Gregory Conti (2016), also examined Rosanvallon’s contribution to understanding populism before the publication of *Le Siècle du populisme*. In “The other side of representation: the history and theory of representative government in Pierre Rosanvallon” (Selinger; Conti, 2016), they challenge the “constructivist” perspective attributed to Rosanvallon by theorists such as Nadia Urbinati, Lisa Disch and Wim Weymans, arguing that descriptive theory adopted in his early writings did not disappear in his main work on the subject, *Le Peuple introuvable*. Thus, the authors reconstruct the Rosanvallonian representation theory starting with the identification of descriptive perspective of his first works, then analyzing its persistence in more recent writings, and, finally, considering to what extent the descriptive and constructivist perspectives can be reconciled. In “Populism, Parties, and Representation: Rosanvallon on the Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy” (2019), Selinger takes a similar approach, namely, the reconstitution of Rosanvallonian thought regarding a specific aspect: the decline of unions and political parties, both crucial for the parliamentary democracy to function. In this perspective, populism is the result of a deep and long-lasting crisis of parliamentarianism itself.

Despite the originality and relevance of these studies, they all predate *Le Siècle du populisme*. As it is still a recent publication, we have not found other academic studies that have addressed Rosanvallon’s most recent work, hence the originality of the present article. To address our aim, this article is divided into three parts. In the first part, we examine the “democratic theory of populism” developed in *Le Siècle du populisme*. In the second part, we expand the analysis by proposing some points of articulation between his theory of populism and the democratic theory developed in his previous works. Finally, we compare Rosanvallon’s thought with other works on the subject, seeking to identify how the historical perspective of the political concepts provides a broader understanding of populism in order to escape the ambiguity found in most studies on the subject, notably studies that present populism as a return to one of the “authentic” poles of

democracy, the one that express the will of the people, to the detriment of its instrumental antithesis, that of liberal political institutions.

### A democratic theory of populism: *Le Siècle du populisme*

With *Le Siècle du populisme*, Rosanvallon's aims for producing a comprehensive theory of populism. To that end, he articulates the sociological, historical and critical dimensions that would allow him to apprehend the phenomenon in its entirety. In the sociological dimension, he proposes an anatomy of populism based on five constitutive elements: a notion of people that intends to be more adequate, which is mobilizing and capable of reestablishing democracy; a theory of democracy that must be "direct, polarized and immediate"; a mode of representation – in the form of exaltation of the leader; a politics and a philosophy of economics – encompassing a conception of sovereignty and political will, as well as a philosophy of equality and a vision of security; and the role of passions and emotions – "emotions of position, emotions of intellection, and emotions of action" (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 42, 57).

In the historical dimension, Rosanvallon retraces the history of populism. There are three ways of doing this; firstly, through rescuing the uses of the word populism;<sup>2</sup> secondly, through identifying the moments and/or regimes that express the constitutive elements of its ideal-type throughout history; and, finally, from a global and comprehensive approach to the phenomenon.

The third dimension is the critique of the phenomenon, from both the theory level and that of concrete experience. In the first case, Rosanvallon criticizes the referendum, showing how it does not meet the range of expectations projected onto this instrument, such as greater citizen intervention in public affairs, a reformulation of electoral expression or compensation for the representation deficit. The critique of the theory is also directed against the unanimity dimension and the absolutization of

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<sup>2</sup> Rosanvallon recognizes that this approach is not useful for the understanding of the phenomenon in contemporary times. For this reason, he puts his consideration on the history of the word "populism" to the appendix.

legitimation by ballot boxes. In the second case, the critique of concrete experience is made against the idea of homogeneity and the conditions under which a populist government transforms a democracy into a “democratorship” [*démocrature*]. We focus on two aspects in our analysis: the typology of what Rosanvallon is calling “limit forms of democracy” and their forms of degradation; and his “democratic critique”, which he defines as “an in-depth critique of the democratic theory that structures populist ideology” (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 21).

### *Conceptual history: populism as a democratic form*

For Rosanvallon, the examination of the various populist experiences only has explanatory value if broadened out into a conceptual approach. It is the latter that allows us to understand the essence of populisms. From this perspective, he proposes a typology of what he calls “limit forms of democracy”, with the aim of not only avoiding amalgamations, but also allowing for the characterization of forces of attraction that these limit-types can exert, and the parallels that can be established. The use of the terminology “limit forms of democracy” is explained by the fact that their defenders problematically exacerbate certain characteristics of democracies at the expense of others, creating the risk of “a reversal of democracies against themselves” (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 161). The first “limit form of democracy” comprises the minimalist democracies whose most distinguished theorists were Karl Popper and Joseph Schumpeter. Since the nineteenth century, its defenders have been guided by the fear of numbers. Its form of degeneration is its transformation into a “democratic oligarchy”.

On the other hand, “essentialist democracies”, the second “limit form of democracy”, are defined as based on denouncing the lies of democratic formalism and identifying the democratic ideal to the realization of a community social order, in which the distinction between political society and civil society is erased (Rosanvallon, 2020). These two limit forms of democracy sought to end democratic indeterminations, either through a

realistic shrinking of its procedural definition, in the case of the first, or through the dissolution of indeterminations through a utopian vision of the social, in the case of the second.

The third “limit form of democracy”, finally, comprises “polarized democracies”, which include populisms that, in turn, seek to simplify the structuring aporias of democracy through the constitutive elements of the populist ideal-type described above. The form of degeneration of “polarized democracies” is their transformation into a democratorship, defined as “a type of fundamentally illiberal regime formally preserving the guise of a democracy” (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 227).

### *The Rosanvallonian critique*

The critique of “real populism” privileges two lines of analysis: the first one, theoretical, is the conception of democratic functioning, which includes the critique of the referendum and of democratic polarization; the second one, that of experience, refers to the idea of a homogeneous society and the conditions under which a democracy becomes a democratorship. The referendum is one of the instruments most demanded by populist governments. Its leaders extol it as a means of reinvigorating democracy insofar as it is supposed to give people back the power to decide. However, as Rosanvallon (2020) shows, it is undeniably problematic in that it has several negative effects from the point of view of deepening the democratic project. The referendum leads to a dissolution of responsibility; to a simplification of the notion of *political will*; to the elimination of deliberation processes; to the irreversibility of the decision; to serious problems following vote due to non-specification of the conditions for implementing the chosen option; the depreciation of legislative power and the establishment of a hyper-presidential regime.

