# How Not to Be Populist. Anti-hegemonic Individualism and the Crisis of Democracy and of the Rule of Law

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ABSTRACT
Individualism (Christopher Lasch's "narcissism", Émile Durkheim's "anomie") – that is, the tendency of individuals *to retreat within the confines of the self, by pursuing selfish (as opposed to shared) values and goals* – has been identified as one of the causes of the crisis of democracy. In this article, I first argue for the need to specify and differentiate that category. It is one thing for those subjected to current forms of social governance to fail to adhere to shared values; it is another for the groups participating in them to carve out privileges for themselves. I will therefore focus on the first type, which I call "the individualism of the subordinated", asking whether populism is the only possible political response to it. In this sense, I will examine the defense of populism in Laclau's *On Populist Reason*, highlighting some of its external and internal problems. Finally, I will suggest a possible alternative, following the model proposed in Acemoglu and Robinson's *The Narrow Corridor*.

L'individualismo (il "narcisismo" di Christopher Lasch, l'"anomia" di Émile Durkheim) – ossia la tendenza degli individui a ritrarsi entro i confini del sé perseguendo valori e fini egoistici, in luogo di quelli condivisi – è stato indicato come una delle cause della crisi della democrazia. In questo articolo sostengo innanzitutto la necessità di specificare e differenziare tale categoria. Una cosa è che coloro che sono sottoposti alle attuali forme di governance sociale non aderiscano a valori condivisi; altra cosa è che i gruppi che vi partecipano si ritaglino privilegi per sé. Mi concentrerò pertanto sul primo tipo, che chiamo "individualismo dei subordinati", chiedendomi se il populismo sia l'unica possibile risposta politica. In questo senso, esaminerò la difesa del populismo in *On Populist Reason* di Laclau, mettendone in luce alcuni problemi esterni e interni. Infine, suggerirò una possibile alternativa, seguendo il modello proposto in *The Narrow Corridor* di Acemoglu e Robinson.

KEYWORDS
crisis of democracy, rule of law, individualism, populism, society

crisi della democrazia, Stato di diritto, individualismo, populismo, società

# How Not to Be Populist.
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## 1. *Introduction*

In recent decades, the literature on the "crisis of democracy" and/or "rule of law crisis" has become a flourishing industry – an indication of widespread and arguably well-founded concern[1]. Among the attempts to explain this phenomenon, the notion of *individualism* has gained some traction: the idea that individuals increasingly retreat within the confines of the self, to the detriment of shared values and rules, and the behaviors necessary to uphold them. This explanation seems to capture a genuine fault line within democratic systems of governance. However, it is crucial to examine it rigorously, especially if we aim to effectively address the problem. When dealing with complex realities, it is rarely a good idea to seek out overly simplistic or one-dimensional explanations.

I aim to take this warning seriously by exploring the idea that individualism accounts for only part of the issue – or more precisely, that the concept needs to be further differentiated. It is misleading to apply the label of individualism indiscriminately to all citizens of Western democracies, as though there were no distinction between those who benefit from current forms of governance and those who primarily bear their costs. In other words, we must consider the difference between hegemonic and anti-hegemonic forms of individualism. Framing the issue from this perspective allows us to pose the question of democratic participation in differential terms. There is a significant difference, after all, between encouraging collective responsibility among those who possess the means and opportunities to assume it, and creating the conditions for participation among those who are largely excluded from collective dynamics. This distinction between two forms of individualism – and thus two forms of *non-participation* – is the focus of the present article.

In the next section, I outline some general formulations of individualism as an obstacle to democratic participation. Section 3 introduces the distinction between hegemonic and anti-hegemonic individualism, set against the background of the idea that the "social contract" – so to speak – is asymmetrical from the outset, regardless of the form of government to which individuals grant

[1] It is important to clarify that the concepts of *democracy* and *the rule of law* are distinct, yet inextricably intertwined when discussing democratic systems of government: in these contexts, issues of participation are largely linked to the question of the extent to which individuals adhere to collective rules. That said, this article does not aim to analyze separately the different levels at stake – political and legal. Rather, I will limit myself to outlining the phenomenon of social psychology that I call "individualism", and to considering some possible effects on systems of social rules, specifically on democracy as a system of rules. A more detailed analysis must be left for another occasion.

