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Populism as a polemological factor

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Abstract:
Democracies incorporate an oligarchic component that stems from their imperfect nature. And populism is a political strategy that seeks to address these shortcomings and restore power to the people.
The point is that, in the long term, it undermines a country's legal and political framework by eroding its checks and balances (such as the media or the judiciary in their role of protecting fundamental rights or minorities) and its procedures. Furthermore, it is also effective in seizing power, meaning that, rather than an end in itself, it becomes a tool, a strategic model. And democracy requires a loyalty to which populism is not committed.
The communication strategy is key. Not surprisingly, it aims to dominate the news agenda and turn it into the social agenda. And to do so, it makes use of disinformation.
We are faced with a polemological factor due to the crisis of the model it advocates at the national level, but also because of the uncertainty that national populism introduces onto the international stage and the emulation it provokes. The spread of the model it advocates hinders global agreements and strains regional organisations. Added to this is the fact that it undermines multilateralism and challenges the entire Western-inspired rules-based world order established since 1945.
Furthermore, the West is being weakened by what appears to be an internal clash between liberal and illiberal regimes.

Keywords: Trump, Disinformation, Narratives, Communication, Postmodernity.

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‘The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter.’

A quote attributed to Sir Winston Churchill

Democracy and postmodern society

The political function of democracy goes beyond its symbolic nature or magical significance. It consists of creating a resilient framework that fosters the convergence of very opposing forces. Loyalty is a key concept for the functioning of the system. This is underpinned by the internalisation of its values, principles and procedures.

We are dealing with a system of checks and balances — but also with an attitude — that maintains equilibrium and is embodied in institutions. Key elements are the judiciary and the media, which act as countervailing powers. The judiciary ensures the proper balance between the different parts of the system and its impact on the public. And the media are a structural counterbalancing mechanism that enables relatively independent scrutiny. Their plurality and diversity serve the quality of democracy.

Liberal democracies have the capacity to reform themselves through peaceful means, whereas other political regimes rarely evolve and change without conflict.

Nevertheless, representative democracy suffers from a deficit of legitimacy, as the interests of the people are represented without them being consulted directly. Moreover, the system’s flaws mean it even has an oligarchic element, given the difficulty of achieving real equality. Thus, Alain de Benoist argued that “the political and media elites espouse the same discourse”. But this fallibility does not imply that only direct democracy is legitimate, as it too incorporates its own problems that also render it fallible.

Postmodernity, regarded as the current age of the West—and which forms the social framework of democracy—is a state of mind, an attitude of denial and even rejection of all previous thought. The suffix “post-” implies its overcoming.

The twilight of ideologies—which marked the dawn of the new century—brought a new anthropocentrism from which, in turn, the questioning, softening and reformulation of many prevailing ideas were derived. This is what Gianni Vattimo calls “weak thought”.

The lack of ideologies implies the absence of vantage points from which to look to the future. There is no future because there is no proposal for one. This concentrates any solution on the present. Compromise then loses its value, for every moment is a new starting point, and one does not look back either to a past that neither exists nor commits.

This lack of horizons gives rise to a sense of drifting. The ephemeral becomes the norm. We are in an age of confusion and weak concepts which, inevitably, rejects any form of sacralisation. It is Baudrillard's "light society" or Bauman's "liquid society".

It is also the realm of the "*light*" man, the compliant citizen, without fixed values or thoughts, who lives in a reality tailored to his own measure. That is why 21ST-CENTURY society is conformist and uncritical. The citizen, in the end, declares himself content with everything as long as his status and standard of living are guaranteed.

Populism as a concept between demagoguery and political representation

The word populism appeared in the second half of the 19TH century as a direct translation of the term *Narodnichestvo*, which designated a heterogeneous set of political movements on the Russian socialist left. But, as is often the case, the term expresses a much earlier reality. In the words of Ernesto Laclau, "populism is merely a way of constructing the political".

This term, which fits perfectly within postmodernity, has evolved to take on pejorative connotations, even within the spectrum of meanings offered by a highly polysemous word of great conceptual ambiguity. In fact, it has become a label used to discredit any political opponent (Ahedo, 2023).

From this perspective, it is an expression of degeneration, a corruption of the Rousseauian general will, even though it is presented as its realisation. We are faced with a substantially anti-liberal or illiberal proposition.