The second criticism falls upon the idea of realization of a supposed “general will”. This unanimist view went hand in hand with the very idea of political community from Antiquity to the nineteenth century, when society

became structured in classes, following the development of capitalism that caused a fundamental social fracture (Rosanvallon, 2020). The general will then take on new avenues of expression. This is an idea developed more fully in *La Légitimité démocratique* (2008). Among these new avenues are what Rosanvallon calls “the power of anyone” [*le pouvoir de n’importe qui*] and “the power of no one” [*le pouvoir de personne*]. In the first case, it is understood that any individual must have a full capacity of representation and each one is recognized as having the same importance in the political community. This recognition extends and completes the status of the voter: “it is as a holder of enforceable rights that the voter stands as sovereign.” (2020, p. 205). Constitutional courts are the guardians of this right and it is by ensuring that all citizens are equally important in the community that they participate in the general will. In the second case, the “power of no one” refers to the impartiality of institutions that must be at the service of everyone and protected from possible attempts at private appropriation. In this sense, it is the distance from private interests that guarantees the pursuit of the general interest, which is the case of independent surveillance and regulatory authorities.

The second part of the criticism is related to the concrete experience of the phenomenon. Rosanvallon admits that the people as one body (“*peuple-Un*”), in some specific moments, can emerge with strength. However, the question that arises is how to inscribe the “people-event” in the duration of the democratic regime, since it does not necessarily engender a real democratic people. This is his concern, shared by Proudhon in the nineteenth century. Marxism had tried, with some success, to absorb the two peoples – the “people-event” and the “people-electorate” – into one, through the notion of the proletariat. However, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, classes would have lost their structuring role, being replaced, at the beginning of the 21st century, by a supposed opposition between the “99%” and the “1%”. Rosanvallon (2020) shows how this opposition is imprecise and does not take into account the tensions, divisions and solidarities that exist in any community. He defends the need to consider the people in their multiple



dimensions: electoral people, people-event, people-judge, people-random. These “pluralized people” [*peuple démultiplié*], with individual situations considered by the government, are at the foundation of a democratic society grounded on the principles of distributive and redistributive justice, what would be equivalent to a society of equals.

For Rosanvallon (2020), the pertinence of the term “democratorship” lies in clarifying the democratic justification of authoritarian practices, on the one hand, and the progressive transition of countries to authoritarian regimes from a preexisting democratic institutional framework, on the other. The final component of Rosanvallon’s criticism lies in this aspect. Thus, the author distinguishes three factors to analyze the conditions under which a populist government can transform a democracy into a democratorship: the establishment of a philosophy and a politics of irreversibility, a dynamic of institutional polarization and political radicalization, and an epistemology and a morality of radicalization.

The philosophy and politics of irreversibility are linked to the belief that winning elections does not mark a shift but the entry into a new political era (Rosanvallon, 2020). The notion of majority changes perspective and acquires a *substantial* dimension, characterized as the triumph of the “people” against their “enemies”. Considering themselves as chosen for the establishment of a new era, populist rulers organize irreversibility using two instruments: recourse to constituent assemblies with the objective of remodeling institutions and the possibility of undefined reelections. In populist rhetoric, there is no autonomy of Law in relation to politics and “the Constitution is the simple momentary expression of a relationship of forces” (p. 231).

The polarization and politicization of institutions is the second point in the critique of “real populism”. Polarization is a process that can follow two modalities: the “direct brutalization of institutions” and the “strategies of progressive devitalization” (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 235). Politicization, in turn, takes place through the curtailment of powers and removal of public officials, resulting in a “privatization of the State”, since it is emptied of the notion of public service. A further aspect to consider is the ascendancy of

populist rulers over the media.<sup>3</sup> In democratorships that managed to strangle the media, those that are at the service of power end up “colonizing the public space and decisively influencing the opinion” (p. 237).

Finally, the third aspect of the critique of “real populism” is what Rosanvallon calls “the epistemology and morals of generalized politicization”. The populists do not defend projects but stand as bearers of truth and morals surrounded by evil and immoral enemies. There is an erasure of facts and arguments and, consequently, of rational exchange. By deliberately lying, populist leaders end up confusing the nature of the problems and disrupting public debate. In this sense, there is what Rosanvallon called a “cognitive corruption” of the democratic debate: “there is no possible democratic life without common language elements and the idea that arguments based on a shared description of facts can be opposed” (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 240).

Both populism studies and the actual experience of populist movements and governments have often carried many ambiguities and imprecisions, namely sociological inaccuracies regarding the populist electoral base; political inaccuracies, reflected in the inability to clearly distinguish between right-wing and left-wing populism; historical inaccuracies that emerge from the difficulty of historically locating populist movements and how they are related; conceptual inaccuracies due to the difficulty in clearly conceptualizing populism.<sup>4</sup> Rosanvallon’s theory of populism intends to solve these problems and offers tools to grasp the phenomenon based on the different ways it interacts with democracy. However, we consider that this theory can only be fully grasped if it is articulated with his previous reflections on the changes of contemporary democracy. It is on this articulation that we will focus in the next part.

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<sup>3</sup> This ascendancy does not necessarily happen through official censorship. Populist governments use diverse means, such as the reduction of official or private publicity in opposition newspapers, considerably destroying their financial autonomy.

<sup>4</sup> Rosanvallon gives the example of a special issue of the journal *Éléments* (n. 177, April-May 2019), entitled “Les 36 familles du populisme”. According to him, such exercise is the exact opposition of a work of conceptualization, and only masks an inability to apprehend the essence of things (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 13).