sovereignty. I consider conceptual tools (provided by Hart and Searle) for distinguishing between subjects who perceive themselves – and are perceived – as aligned with the existing political order, and those who perceive themselves – and are perceived – as subordinated to it. Finally, in Section 4, I turn to what might be termed the "individualism of the subordinated", examining its relationship to populism and exploring alternative ways of engaging with it. A crucial question for constructing an alternative to populism, I will argue, is whether democratic systems are capable of institutionalizing dissent – by promoting forms of social organization among subordinates that prevent the effects of unrestrained individualism.

## 2. *Individualism as an Obstacle to Participation*

Each of the topics I am about to address, including the relationship between democracy and individualism, has generated an immense body of literature. We must therefore necessarily limit ourselves to a selection of exemplary authors, chosen in light of our specific objectives.

To begin, Francis Fukuyama (FUKUYAMA 1999) initiated a reflection on the notion of "social capital", to be considered alongside the more established concepts of "physical" and "human capital". Social capital is defined as «a society's stock of shared values» (FUKUYAMA 1999, 22). Fukuyama's core idea is that «true communities are bound together by the values, norms, and experiences their members share» (FUKUYAMA 1999, 23), and that – contrary to widespread expectations – loosening these strong social bonds in the name of individual liberty tends to bring about the dissolution of meaningful relationships:

> «The trade-off between personal freedom and community [...] does not seem obvious or necessary to many. As people have been liberated from their traditional ties to spouses, families, neighborhoods, workplaces, and churches, they have expected to retain social connectedness. But they have begun to realize that their elective affinities, which they can slide into and out of at will, have left them feeling lonely and disoriented, longing for deeper and more permanent relationships» (FUKUYAMA 1999, 23).

In short, by weakening the strong ties characteristic of traditional societies, the push toward individual freedom may leave individuals more isolated and personally disoriented. At the same time, it renders them less capable of pursuing shared goals:

> «As people soon discovered, there are serious problems with a culture of unbridled individualism, in which the breaking of rules becomes, in a sense, the only remaining rule. [... Social capital is] the prerequisite for all forms of group endeavor that take place in a modern society, from running a corner grocery store to lobbying Congress to raising children. A society dedicated to the constant upending of norms and rules in the name of expanding individual freedom of choice will find itself increasingly disorganized, atomized, isolated, and incapable of carrying out common goals and tasks. [...] the consequence is a rise in crime, broken families, parents' failure to fulfill obligations to children, neighbors' refusal to take responsibility for one another, and citizens' opting out of public life» (FUKUYAMA 1999, 22-23).

As we can see, Fukuyama frames the issue in terms of «the breaking of rules»: the erosion of both formal and informal norms that regulate collective life. Giovanni Orsina (ORSINA 2018) also analyzes the aspiration to individual freedom as a factor that weakens collective bonds and values, adding a further consideration: the individualistic drive toward self-gratification (or «narcissism», to use LASCH's 1979 category) may have deep roots in the very nature of democracy, as Tocqueville had already suggested.

> «Democratic institutions awaken and flatter the passion for equality without ever being able to satisfy it entirely. Every day, at the moment when people believe they have grasped complete equality, it escapes from their hands and flees, as Pascal says, in an eternal flight. [...] The chance to succeed rouses the

people; the uncertainty of success irritates them. They get agitated, grow weary, become embittered» (DE TOCQUEVILLE 2010, 136).

In other words, democracy inherently tends to generate irritation and resentment, insofar as it stimulates individual aspirations that can never be fully satisfied. Orsina links this psychological outcome to a dynamic described by ORTEGA Y GASSET (1993), in which the normative idea of individual rights, as it spreads through the social fabric, undergoes a transformation – from regulative ideals into drives demanding immediate gratification.