But the fact is that populism possesses a remarkable cross-cutting nature or versatility. In fact, it is essentially a rhetorical concept, a methodology or strategy, rather than an ideology. For this reason, as Vallespín highlights and Areilza emphasises, it is easier to use it as an adjective than to define it as a noun.

All in all, it is particularly suited to extreme positions given the great communicative power they possess due to their apparent consistency; this causes nuances to lose relevance. Its application is thus a catch-all. But the populist strategy inevitably draws those who employ it towards the extremes as a result of a need for consistency.

Nevertheless, it is also worth noting how David Cameron's British Conservative Party, to serve his personal political agenda, first called a referendum on Scotland's continued membership of the United Kingdom and then promoted Brexit; the result of this contradiction in agendas was a tension that benefited another openly populist and extreme party. And President Donald Trump belongs to a traditional party such as the Republican Party, which may also suffer as a result. Indeed, some authors suggest that it has already mutated into a national-populist movement.

All in all, the left-right axis, the cornerstone of politics since the 19TH century, seems to have run its course; for, with the crisis of the welfare state, the consensus surrounding the social and democratic rule of law is beginning to falter, and the social contract that has governed Europe over the last few decades may even be broken.

In any case, the plebiscitary nature of populism involves an appeal to the people, which leads it to be regarded as an expression of direct democracy, a guise behind which it hides. Indeed, by offering simple solutions to difficult and complex problems, it manages to politicise any social unrest.

Populism considers that political representation, and with it liberal democracy, alienates power from the people, as institutions that act against the majority *effectively* serve to block the decisions of the majority. For populism, there is only one collective subject with a will and, following this logic, the institutions of liberal democracy (constitutions, rights, parliaments, the media or an independent judiciary) are positive if they are subordinate to "popular power"; but negative when they limit its sovereignty (Gratius and Rivero, 2018).

Power thus acts without restraint. Populism, shielded by this legitimisation, recognises no limitations whatsoever—organisational, procedural or of any other kind, including ideological or epistemological. It presents itself as the only valid and indeed possible ideology. For this reason, it is not only illiberal, but also anti-pluralist, anti-elite and anti-expertise (Gratius and Rivero, 2018).

It seeks refuge in the socio-economic circumstances of the moment. These are channelled into enemies, which is what potential political rivals become—rivals whom it no longer even attempts to convince. It confronts pre-fabricated existential enemies.

It is characterised by its ability to mobilise and connect emotionally with the masses, appealing to their prejudices and aspirations. To achieve this, it simplifies the public sphere and seeks to concentrate power in the executive, often at the expense of freedoms, which can lead to the erosion of the rule of law and of institutions of control (Rivera and González, 2024). There is only the leader and the people.

This represents a psychological and intellectual regression, as it implies the primacy of the emotional over the rational. The populist leader stokes the passions of the people, their most immediate ambitions. And he satisfies them, mind you, whilst neglecting their real interests. And he does so outside due process, using a dichotomous, black-and-white methodology.

For Laclau and Mouffe, hegemony is the capacity of a social group to articulate the elements of a society and provide them with a common direction of progress. They assert that hegemonic capacity is contingent in nature and depends both on socio-historical conditions and on the strategies adopted. Consequently, there are axes other than the economic one through which hegemony can be organised. These can be utilised, even successively, to drive progress (La Trivial, 2024).

And that is precisely what President Trump has done. He has managed to bring together various disparate social groups, whose demands he has successively brought into alignment. These range from technocrats to labour groups, including expatriate communities of different nationalities, alongside the traditional WASP Republican voter. All these groups are united by national populism and the pursuit of economic gain. But naturally, they often put forward demands that are at odds with one another.

In this way, by bringing these groups together, he manages to appeal to the people, but at the same time, he can lead them to act against their own interests, that is, against their deep-seated and genuine interests. And, as a result, the institutions that serve as a counterweight to power are left in a precarious position, their credibility damaged by the betrayal of democratic principles and a failure to uphold due loyalty. That is why populists are branded as “anti-system”.

For the two post-Marxist authors[1] cited, the main features of populism are: the articulation of antagonism within the community and the challenge to the order as a whole. This challenge is framed in terms of the people versus the elite, although other forms may be adopted.