## Broadening the internalist approach: Rosanvallon's theory of populism in light of his theory of democracy

Formulated in several works, Rosanvallon's theory of democracy sought to understand some of the changes that characterize contemporary democracies. The first of these is the transformation of citizen activity into the rise of a form of participation, alongside the electoral participation, which translates into diffuse practices of surveillance, veto, and judgment. The second mutation is found in the conception of the general will, which, in turn, led to a change in democratic legitimacy. Rosanvallon showed how the dual legitimacy system, which arose from the French and American revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century, and the growth of the role of the State from the beginning of the twentieth century on – the “establishment legitimacy” and the “legitimacy of identification with social generality” – starts to decline from the 1980s onwards as a result of the citizens' loss of confidence in their leaders and the decline of the capacities of the State. Thus, the general will is no longer considered solely as an expression of the majority, but also as fully democratic as long as it is submitted to controls and validations. Three forms of legitimacy emerge: the legitimacy of impartiality, the legitimacy of reflexivity, and the legitimacy of proximity. The third mutation is found in democracy as a form of society threatened by the explosion of inequalities in the latter decades of the twentieth century. The fourth mutation, finally, was the strengthening of the executive power from the mid-twentieth century, a process that Rosanvallon called the “presidentialization of democracies”.

How, thus, can these mutations in contemporary democracy be connected to the problem of populism, and how does the understanding of the former contribute to the understanding of the latter? The starting point is the idea of “democratic indeterminacy” which, in Rosanvallon, differs both from the conception of Claude Lefort (1991) – who associates democratic indeterminacy with the idea of power as an empty place [*lieu vide*], not subject to reappropriation –, and that of Hans Kelsen (2000) – who

associates it with an epistemological quality translated into philosophical skepticism. Rosanvallon places it on a more functional level, linked to the fact that the subject, the object, and the procedures of democracy are structurally linked to tensions, ambiguities, paradoxes, and aporias that make its definition problematic. Consequently, they are also sources of multiple forms of disenchantment (Rosanvallon, 2015a). What Rosanvallon called “pathologies of democracy” are forms of reducing complexity, of polarization or of forgetting the structural tensions between its different elements. As he wrote, “these are pathologies of achievement or limitation supported by the illusion of a simplification” (2013).<sup>5</sup>

We propose herein three points of articulation between the mutations of contemporary democracy and populism: the problem of the “unpolitical” and the consequent need for a “work of the political”; the idea of achievement of the will in democracy, which refers to its reflexive dimension; and the current “cognitive corruption” of the public sphere, which refers to the importance of language and, specifically, of the notion of *parler vrai*, forged by Rosanvallon in *Le Bon Gouvernement*.

### *The problem of the unpolitical*

Until the publication of *Le Siècle du populisme*, populism had not occupied a central place in Rosanvallon’s reflections on democracy and its perversions. He dedicates a small chapter to it in *La Contre-démocratie* (Rosanvallon, 2006), and also in an article published in 2011 in *La Vie des idées*. Thus, the discussion that interests us in *La Contre-démocratie* goes beyond the specific problem of populism, since the latter is just one of the

<sup>5</sup> Rosanvallon identified some “internal pathologies of democracy” from the 1789 Revolution to the twentieth century”, analyzed in *La Démocratie inachevée* (2000): they took on three forms in the nineteenth century – the “constitutional democracy”, the “culture of insurrection”, and a conception of “direct government” embodied in Napoleon III –, two in the twentieth century – the communist and Nazi totalitarianisms –, and one form in the twenty-first century – populism. For Rosanvallon, to understand democracy is to understand the system that forms this indetermination and disenchantment. Hence, this is a point to emphasize: populism is one more perverse result, among others, of an attempt to simplify the democratic ideal.

consequences of a broader and deeper problem that Rosanvallón defined as the “unpolitical”. This point is worth deepening.

Unpolitical is defined by Rosanvallón (2006, p. 27-28) as “the lack of understanding of the problems linked to the organization of a common world.” Here lies the contemporary problem, not in passivity. This dissolution of the political – that is, of the expressions of belonging to a common world – manifests itself in two ways: by deepening the separation between civil society and institutions, on the one hand, and by constituting a counter-policy that depreciates powers instead of seeking to conquer them, on the other. Thus, in the same movement, the political field is placed in a position of externality in relation to society, delegitimizing power, and the essential qualities of the political are lost through a process of loss of visibility and legibility of the democratic regime. The era of unpolitical democracy that we experience today must be understood as a type of governmental action whose modalities were profoundly modified by a simultaneous movement of expansion of democracy in an essentially indirect form and decline of the political.

This is the background of both the rise of counter-democratic forms of participation and of their deviations. Counter-democracy is an “entanglement of informal practices, tests, social counter-powers, but equally of institutions, *designed to compensate for the erosion of trust through the organization of distrust*” (Rosanvallón, 2006, p. 11). In *La Contre-démocratie*, populism is understood as a pathology of democracy and, above all, of counter-democracy. As a pathology of electoral-representative democracy, it is intrinsically linked to the structural tensions of representation, referring to the idea of a sane and homogeneous people that must oppose or protect itself from what is external to it. As this factor is not enough to comprehend the causes and express the peculiarities of the phenomenon, the author then deepens the analysis based on the idea of populism as a pathology of counter-democracy. As a pathology of surveillance, populism transforms the active and positive concern of inspecting the actions of the powers, of submitting them to criticism and evaluation, into a permanent and

compulsive stigmatization of the governing authorities, to the point of turning them into enemies and outsiders of society. As a pathology of veto, it turns into a negative view of the political as self-enclosed. Finally, as a pathology of judgment, it is the “destroying exacerbation of the idea of the people as judge” (p. 275), where the court scene is degraded and there is a process of criminalization or ridiculing of power. Populism as a pathology of counter-democracy can be considered as a form of political expression, in which the democratic project allows itself to be totally drained and sucked in by counter-democracy, transforming itself into an extreme form of anti-politics.

If Rosanvallon himself recognized in *Le Siècle du populisme* that his analysis of populism in *La Contre-démocratie* had been reductive, since it is not just a pathology of counter-democracy, the diagnosis of the unpolitical as a background to the problems of contemporary democracy remains an essential theme for his reflection. The consideration of the unpolitical and its possible solutions also sheds light on the problem of populism. This answer involves what Rosanvallon (2006, p. 298) called “work of the political” (*le travail du politique*), which consists of the reflexive and deliberative activity through which the rules for the constitution of a common world are elaborated: determination of the principles of justice; arbitration between the situations and interests of different groups; and modes of articulation between the public and the private. The solution, facing the unpolitical, involves the reconstruction of the vision of a common world, translated into “society’s work on itself” (p. 312).