> «The sovereignty of the unqualified individual, of the human being as such, generically, has now passed from being a juridical idea or ideal to be a psychological state inherent in the average man. And note this, that when what was before an ideal becomes a component part of reality, it inevitably ceases to be an ideal. The prestige and the magic that are attributes of the ideal are volatilised. The levelling demands of a generous democratic inspiration have been changed from aspirations and ideals into appetites and unconscious assumptions» (ORTEGA Y GASSET 1957, 23; quoted in ORSINA 2018, 35).

Following HART (2012), ROVERSI (2023) offers a converging analysis of the potential "pathologies of legal systems", rooted in cognitive dynamics. His general thesis is that «an essential part of the ideal of the Rule of Law is people's fidelity to it, namely, "a general willingness to submit to law's governance and to give deference to its limits and requirements" [...] (POSTEMA 2022, 66)» (ROVERSI 2023, 26). According to Roversi, this «willingness to submit to law's governance» may be undermined by three distinct cognitive challenges:

> «[1] a widespread incapacity on the part of members of the legal community to understand that in supporting the law [...] they are involved in a collective endeavor, and that they are so involved for a reason that relates to what they are, to their normative identity as persons [...] [2] a reduced ability to understand the symbolic nature of rituals, objects, and roles: the fact that some objects, persons, and behaviors can *mean* much more than what they concretely are and that they do so mean because we collectively support that meaning. [3] Finally, an incapacity to control our reactive impulses, delegate reactions at a collective level, and take the perspective of others» (ROVERSI 2023, 24).

The first point – the inability to perceive the connection between participation in a collective endeavor and one's normative identity as a person – significantly echoes Fukuyama's concerns about the dissolution of a cultural model grounded in strong social bonds. The second – the diminished capacity to grasp the symbolic nature of social roles, and thus the ideal meaning of rules – recalls Ortega y Gasset's reflections on the dissolution of «the prestige and the magic that are attributes of the ideal». Lastly, the third point – the inability to control one's impulses and adopt the perspective of others – may be viewed simply as a behavioral consequence of the first two.

To conclude this overview, it is worth mentioning Mark Lilla's (LILLA 2017) critique of «identity politics», which he sees as the left's political response to the spread of individualism. The core thesis of his book is that identity politics is inadequate for articulating a comprehensive vision of society, economy, and culture, and as such cannot constitute – let alone replace – a political platform for left-wing parties. This view is well captured by the book's epigraph, a quote from Senator Edward Kennedy: «we can and we must be a party that cares about minorities without becoming a minority party. We are citizens first». According to Lilla, in American society (on which his analysis is focused):

> «the use of the notion of identity has gradually shifted from indicating minority rights to becoming a vehicle for purely individualistic demands, thus dissolving any possibility of constructing a common-good oriented political program. Identity – Lilla summarizes – is Reaganism for lefties. In the background is the idea of a proliferation of the "culture of narcissism"» (MAZZONE 2024a, 104).

## 3. *Asymmetrical Individualisms*

The previous section seems to suggest the following picture. Individualism replaces strong social bonds with weak ones, marked by low solidarity, and deprives the norms that govern our communities of their symbolic value[2]. As a result, it significantly weakens our ability to adopt others' perspectives and to exercise self-restraint in pursuit of a shared good. From this standpoint, restoring the strength of the norms underpinning the rule of law would seem to require reinforcing citizens' commitment to them.

At this point, as a working hypothesis, one might be tempted to distinguish between social groups, suggesting that some are not affected by individualism – since they tend to comply with the rule of law – while others, less integrated into its value system, are more prone to individualistic behavior. HART's (2012) distinction between "ordinary citizens" on the one hand, and "legal officials and experts of the legal system" on the other, might be interpreted in this light. The distinction is, however, ambivalent. As ROVERSI (2023, 10) observes in relation to dictatorships and totalitarian regimes, "in these systems, officials must be trained and indoctrinated to become cooperative supporters of the status quo to the point of fanaticism" – which shows that adherence to norms is not intrinsically virtuous. Still, one might attempt to salvage the hypothesis by positing that, *within democratic regimes*, the commitment of "officials and experts" to norms is indeed a positive value. In that case, conformity to rules would represent a form of civic virtue, a counterpoint to the individualism of those who resist them.