The populist strategy involves putting the system under extreme strain. To this end, it resorts to oversimplifying reality, social division, demagoguery and authoritarianism. And the key to it all is communication (La Trivial, 2024).

The populist knows how to manage resentment but does not know how to capitalise on their eventual victory because they are unable to deal with the complexity of THE 21ST century and, above all, do not really have an alternative proposal. They claim to represent the people. Their representation is of what they deem or interpret as the people's most intimate and even hidden desires which, once made explicit, come to shape their political agenda. This becomes a media agenda, a direct line of communication between leader and people.

Populism thus brings the populist leader into the picture, serving to construct him by endowing him with a salvific mission. And he, in turn, practises populism; that is, he politicises the existing discontent by capitalising on it through a self-serving approach to the socio-political situation. He uses it as a source of authority and with the aim of legitimising his authoritarianism.

Unlike other political parties, populists are not bound by ideologies, as their primary objective is first to come to power and then to remain in it; for this reason, it is not strictly a political movement but rather a political logic. The populist leader[2] is a central figure in this scheme. Without populist leaders, populist movements are ineffective and are relegated to the margins of the system (Torre, 2022).

However, it is also true that, by labelling a certain course of action as populist, one is delegitimising a political proposal. And, in doing so, one may be ignoring the real concerns

[1] Unlike Marx, who had replaced Hegelian reason with class struggle as the driving force of history, Laclau and Mouffe, however, consider that the very idea that history is determined must be overcome, given that capitalism is a failed structure, which broadens their scope for political action.

[2] To address the proliferation of populist leaders, Gideon Rachman's work, *The Age of Authoritarian Leaders* (Spanish edition published by Crítica, translated by Efrén del Valle), may prove interesting. One of the defining features of our time is the spread of the 'strongman' archetype in both democracies and autocracies.

of the people. This is all the more so if these concerns diverge from the dominant thinking or that championed by the elites.

Consequently, for authors such as Laclau, populism is a logic that produces popular identities and is absolutely necessary to put an end to exclusionary administrative systems and build alternative orders. The populist rupture is, viewed in this way, precisely the alternative to post-politics, to the administration's negation of the political (Torre, 2022), that is, to the replacement of politics by administrative management.

Post-politics, populism and communication

With the end of the Cold War, representative democracy entered a crisis. This is, in part, the result of a process of consensus-building that has narrowed the scope of the political arena by relegating matters of consensus to the technical sphere. It is linked to the twilight of ideologies.

Seen in this light, populism is not a cause of this crisis of legitimacy but its consequence. Democracy, paradoxically, is thus transformed into an event of dissent. This is because it does not oppose a specific resolution, but rather the technical regime that facilitates its adoption, given that this regime has removed itself from politics through its administrative trivialisation (Torre, 2022).

It is this depoliticisation of politics that Žižek, in 1999, termed "post-politics". Through this, politics has left behind the old ideological struggles to conceal what has become a technical regime of administration. Through such a strategy, the public's attention is diverted away from structural issues—which, particularly in the case of the economy, have become technicised—and replaced by identity- and culture-based concerns.

The natural result is also a depoliticised society, insofar as it is concerned solely with the recognition of identities (gender, ecology, ethnicity, cultural minorities, sexuality…) and with tolerance of difference. Without downplaying these issues—in which he acknowledges that progress has been made—Žižek's proposal, as a true neo-Marxist, is based on repoliticising the economy, that is, refocusing debates on it.

For his part, Christian Salmon, in 2007, referred to post-politics as the politics of post-truth. This seeks to create or shape public opinion by acting more on emotions and

personal beliefs than on objective facts. To this end, it primarily utilises the sentiments that Moïsi identified in relation to trust: fear (lack of trust), hope (the expression of trust) and humiliation (wounded trust), and uses these to structure the discourse. It manipulates them for non-explicit purposes.

Disinformation thus becomes the lifeblood of this depoliticised conception of politics. It makes use of social media, of a population with access to information but with limited time for its analysis and lacking the necessary training.

And its origins have also changed. Thus, the term *agitprop,* agitation and propaganda, was a political strategy of the Russian Revolution. It emerged as a movement created by artists to influence public opinion in two ways: passively, on people's consciences through propaganda, and actively, through agitation (Lenoir-Grand, 2017).