### *The reflexive dimension of democracy: pluralization of the people and political will as a historical construction*

The transformations in the conception of general will offer a privileged angle to approach the question of reflexivity, as well as to measure one of the main counterpoints between a “complexified” conception of democracy and a “simplified” one – direct, polarized, and immediate – found in populist rhetoric. This is one of the points of Rosanvallon’s critique in *Le Siècle du*

*populisme* that we develop in this section. As already mentioned, three new forms of democratic legitimacy emerged in the 1980s: impartiality, reflexivity, and proximity.<sup>6</sup> Reflexivity intends to fight the dangers of an immediate, direct, and polarized democracy through the pluralization of modalities and temporality in the exercise of people's sovereignty. Condorcet is a fundamental reference in this respect. Grounded on his work, Rosanvallon states that the general will results from a continuous process of interaction between the people and representatives, and from a historical construction based on the articulation of various temporalities. The "people" of democracy, in turn, take on different forms, none of which can monopolize the subject of democracy. These "forms of the people" are the electoral people, the social people, and the people as principle. The main institutions of reflexivity are the constitutional courts that embody the "people as principle" in the lengthy duration of collective memory and law. It is a logic that is contrary to that of the greatest number.

Yet, if it derives from an institutional interaction, the sovereignty of the people is also a "historical construction" insofar as it articulates several temporalities: the short time of the referendum; the institutional pace of elections; the extended time of the Constitution (Rosanvallon, 2008). In each case, the expression of the people establishes a will that is simultaneously completed, surveilled and controlled by the other procedures. These are different expressions of the people's sovereignty that come into play. Condorcet thus, opens the way to a profound renewal of the question of separation of powers, no longer understood in the traditional way of a

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<sup>6</sup> The impartiality legitimacy is characteristic of independent administrative authorities. They reduce the ground of the executive and administrative power, thus impacting the traditional division of power. They are expected to be independent in relation to the Executive, the politicians in general and the lobbies, but also to be coherent. They must reach generality negatively, that is, not granting anyone advantages or privileges, and expressing a form of detachment constitutive of the lack of interest. The proximity legitimacy refers to a new expectation of citizens that are more sensitive to the very behavior of the rulers. They want to be heard, taken into consideration, to expose their points of view; they expect that the power is aware of the daily life of ordinary people. Moreover, each person would like the specificities of their situation be taken into account, not only submitted to abstract rules (Rosanvallon, 2008, p. 267).

scale or a balanced division of prerogatives, but conceived as a condition for democratic strengthening, a condition for giving consistency to the real people, who are always complex and plural. The people, in other words, are multiple and for this reason none of their manifestations can satisfactorily summarize and “represent” them.

Therefore, time builds reflexivity; thus, it builds the general will in a continuous movement of reflection. As Rosanvallon puts it (2008), wanting together is not limited to choosing or deciding together, as in an election. Choosing and deciding presuppose a before and an after. The general will is no more effective in the referendum, quite the opposite. It inscribes a momentary choice – involving persons and programs – in the broader perspective of the actualization of values, in the search for more general goals involving a desired form of society. Will is the complex disposition that links these different elements and, for this reason, structurally it is a construction of time, the fruit of an experience, the expression of a projection of the being. Will is, by definition, linked to the construction of a narrative and not, as populist rhetoric puts it, the decision regarding a specific issue, posed in a dichotomous way.

### *The parler vrai battle against cognitive corruption*

The work of the political and the manifestation of the will are only realized through language. This is the third aspect particularly relevant regarding the connection between changes in contemporary democracy and populism. Although the importance of language underlies all dimensions of Rosanvallon’s reflection, it receives special treatment in *Le Bon Gouvernement* through the notion of *parler vrai*. The unavoidable character of language in his theory is clearly stated when he affirms that “to govern is to speak” (Rosanvallon, 2015b, p. 327). According to him, politicians speak to explain themselves, but also to point out a direction, set a horizon, and account for their actions. Democratic politics involves making people’s lives and public action intelligible through language. It is the *parler vrai* that increases



citizens' control over their existence and allows them to establish a positive relationship with political life. On the other hand, the absence of *parler vrai* means that citizens are distancing themselves from issues involving collectivity. Therefore, political language is crucial to establishing a bond of trust.

There is no simple definition of *parler vrai*, as it exists only in the form of a permanent work of critical reflection on political language, a work that is one of the vital dimensions of democratic activity. In Rosanvallon's (2015b, p. 342) words, it is "a radical form of involvement in the community, the link between a personal existence and a collective destiny." The *parler faux*, on the other hand, has a destructive effect on democratic life. Because, if language has the power to make sense of things and set a horizon, it also carries abilities of seduction and dissimulation, and creates an artificial world that hinders the possibility of questioning the running of public affairs. Therefore, the same language that creates bonds of trust, a vector of inter-comprehension and a means of exploring reality, creates the conditions for authoritarianism. Totalitarian regimes have made this clear. Such regimes were able to create a fictional world not only by means of terror, but also through language, producing the fictitious and coherent universe of ideology.

Rosanvallon (2015b) identifies three challenges facing *parler vrai*. The first is defeating outright lying – unveiling lies, inaccuracies, semantic twists.<sup>7</sup> Lies must be deconstructed by all possible means, to prevent political world from imposing its language unchallenged. The second challenge lies in criticizing the "monologue" – the type of language that hinders argumentation, avoiding to take risks and to be tested, by hiding behind the "fortress" of its pure affirmations. The consequence of this type of language is keeping citizens as passive spectators. Finally, the third challenge is defeating what Rosanvallon calls the "language of intentions". It is relatively new and refers to the idea of political impotence in relation to impersonal powers, notably the market. This language restores the feeling of mastery of the moral

<sup>7</sup> Rosanvallon (2015b) exemplifies these semantic changes based on a text by George Orwell entitled "La politique et la langue anglaise", where he notes how, in totalitarian countries, summary executions came to be called "elimination of suspects" or massive population displacements reduced to "border rectification".

order over things, disconnected from political action, thus relating to the perception of a world ruled by intentions from which realities would stem. In this sense, changing the world would entail imposing other intentions from which a new world could emerge. Such language is disconnected from realities, being structurally linked to an aversion to compromises and practical arrangements, since the world of intentions is the dichotomous world of good versus evil.