Yet this working hypothesis has a major flaw. It assumes that, in democratic contexts, adherence to norms is inherently aligned with the collective good. But there are at least two scenarios in which this alignment breaks down. Norms may be designed primarily to serve the interests of hegemonic groups – i.e., the individuals who belong to them. Or, alternatively, the ways in which norms are applied, enforced, or left unenforced may disproportionately benefit such groups. In what follows, I will not distinguish between these two situations, as they tend to share both causes and consequences. If either occurs to a significant extent – even within democratic systems – then the relevant distinction is not between subordinate individualists and rule-abiding non-individualists, but between hegemonic and anti-hegemonic forms of individualism.

If this is the case, the challenge of revitalizing citizen participation in the rule of law takes on a different shape. It is not primarily about persuading subordinate individuals to recognize the value of the normative system. It is rather about acknowledging that the system itself traces a fault line within society, privileging certain individuals and groups over others.

In short, the issue is not merely to change how subordinated individuals perceive the norms, but – at least in part – to change either the norms that subordinate them or the way they are enforced.

Consider, by way of example, a sector of strategic importance for democratic societies: the education system. As has been noted:

> «In its first report on social mobility in 2020, the World Economic Forum placed Italy last among industrialized countries [...]. Such low social mobility [...] fuels resentment and social envy, which are the roots of populism» (MARATTIN 2024, 125; my translation).

This quotation effectively captures the link between low social mobility and insufficient – or even antagonistic – engagement with collective norms. But two caveats are in order. First, this phenomenon is by no means unique to Italy. Second, low social mobility does not seem to be a blind mechanism operating independently of human responsibility. On the contrary, those in subordinate positions are often right to see it as the result of actions taken by hegemonic actors.

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[2]   On the notion of "symbolic value", see MAZZONE 2024b.

Consider, for instance, the growing distrust toward the university system in the United States, which has been described as:

> «the training ground of the technocratic ruling class, founded on the principle of meritocracy: a mechanism ostensibly designed to select those with the highest intellectual quotient, it has in fact been co-opted by patrician families to secure good jobs for their children, thereby stalling the social elevator» (PETRONI 2024, 39-40; my translation).

In short, if the social elevator is stalled, this is not necessarily due to chance.

It is important to clarify that in invoking responsibility here, I am not making a moral judgment. Such judgments are often one-sided, whereas responsibility is typically shared and cause-effect relations are circular. Moreover, moral fault is essentially individual. For these reasons, it only makes sense on a case-by-case basis to ask to what extent subordinated individuals are held back primarily by domination, and to what extent by their own refusal to pursue pro-social goals.

The question that concerns me here is different: should the formation of hegemonies that hinder social mobility be considered a structural feature of human societies – even within democratic frameworks? Clearly, this question involves individual behavior only insofar as it has systemic effects.

It is at this level that the important analysis by ACEMOGLU and ROBINSON (2019) is situated. Their central claim is that:

> «for liberty to emerge and flourish, both state and society must be strong. A strong state is needed to control violence, enforce laws, and provide public services that are critical for a life in which people are empowered to make and pursue their choices. A strong, mobilized society is needed to control and shackle the strong state» (ACEMOGLU, ROBINSON 2019, XVII).

State strength is described as necessary to "control violence" and "enforce laws" on individuals[3]. But this strength itself tends to devolve into a "Despotic Leviathan" unless it is restrained by a strong and mobilized society.

The authors describe despotism as a manifestation of the "will to power", which may take the form of oppression and violence. But they also examine how domination can occur in subtler ways, such as through the abuse of privilege. Consider, for example, the pages devoted to Ibn Khaldun, the Arab historian and philosopher (1332-1406), who anticipated the so-called "Laffer curve" (foundational to Ronald Reagan's economic policy): the idea that only up to a certain point does increasing tax rates result in higher revenues. Khaldun expressed it this way: "at the beginning of the dynasty, taxation yields a large revenue from small assessments. At the end of the dynasty, taxation yields a small revenue from large assessments" (quoted by ACEMOGLU, ROBINSON 2019, 108). His thesis stems from observations of Arab society and, in particular, the increasing abuse of power by ruling elites:

> «When the dynasty continues in power and their rulers follow each other in succession ... the Bedouin qualities of moderation and restraint disappear. Royal authority with its tyranny, and sedentary culture ... make their appearance ... individual imposts and assessments upon the subjects, agricultural laborers, farmers, and all the other taxpayers, increase» (quoted by ACEMOGLU, ROBINSON 2019, 111).

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[3]    No less important is the third component, "provide public services". Another central thesis of the book is that human groups, aware of the risks posed by the Leviathan, often generate a "cage of norms" that inhibits individual initiative – and with it, any accumulation of knowledge and resources that could enable emancipation from immediate needs, the provision of services, and thus social progress. Delegating power to a Leviathan is therefore a necessary, though not sufficient, step toward progress and freedom. For our present purposes, however, this aspect can be set aside.

More specifically regarding the power of "officials and experts" in Hart's sense, Acemoglu and Robinson devote some fascinating pages to John Lydus, a Byzantine official during the reign of Justinian, who left us a vivid account of the bureaucracy of his time:

> «The bureaucracy ran on, as John put it, a complex set of "customs, forms and language" and members of it wore "distinctive regalia", uniforms of military origin. They had to deal with regulations and procedures and "registers, titles and duties". John was also keen to point out that it had an esprit de corps and an identity that separated it from "ordinary people"» (ACEMOGLU, ROBINSON 2019, 159).

John Lydus expressed pride in belonging to a well-structured group of "officials and legal experts", clearly set apart from the "ordinary people". But the authors are quick to note that such membership conferred advantages that went beyond what the law formally authorized:

> «What John describes is an extensive bureaucracy with well-defined rules, functioning within an elaborate legal system. Of course it was not immune to personal influence, and it didn't work out exactly as the rules specified. John himself got his job not entirely on the basis of merit, but with the help of his [...] contact Zoticus. Moreover, many of the senior positions were reserved for elites, particularly people from the senatorial class, and there was certainly some corruption» (ACEMOGLU, ROBINSON 2019, 160).

In sum: the formation of dominant groups not only generates privilege but tends to make the exercise of privilege seem natural and right, eventually leading to its expansion or abuse. This is evident both in the dynasties described by Khaldun and in the Byzantine bureaucracy – as well as, as noted earlier, in the U.S. education system. What Khaldun calls the «Bedouin qualities of moderation and restraint» suggest that such abuses are prevented only as long as dominant groups voluntarily adhere to a traditional moral code based on suspicion toward privilege. Once that phase ends – as we will see in the next section – dominant groups can only be constrained by the active resistance of "ordinary people".

In short, the distinction between "ordinary people" and "legal experts and officials" points to a political fault line separating groups with partially divergent experiences and interests. These give rise to different forms of individualism: systemic and anti-systemic. This fault line also helps explain why SEARLE (2010) felt the need to clarify the notion of "collective recognition or acceptance" that underpins his theory of institutional facts. In a community, an institutional fact – such as a system of norms – exists only to the extent that it is collectively recognized. But this seemed to imply that all members of a society willingly endorse the system of norms. To dispel this misunderstanding, SEARLE (2010, 57) notes that his notion of "collective recognition" is compatible with «cases where one thinks the institution is a bad thing».

The "recognition" of norms by subordinated individuals is, in many cases, precisely of this kind. This is not without reason: for the subordinated, norms are the very instruments of their subordination, and their individualism manifests itself as *resistance*; whereas the individualism of hegemonic groups is (partly) expressed *through* the system of norms.

## 4.  *The Individualism of the Subordinated: Between Populism and Social Organization*

We have described, in a preliminary way, individualism as an obstacle to the sharing of collective systems of norms. However, a necessary clarification has since emerged: while individualism indeed fosters anti-system behavior among subordinated groups, hegemonic groups are instead characterized by pro-system forms of individualism. In other words, systems of norms generate a fracture within the social body, for the simple reason that some individuals are merely subjected to them, while others benefit from the privileges tied to their administration. We could say that "social contracts" are necessarily asymmetrical.