Considerations around the unpolitical, reflexivity, and language afford an expansion of the understanding of Rosanvallon’s theory of populism. In this sense, the appraisal of *Le Siècle du populisme* cannot be separated from his theory of mutations in contemporary democracy. These connections, which we seek to demonstrate herein, beyond constructing an ideal-type of populism, identifying its emergence in different historical periods, and the criticism that can be directed at it, reveal that populism is a limit form of democracy characteristic of an era threatened by the problems of the unpolitical and exacerbation of counter-democratic forms, of a reductionist conception of general will, and a growing process of cognitive corruption in public debate. These aspects are fundamentally what allowed for the emergence of a conception of direct, polarized, and immediate democracy, seductive to various sectors of society. The problem is that this conception of democracy does not solve the problems that populist leaders promise to solve. On the contrary, it deepens them, opening the way for a demagoguery and, ultimately, for an overtly authoritarian regime. Limiting the study of Rosanvallon’s theory of populism to a purely internalist approach – even if it is an internalist approach extended to his other works –, only offers a partial view of the object under analysis. Thus, it is crucial to compare his theory with other studies, particularly those that theoretically defended populism.

## Rosanvallon and the contemporary debate about populism

Within debates on the contemporary political crisis, literature on populism has increased consistently. Such growth, however, has not been characterized by a consensus around a clear definition of populism, how

it differs from other types of political movements, and if it even exists as a distinguishable phenomenon and an efficient concept.<sup>8</sup> In the well-known collection of articles on the topic of populism, organized by Ghita Ionescu and Ernst Gellner in the late 1960s, the authors insist on the importance of the concept, while recognizing its elusive nature: “it is not possible, in the present, to doubt the importance of populism. But no one knows for sure exactly what it is”. Later on, they add that “it appears everywhere, but in various contradictory forms. Does it have a unit, or is it just a name that covers disconnected trends?” (Ionescu; Gellner, 1969, p. 1).

The diversity of approaches responds, of course, to considerably different theoretical perspectives: we find in the literature historical interpretations that highlight the ideological continuities between post-war populisms and fascism (Finchelstein, 2017), populism as a crisis of liberal representation (Taggart, 2004; Urbinati, 2019), populism as a manifestation of a political action that aims to replace the democratic regime with an “illiberal democracy” (Müller, 2016), populism as a style of political performance (Moffit, 2016), or even empirical studies that seek to understand specific aspects of the phenomenon, such as the generational characteristics of voting in populist leaders (Norris; Inglehart, 2019). It would be appropriate, therefore, to ask what contribution to the literature on populism Rosanvallon’s work offer and how his theoretical approach approximates or distances itself from the main interpretations within the relevant literature. As we have tried to demonstrate so far, Rosanvallon’s interpretation of populism is inseparable from his theory of democratic indeterminacy and diagnosis of populism as a sign of “closure” of the democratic horizon. In this sense, we will first seek to show how Rosanvallon’s interpretation differs with respect to studies on the relationship between populism and representation, particularly by

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<sup>8</sup> Given that the purpose of this article is the interpretation of Rosanvallon’s conception of populism in light of the contemporary debate, we will leave aside the discussion of the historical variations of populism, both in the Russian case, where the word “populism” finds its origin, as well as the development of North American agrarian populism and, above all, the long and complex discussion of populism in Latin America. For sources on this debate, see, respectively: Berlin (1968), Kazin (1995), and Ferreira (2001).

contrasting his work with that of Nadia Urbinati, admittedly a critical reader of his previous works. Secondly, we will contrast Rosanvallon’s approach with that of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, arguably one of the foremost theoretical approaches on populism and object of Rosanvallon’s criticism in his book on the topic.

### *Populism and political representation*

From Ionescu and Gellner’s 1969 volume to Margaret Canovan’s contributions (1981, 1999, 2002), some of the most influential interpretations of populism interpret it as a syndrome of the pretended fundamental democratic ambiguity: the paradox between the idea of the sovereignty of the people and democracy’s institutional or “pragmatic” practices (Canovan 1999), and the limiting nature of popular demands. Close to this interpretation, the works of Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012, 2017) define populism as a “thin-centered ideology”, identified by the claim of a link to the people in opposition to the political establishment. This “thin-centered ideology” would not exist alone but manifest itself within other “full” ideologies – socialism, nationalism, or even liberalism. For the authors, populism opposes two other foundations of democracies: pluralism and elitism (Mudde; Kaltwasser, 2017).

Criticisms of such approaches focus primarily on their analytical deficits. Assuming a populist ideology, there would be few elements capable of differentiating it from other ideological characteristics already present in well-defined political ideologies (socialism, far-right nationalism, neoliberalism etc.). As Benjamin Moffit (2016, p. 19) notes, “a thin-centered ideology can become so empty that it loses its conceptual validity and usefulness”.

Concurring on the criticism about the imprecision of populism as an ideology but seeking to understand it by analyzing its interactions with elitism and democratic pluralism, Nadia Urbinati seeks to interpret populism based on a theory of democratic representation. According to her,

It is possible to affirm that things become clearer if we stop engaging in debates about what populism is – if it is a “thin-centered ideology”, a mentality, a strategy, or a style – and turn to the analysis of what populism does: particularly, asking about how it changes or reconfigures the procedures and institutions of representative democracy (Urbinati, 2019, p. 7).

It would thus be less about referring to populism as one of the expressions of the foundation of democracy, the search for ways of expressing sovereignty and popular will, but rather about interpreting it as part of the dynamics of competition and circulation of the political elites of the representative regime. From the outset, Urbinati proposes to distance “mythology” from the ontological paradox of democracy – and, therefore, from populism as an expression of the properly democratic extreme of dualist ontology –, and assume that the understanding of populism must start from an interpretation of its effects in the practice of representative democracy, which cannot be understood outside its relationship with liberal and republican values, such as individual guarantees and the exercises of representation, and institutional mechanisms for exercising power (Urbinati, 2019, p. 11-12). The point is to understand what kind of demand for institutional change populism activates in practice and, above all, its consequences for fundamental democratic institutions, such as pluralism, political competition, the functioning of counter-majoritarian mechanisms etc.