In this section, I aim to analyze the individualism of subordinated groups and its natural connection to populism. Based on this analysis, I will suggest that one possible alternative is the social organization of dissent.

## 4.1  *Laclau and Populism*

In Section 1, we described the loosening of social bonds as a characteristic feature of individualism. As is well known, the theme of individual isolation – and its political consequences – is central to Hannah Arendt's reflection in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. To use a well-known quote: «Totalitarian movements are mass organizations of atomized, isolated individuals» (Arendt 1973, 323).

More broadly, Arendt speaks of:

> «an unorganized, structureless mass of furious individuals who had nothing in common except their vague apprehension that [...] the most respected, articulate and representative members of the community were fools and that all the powers that be were not so much evil as they were equally stupid and fraudulent» (Arendt 1973, 315).

This passage succinctly captures the link between social atomization («an unorganized, structureless mass»), anti-system sentiment, and what Roversi termed «an incapacity to control our reactive impulses» («*furious* individuals»).

The discourse on populism inherits this idea of atomized individuals and their visceral resentment toward the status quo. Without offering an explicit definition of "populism" – a notoriously complex task – I will simply follow the main lines of Ernesto Laclau's analysis in *On Populist Reason*. Given Laclau's theoretical orientation, this allows us to approach populism in a light that is not prejudicially negative. To anticipate my argument: Laclau's attempt to rehabilitate populism depends on his initial assumption that society "does not exist", in the sense that it does not precede politics. Politics, therefore, has no choice but to construct the imaginary "people" it addresses. I intend to contrast this view with that of Acemoglu and Robinson (2019), discussed earlier: from their perspective, politics contributes to freedom and progress only when it faces a strong, organized society. In short, the populist mobilization of atomized individuals appears inevitable only insofar as we abandon from the outset the idea of a social organization of the subordinated. Let us follow this reasoning in more detail.

Laclau's stated goal with respect to the notion of "populism" is:

> «to invert the analytical perspective: instead of starting with a model of political rationality which sees populism in terms of what it lacks – its vagueness, its ideological emptiness, its anti-intellectualism, its transitory character – [my objective is] to enlarge the model of rationality in terms of a generalized rhetoric (what [...] can be called "hegemony") so that populism appears as a distinctive and always present possibility of structuration of political life» (Laclau 2005, 13).

This reevaluation of populism – through an expanded notion of rationality – is also intended as a reevaluation of the subjects to whom it appeals. Laclau examines the classical literature on the masses, from Gustave Le Bon to Hippolyte Taine, rejecting their tendency to describe them as made up of «"vagabonds", "ruffians" and "brigands" – that is, by forces which escape every kind of social rationality» (Laclau 2005, 32).

According to Laclau, it is Freud who introduces a decisive theoretical shift in our understanding of the relationship between individuals and masses, thanks to two decisive moves. The first is the minimization of the distinction between the individual and the social dimensions, since «the individual, from the beginning of his or her life, is invariably linked to somebody else» (Laclau 2005, 52). The second is the appeal to «*libido* [rather than rationality] as the key category explaining the nature of the social bond» (Laclau 2005, 53). What Laclau calls an expansion of the concept

of rationality thus appears as a radical critique of the traditional one, as is clarified by the following quote from Mouffe (2000, 95-96):

> «By privileging rationality, [theories of democracy] leave aside a central element which is the crucial role played by passions and affects in securing allegiance to democratic values […]. The failure of current democratic theory to tackle the question of citizenship is the consequence of their operating with a conception of the subject which sees individuals as prior to society, bearers of natural rights, and either utility-maximizing agents or rational subjects».

Following Freud, Laclau's individuals are not rational subjects that preexist the libidinal relationship constitutive of the social. More precisely, this constitution is described in terms of the development Lacan brings to Freud's theories. Lacan introduces the notion of the "empty signifier" – alongside the need for a leader, already recognized by Freud. According to Laclau, it is this empty signifier that, by establishing a relation of equivalence among otherwise distinct individual demands, produces the libidinal aggregation of individuals into a "people" – the political act *par excellence*, as it founds society as a whole.