The starting point of Urbinati’s criticism of the literature on populism and her interpretative and theoretical proposal seems to us, at first, to be close to what we have tried to demonstrate so far in Rosanvallon’s theory. Both authors propose that populism claims representation as a mode of *confirmation* that nullifies the complexity of democracy, since the exercise of power resulting from representation is no longer related to its adequacy to objective social norms – which presuppose the exercise of the sovereign-people as institutionalized people by the rule of law. Instead, it is related to a supposed direct response to the sovereign, and to the possibility of interpreting and incarnating, his/her will. In practical terms, this distinction refers to the problem initially posed by populism as a phenomenon of an

anti-pluralist nature: if political competition for representation is what generates democratic pluralism, the assumption of a democracy that could forgo pluralism would open space for the construction of an “authoritarian, immediate and polarized democracy, which today we would call ‘illiberal democracy’” (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 18).

However, it is important to emphasize a fundamental difference between Rosanvallon and Urbinati’s interpretations of populism that, in fact, reveals long-term disjunctions between the two authors. Urbinati’s analysis demonstrates that populism is, above all, a way of transforming democracy, and not of replacing it with an authoritarian regime; this is the main difference that the author perceives between populism and fascism, given that the latter is inseparable from the objective of building a “tyranny”. However, the need to distinguish populism from other overtly authoritarian forms seems to have led the author to include potentially undemocratic forms of political mobilization that have forms of demand for alternative modes of participation in the same category of “populism”.

Urbinati states that “we should speak of a populist *transformation* of democracy – or, even better, a transformation of the *form* that representative democracy is primed to take in the era of sovereignty of the audience” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 176). And, to demonstrate this populist transformation within representative democracies, she illustrates the argument by claiming the cases of *Podemos* in Spain and the *Movimento 5 Stelle* in Italy as examples of claims for forms of “direct popular power” and “participatory democracy” as alternatives to fighting the power of the elites that parasitize the traditional political party system. For her, both parties would be “the most daring and spectacular cases of populist uprisings that have challenged mainstream parties in recent years” (p. 181). Now, if it is true that these parties obtained expressive electoral growth from the criticism of the political establishment and the demands for new forms of participation and control over representation, the fact that both have formed cabinets with the center-left “establishment” in recent years shows that there is no effective distinction between calling them populists or seeing them as a manifestation

of new forms of conflict and transformation of the party framework in democratic systems. In the end, Urbinati characterizes as populist any type of demand for new forms of participation, deliberation, and criticism of the established party system, not differentiating them from examples that put the structures of representative democracy and the rule of law at risk, such as the process of democratic regression in Hungary, which would fit perfectly into “her concept of populism as a transition from movement to regime” (Cassimiro, 2021, p. 41).

This problem in Urbinati’s analysis refers to her criticism of Rosanvallon in her book *Democracy Disfigured* (Urbinati, 2014). In this work, she argues that in contemporary political theory, there is a tendency to challenge the procedural definitions of democracy by attributing essential content – that would not necessarily be the result of electoral procedures – to certain institutions. In the case of Rosanvallon, Urbinati recognizes this “disfiguration” of democracy in his defense of the institutional locus, where instruments of “impartiality and reflexivity” would be developed, especially the judiciary and independent authorities. In many ways, Urbinati’s critique reveals the underlying theoretical problem that distinguishes both authors. For her, the centrality of a certain minimalist conception of democracy, which she calls proceduralist, endows her conception of democracy with a well-established content quite distant from Rosanvallon’s idea of “indeterminacy”: democracy may not have a “perfectionist” content, but it is something well defined for Urbinati, “a method for regulating the distribution of power among a group of citizens” (2014, p. 234). It is precisely for this reason that she can include political phenomena as distinct as those of Viktor Orbán, Trump, or *Podemos* in a single category called “populism”: in every instance, it is a type of politics that seeks operate beyond the procedural mechanisms of the “democratic game”, thus “disfiguring them”. However, as we have pointed out, this lack of distinction does not allow us to understand if this disfigurement carries an authoritarian normativity with it.

To be precise, Rosanvallon’s theory of democratic indeterminacy seeks to overcome this attempt to take refuge in the defense of procedures,

while also moving away from the theory of democratic “paradox” or the idea of the emancipatory potentialities of populism. As we have already shown, for Rosanvallon, populism is a “limited form of the democratic project”, alongside two others: minimalist democracies and essentialist democracies. The Schumpeterian idea of democracy (criticized by Urbinati, but which still maintains affinities with their defense of proceduralism against perfectionist forms of democracy) is not, for Rosanvallon, but one of the possible manifestations of democratic indeterminacy, insofar as it reveals the institutional dimension associated with the method of selection of political elites, without, however, exhaust or end the possibilities of democracy. If it is evident that, for Rosanvallon (2020, p. 151), power cannot “take shape unless it is mediated and instrumentalized by representative procedures”, it cannot be forgotten that “democracy does not designate just one type of regime, but it also qualifies a form of society” (p. 158). And it is precisely the conflict between the unfulfilled promises of democratic institutionality as it exists and its tension with the promises of realizing the “society of equals”, in the context of democracy as a form of society, that strengthens symptomatic processes of “contemporary democratic disenchantment” (p. 19). It is indeed this ambiguity, created by the definition of populist, applicable to considerably different political processes – from *Podemos* to Viktor Orbán –, that Rosanvallon seems to overcome by proposing the idea of “limit forms” of democracy. In fact, we could argue that his theory originality lies less in a “new definition” of populism, than in the theoretical understanding of populism within these limit forms. Rosanvallon observes such diminishing horizons of the complexity of democracy both in the minimalist defense of liberal democracy and in the normative apology of the democratizing potentialities of populism, as we discuss below.

### *The limitations of the “populist moment”*

Among the theorists who assess the positive potentials of populism, Argentine philosopher Ernesto Laclau was the one who developed a more elaborate argument, with normative consequences for political action. His



work was written in partnership with Chantal Mouffe and, after Laclau's death, his argument was further developed by her – although with some differences.

From what we could define herein as his “ontological” perspective, Laclau points to populism as the manifestation of a type of antagonistic conflict constitutive of the “political”: the ability to establish differences between the inside and the outside, between the “us” and “them”. Populism would be the act of overcoming the idea of politics as a “purely differential set” of demands, identified by liberal democracy, in favor of a type of identity capable of bringing together subordinate demands in a concept of differential totality, reconstructing politics as an antagonistic conflict (Laclau, 2005). Laclau moves away from efforts to catalog the varieties of populism, given that, for him, the phenomenon cannot be understood by the synthesis of its historical manifestations, which would, at most, offer “a map of linguistic dispersion” (Laclau, 2005, p. 7) of the populist phenomenon. In this sense, the elusive nature of populism would not be a conceptual flaw, but rather a consequence of the social reality to which it refers: rather than an ideological and political operation, populism is a performative act capable of building identities around specific political demands.

The publication of *Le Siècle du populisme* received immediate attention in the intellectual debate on populism and the crisis of democracy. One of the critical reactions to the work was the article “Ce que Pierre Rosanvallon ne comprend pas” written by Chantal Mouffe for *Le Monde Diplomatique* (2020). This piece allows us to explore some of the implications of Rosanvallon's interpretation in comparison to the theories that claim populism as a normative horizon of political action. In her critique, Mouffe claims that Rosanvallon's reading of her works and of those by Laclau gets back to the “commonplace” definition of populism as a counter-position between “pure people” and “corrupt elites”. She also claims that Rosanvallon's appraisal fails to understand that the variety of populisms would respond to specific strategies of “building the political frontier, established on the basis of an opposition between the lower and the higher strata, the dominant and the dominated” (Mouffe, 2020), trying to reduce the phenomenon to a

univocal ideological definition. This point structures Laclau’s conception of populism as a performance of political conflict. For him, populism uses the category “people” as an empty signifier that allows the establishment of a chain of equivalences between apparently disaggregated demands of subaltern strata of the population (Laclau, 2005). Founded on a logic of identity, this chain constructs the boundary between the people and their “other”, the elites, creating the dichotomy needed for the reconstruction of the fundamental political conflict that is hidden under the guise of the “differential totality” represented by liberal democracy.

However, unlike Laclau, who identifies liberal democracy with bourgeois democracy and, therefore, calls for populist action aimed at building another emancipatory project, Mouffe’s populist project proposes a “radicalization of liberal democracy”, consisting precisely of reaffirming the “nature of party politics” (Mouffe, 2018, p. 10). The current moment, which the author defines as the “populist moment”, is a possibility of “returning to politics”; however, it is worth remembering, this return does not necessarily have an essentially democratic content, but can also lead to authoritarian alternatives. For this reason, she defines the fundamental political conflict of the contemporary world as a dispute between a left-wing populism and a right-wing populism, made possible by the “interregnum” resulting from the crisis of neoliberal hegemony. In this sense, the encounter between populism and agonism appears in Mouffe’s most recent works as the result of a possible radicalization of the political imagination of modern democracies: “To inscribe the left populist strategy in the democratic tradition is, in my view, the decisive move because this establishes a connection with the political values that are central to popular aspirations” (Mouffe, 2018, p. 26). Thus, political action is not a complete reconstruction of an empty signifier, but a reconnection with the “political values” of the democratic project represented in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, among other experiences.

At the limit, the agonistic critique presupposes a distinct inscription in the emancipatory project of democracy or, in Mouffe’s words, “a

radicalization of the ethico-political principles of the liberal-democratic regime” (Mouffe, 2018, p. 25). Mouffe claims that Rosanvallon did not understand that dimension of connection between the constructivism of populist strategy and the radicalization of the emancipatory ideal of democracy; rather, he remains connected to a consensual conception of democracy, “a sophisticated version of the dominant doctrine of social democratic parties under neoliberal hegemony” (Mouffe, 2020), for which the contemporary “democratic deficit” could be resolved through a political system capable of making room for the diversity of individual demands in a society where social classes and their consequences for left- and right-wing identities lose relevance.

Without treating here Mouffe’s judgment on the normative implications of Rosanvallon’s theory of democracy, we may observe that his reading, rather than getting wrong about the theoretical status of the “populist moment” of the left, takes it as a theoretically accurate example of populism as a manifestation of one of the structuring aporias of democracy, which points less to the fulfillment of the “promises” of democracy, and rather to its limitations in a restricted democratic horizon. Let us return to Laclau’s work to develop this question.

Laclau formulates a distinction between the emancipatory potential of populism and its possible manifestation in an empty signifier whose nature is limiting or even regressive in terms of democratic achievements. Given that the identity of the people needs to overcome the purely differential aspects of democratic-bourgeois institutional framework, resort to any aspect of institutional mediation as a way of limiting the possible anti-democratic conversion of populist representation must be ruled out on principle. The solution to escape the possibility that populism emerged in anti-democratic forms is to claim an identity between universalism and emancipation, which would therefore be absent in authoritarian forms of populism. The “*plebs*, whose partial demands are inscribed in the horizon of a fully-fledged totality – a just society which exists only ideally – can aspire to constitute a truly universal *populus* which the actually existing situation negates”

(Laclau, 2005, p. 94). It is through a gamble on the normative horizon of an identity between the demands of the plebs and their universal content – articulated in a populist political action with emancipatory content – that Laclau distinguishes populism as an emancipatory potential from its authoritarian perversion (Cassimiro, 2021, p. 21).<sup>9</sup>

Laclau’s argument is based on the defense of democracy as the exercise of emancipatory political action (whose manifestation is populism) and on the rejection of institutional forms, law and representation that characterize the modes of mediation of liberal democracy. This refusal is based on a distinction made by Mouffe between democracy as a form of government, based on the principle of the sovereignty of the people, and the liberal institutional framework through which democracy is exercised (Laclau, 2005). For Mouffe, modern democracy is the result of the circumstantial conjunction between two traditions: the liberal claim of the “rule of law”, “the defense of human rights and respect for individual freedom”, and the democratic tradition, based on the ideas of “equality and popular sovereignty”. “There is no necessary relationship between these two traditions, but only a contingent historical articulation” (Mouffe, 2000, p. 3) which, ultimately, would express itself through a paradox, as she proposes in her book *The Democratic Paradox* (2000).