Also in this respect, Laclau insists, it would be a mistake to interpret the dynamics of populism in terms of a political or cognitive deficit:

> «The empty character of the signifiers that give unity or coherence to a popular camp is not the result of any *ideological or political underdevelopment*; it simply expresses the fact that any populist unification takes place on a radically heterogeneous social terrain»; «The language of a populist discourse – whether of Left or Right – is always going to be imprecise and fluctuating: not because of any *cognitive failure*, but because it tries to operate performatively within a social reality which is to a large extent heterogeneous and fluctuating» (Laclau 2005, 98 and 118; emphasis added).

Nonetheless, in other contexts Laclau adopts the image of a lack – more precisely, a weakly constituted will or identity – to justify the need for populism as a mechanism of representation: «If we had a fully constituted will – of a corporative group, for instance – the representative's room for manoeuvre would indeed be limited» (Laclau 2005, 158). Conversely, politics is necessarily populist because it deals with «weakly constituted identities whose constitution requires, precisely, representation in the first place» (Laclau 2005, 160).

In short, it is the absence of social organization that makes populism necessary as a political mechanism for individuals' self-representation – one that elevates them to a perception of themselves as a "people". It is this absence that renders the individuals described by Freud and Lacan devoid of any social identity prior to that political device, and therefore in need of empty signifiers that may represent them:

> «It is only with the Freudian/Lacanian description of the working of the unconscious that representation becomes ontologically primary – as we have seen, names retrospectively constitute the unity of the object. And it is difficult to find a terrain which reveals this constitution better than the constant fluctuations in naming the "people". The main difficulty with classical theories of political representation is that most of them conceived the will of the "people" as something that was constituted before representation» (Laclau 2005, 163-164).

And yet, it is precisely here that we find a fundamental ambiguity in Laclau's position. On the one hand, his thesis is descriptive – and its premise can be debated on empirical grounds: if individuals lack the strong identity that social organization provides, then there is no alternative to populism as a mechanism of self-representation. On the other hand, adopting the Freudian/Lacanian model of the subject imposes a theoretical constraint a priori: individuals are seen as inherently and necessarily lacking a social organization that precedes populist representation.

Granted, Laclau acknowledges that Freud himself limits his own model, admitting the possibility of forms of social organization other than mass adhesion – forms that mirror the structure of the organized individual, endowed with a strong identity: «we have those passages in which [Freud] opens up the possibility – as an alternative mode of social aggregation – that, *through organization*, society acquires the characteristics of the individual» (Laclau 2005, 57; emphasis added).

Nevertheless, Laclau immediately neutralizes this concession:

> «So how are we to conceive of this opposition between two modes of social aggregation – one based in "organization", by which society acquires the secondary characteristics of the individual; the other grounded in the libidinal tie with the leader? Do they apply to different kinds of group? Or, rather, are they social logics which, to various extents, enter into the constitution of all social groups? I think that this second hypothesis is the correct one» (Laclau 2005, 58).

This Solomonic conclusion – entirely reasonable in itself – is nevertheless used by Laclau to present populism as the very essence of politics: not as one pole within politics, opposed to the organization of social needs, but as its foundational structure. The idea that social needs might be addressed through organizational forms is largely absent from the book, and when it does appear, it is only in a negative light, as in the following passage:

> «Thus the defeat of the "democratic promise" implicit in American populism adopted the pattern we have seen throughout this book: the dissolution of equivalential links and the differential incorporation of sectors within a wider organic society – "transformism", to use Gramsci's term» (Laclau 2005, 207).

Since needs are necessarily different from one social group to another, their fulfillment by an organized society can only dissolve the potential unity of the people. But in doing so, it also weakens – or even extinguishes – the *critical* political drive generated by the populist device.

## 4.2  Acemoglu and Robinson, and the Organization of Dissent

In short, for Laclau politics is not merely the administration of specific needs; it concerns, rather, the individual's fundamental need to feel part of the social totality. However, this necessarily entails a permanent antagonistic – or "critical" – dynamic, one that not only draws on dissatisfaction and resentment, but actively fuels them as a driving force. To unify the "people", politics must continuously take the form of anti-politics.