At first, this interpretation seems to agree with the idea of democratic indeterminacy, which presupposes democracy as a field of disputes over the fundamental representations that organize political life, denying purely procedural definitions of democracy or its limitations as a final institutional form. However, the interpretations of populism as an ontology of the political are far from the idea of democratic indeterminacy that stem from Claude Lefort’s considerations, and that Rosanvallon seeks to develop and amplify. For instance, for Laclau, Lefort’s theory does not attain to grasp the performative dimension of the construction of popular and democratic subjects, precisely because “it is concentrated exclusively on liberal-democratic *regimes*” (Laclau, 2005, p. 166).

<sup>9</sup> For further references on the relationship between populism, universalism and social classes, see Butler *et al.* (2000).

However, the problem of this criticism is that it originates from a very partial reading of Lefort's work, for whom the centrality of human rights and individual freedoms is not to be confused with a defense of liberalism. Rather, it is based on the recognition that the modern conception of democracy presupposes a relationship between the idea of an "empty place of power" and the "new symbolic constitution of the social".<sup>10</sup> This new symbolic constitution of the social is marked precisely by the fact that it is through political forms – law, freedoms, publicity, modes of representation – that the democratic political experience manifested itself in modernity. In this sense, Lefort (1991, p. 34) does not reject the criticism that liberal-democratic institutions were also ways of "limiting to a minority the means of access to power, knowledge, and the enjoyment of rights". But he does refuse to reduce the sphere of formal mediations – human rights, above all – as pure manifestations of alienation (p. 33). Rosanvallon seeks to develop this argument. He points out that populism is a specific way of solving the fundamental indeterminacy that characterizes the democratic experience, from the absorption of democracy by only one of its constituent dimensions, whose greatest example is found precisely in a univocal and totalizing conception of representation: "the imperative of representation is fulfilled with the mechanism of identification of the leader (...) at the same time that the vision of society refers to an elementary dichotomy" (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 165 ).

It is indeed this restricted conception of the political that presupposes the link between democratic legitimacy and just one of the expressions of its indeterminacy, that Rosanvallon puts forward in his work:

The problem of this dimension of mediation of institutional forms and law in populist theory is that it is not presupposed as an inextricable part of the modern democratic experience, but as a result of the liberal contribution to democracy, in the end an element alien to the democratic "essence", the ontological identity between power and people. The problem of the dimension of mediation for

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<sup>10</sup> As Mark Ingram (2006) demonstrates, the interpretation of Lefort's work tend to either emphasize affinities with liberalism or affirm his adherence to an idea of radical democracy.

Laclau is that it remains a “differential/institutional totality” (Laclau, 2005, p. 77), and the need to overcome it through populist mobilization would obey fidelity to an ontology of the political which presupposes a polarity without mediations. (Cassimiro, 2021, p.23)

Ultimately, this equation is a gamble on a univocal form of representation: as Rosanvallon shows, even though Laclau’s theory intends to preserve an idea of pluralism within subaltern identities, the construction of collective identity presupposes the “vertical articulation around a hegemonic signifier that, in most cases, has the name of leader” (Laclau *apud* Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 51).<sup>11</sup>

Rosanvallon (2020) is specifically drawing attention to the implications of this type of political theory, expressed in the idea of democracy as a paradox. He does so by designating populism as a “limit form of the democratic project” (p. 19). His proposal to “complicate democracy” is nothing but a normative manifestation of his conception of democracy as an unfinished form and which, at the same time, is expressed in its various dimensions – political regime, civic activity, form of society and political action – as we tried to demonstrate in the first part of this article. Ultimately, Laclau and Mouffe’s argument points to the continuity of what is the essence of the Rosanvallonian critique of populism as the “limit form” of democratic representation: if, for populism, the political must be understood as a manifestation of representation as a unity (constructed from the integration of subaltern identities, such as left-wing populism, or the revelation of the national authenticity of a people, as right-wing populism), this conception of the political is in flagrant contradiction to the idea of democracy as a complex plurality of temporalities, modes of representation, and institutional formalizations susceptible to expansion and transformation.

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<sup>11</sup> An important theoretical challenge is to examine the affinities between the argument of Laclau and Mouffe and that of the French far-right ideologue Alain de Benoist. Not only does Rosanvallon draw attention to the convergences, pointing out, for example, the affinities of Mouffe and Benoist with Carl Schmitt, but they are recognized by Benoist himself in his works (see note 2 in Rosanvallon, 2019, p. 31). Theoretical convergences – which do not hide the deep political disagreements – can also be witnessed in the television debate between Mouffe and de Benoist, available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9E\\_9c8B1cPg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9E_9c8B1cPg).

## Final considerations: an alternative

Rosanvallon never shied away from participating in the public debate and proposing solutions to the problems of the polis. He ends *Le Siècle du populisme* with an alternative plan, which was already outlined in previous works, especially in *Le Bon Gouvernement*. It is an alternative that is antagonistic to “limit forms of democracy”. In other words, the solution is not to simplify democracy, overcome its structural aporias, or end its indeterminacy. What he suggests, on the contrary, is to complicate it. Firstly, by starting with the idea of “people” considered in its multiple dimensions – electoral, social, principle – so that no one can “own” it or speak in their behalf, because “the people” only exist in forms of partial manifestations. In addition to this process of “pluralization” of the people, Rosanvallon insists on the need not only for a democratic regime and a democratic society, but also for democratic “action”. To this end, it is necessary to move from what he calls a “democracy of authorization” to a “democracy as an exercise”. The latter must maintain a relationship between the rulers and the ruled, governed by the principles of legibility, responsibility, and reactivity. Their rulers, in turn, must have the qualities of integrity and *parler vrai*. If we combine the two dimensions to exercise democracy, we have legibility, responsibility, reactivity, *parler vrai*, and integrity as its pillars. Through adequate institutions, its strengthening is the way towards a good democratic government.

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