Two distinct strands converge in this anti-systemic movement. On the one hand, there is the antagonism directed at hegemonic forces – including "officials and experts" – and their privileges. On the other, there is a deep suspicion of social organization and the satisfaction of needs as such, seen as complicit with domination (a manifestation of "transformism", in Laclau's terms) – but also, strategically, as weakening the critical political thrust. In both respects, the status quo as a normative system appears as the enemy – against which the people must be mobilized in order to ensure their unity. As De Carolis puts it (2023, 127; my translation), politics becomes the art of «mobilizing the masses against [organized] civil society».

Now, Laclau's argument captures a real point – one we have already highlighted. To the extent that systems of governance are able to redistribute the fruits of the growth they produce, the impetus for change is inhibited, and the privileges of hegemonic groups become entrenched – with ultimately negative consequences for society as a whole. So is there no way out of this dilemma? Must we choose between populism, which incites the individualism of the subordinate classes against civil society and its normative systems; or the defense of the status quo, which allows the individualism of hegemonic groups to expand unchecked?

A possible way out is suggested by Acemoglu and Robinson: the self-organization of subordinate individuals, capable of confronting elites and their systems of norms.

> «In Britain, [...] women's rights were not given but taken. Women [...] mobilized. They engaged in direct action and civil disobedience. [...] Gaining rights was a consequence of their organization and empowerment. [...] The story of women's liberation isn't unique or exceptional. Liberty almost always depends on society's mobilization and ability to hold its own against the state and its elites» (ACEMOGLU, ROBINSON 2019, XIX).

At the same time, Acemoglu and Robinson do not conceal how difficult it is not only to achieve, but also to maintain the balance required – what they, drawing on *Through the Looking-Glass* by Lewis Carroll, call the "Red Queen effect": like the Red Queen and Alice, Leviathan and society must constantly run at the same speed in order to remain in balance, and to stay within that "narrow corridor" which enables development. In other words, society must curb the constant tendency toward a "Despotic Leviathan", by instead producing a "Shackled Leviathan". But this effort is not purely critical – it is also constructive, and as such it requires forms of self-restraint:

> «Yet it is important to recognize the precarious nature of the Red Queen effect. In all of that reaction and counterreaction, one party may pull ahead of the other, yanking both out of the corridor. The Red Queen effect also requires that the competition between state and society, between elites and non-elites, isn't completely zero-sum, with each side trying to destroy and dispossess the other. So in all of that competition, some room for compromise, an understanding that there will be a counterreaction after every reaction, is critical» (ACEMOGLU, ROBINSON 2019, 66).

In practice, the two forces involved must accept a degree of cooperation: they must participate jointly in the management of public affairs – without avoiding conflict, but being partially willing to mediate it. If Europe was able to enter the "narrow corridor" of development, according to the authors, it was due to:

> «a fortuitous balance between the powers of central authority and those of common men (not women, unfortunately). It is this balance that put Europe into the corridor, setting in motion the Red Queen effect in a relentless process of state-society competition. The balance was a consequence of two things. First, the takeover of Europe at the end of the fifth century by democratically organized tribal societies centered on assemblies and norms of consensual decision making. Second, the legacy of critical elements of state institutions and political hierarchy absorbed from the Roman Empire and the Christian church» (ACEMOGLU, ROBINSON 2019, 153).

Only relatively stable forms of organized dissent – such as, at the origins of European development, the "assembly politics of Germanic tribes" – make it possible to reintegrate subordinate individuals into political participation. This is also the direction suggested by ESPOSITO (2023, 40-41; my translation) in discussing Machiavelli's valorization of social conflict:

> «The social conflict, defended by Machiavelli against all previous and subsequent philosophy, is not valued by him because it is destructive of institutions, but rather, on the contrary, because it is reconstructive of them. [...] Conflict is valuable, it has a productive value, only if it serves to establish an order capable of integrating and enhancing it».

In short, the issue is not the redistribution of resources. It is about reopening spaces for participation and/or emancipation – consider, again, the question of social mobility. Only under this condition can we hope to transform the individualism of the subordinate classes into participation in normative systems.

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