Whereas thinkers such as Chomsky or Derrida were traditionally defined as "alternative", now the "alternative" is, precisely, in power. And that is novel. Power now, from this conception of politics, engages in *agitprop* and is also "alternative".

Media and social media in the information age

The media are key to democracy. But they have a dual nature—as both business and public service—and simultaneously disseminate facts and ideas for informational, advertising, propagandistic and even entertainment purposes, which fosters confusion between them (Manrique, 2016).

Furthermore, large groups and corporations have emerged, often linked to state interests and possessing considerable influence, which exploit the absence of effective borders to spread disinformation. This poses a risk of interference in the internal affairs of third parties and a threat to their sovereignty.

Indeed, there has been a significant concentration of companies, such that the vast virtual space has been fenced off and divided up by an oligopoly of digital firms (Merchan, 2017).

Furthermore, the pattern of communication has been radically transformed. Social media are the linchpin of the 21ST-CENTURY "information ecosystem". These are spaces where

users encounter a relative homogeneity and, as a result, ideas and beliefs are treated as equal regardless of their origin and quality.

Social media also enables, under these conditions, shared spaces for interaction between physically dispersed groups, to the extent that the internet becomes a space for public gathering – an "*online* crowd" – facilitating a form of *e-democracy*.

This is because in 2016, 62% of US adults accessed news via social media and 44% via Facebook (Gottfried and Shearer, 2016). In 2024, Facebook [Meta] had 3.065 billion users, YouTube 2.491 billion, Instagram 2 billion and Twitter 619 million, with an average daily usage of two hours and twenty-three minutes. There are thus *influencers* capable of mobilising or influencing hundreds of millions of people with their opinions.

21ST-CENTURY society is an information society, given that information is an essential resource. It is estimated that by 2003, humanity had produced 5 exabytes of information, a figure that, by 2011, was being generated every two days. In 2007, the figure rose to 295 exabytes, reaching 600 exabytes by 2011 (Marina, 2017). In 2020, 2.5 quintillion bytes were generated every day. Since then, all human knowledge has doubled every two years, so that today, 90% of it is less than two years old (Gilli, 2019).

This represents a powerful weapon for populism, as it comprises a set of interconnected communication tools and practices that fit perfectly with its rhetoric. Populism and social media feed off one another. Social media facilitates the emergence of populist movements, and these movements have helped turn social media into a space for political mobilisation (Gerbaudo, 2023). They serve to disseminate negative and simplistic messages that are useful from a political communication perspective and that foster polarisation. This is aided by the very structure of social media and the underlying business model.

Truth and the struggle for control of the news agenda

In postmodernity, the emotional takes precedence over the rational. Truth is not confined to facts, but also to the feelings it arouses or the allegiances it provokes.

And when power is not measured by wealth or the exchange of goods, in fact, it is neither given nor exchanged, but rather exercised; it exists only in action and is a "producer" of

knowledge and truth (García and Vidarte, 2009: 199). As Michael Foucault put it, “we are subjected to the production of truth by power, and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth” (Foucault, 1979: 140). In other words, whoever holds power holds the truth, and this is no minor matter, for the reverse is also true: whoever holds the truth holds power.

Populism seeks to take control of the political agenda. This involves taking control of the news agenda, insofar as this is an expression of social reality, of the truth. By taking control of it, it also seizes power. And borders are no obstacle to such a strategy.

Added to this is the fact that the news coverage offered by the media focuses on events that represent a certain rupture, and populist, emotive and disruptive messages are precisely that. Such a role is characteristic of the tabloid media. In fact, the format of media spectacles or infotainment (including video games) lends itself very well to the polarising ideas it promotes, thereby creating a sort of symbiosis as both sides benefit (Prior, 2021).

Populism strives to push its debates onto the news agenda. It does so by appealing to emotion. And this is particularly true in postmodern societies, which crave drama and powerful emotions such as fear, anger and hostility. These are typically achieved by simplifying and presenting reality in black and white terms in order to mobilise public opinion. And by repeating the message, because high politics is a form of education. Populist politics thus fractures society, grinding it down in order to subjugate it.

This is psychopolitics. A political construct systematically built upon its irrational component, that is, through the exaggeration of the emotional factor. The people do not so much want to think as to confirm what they already think. Something that may stem from internal or external opinions.

Disinformation and populism

Although the dissemination of knowledge is greater in the 21ST century, the average quality of information is lower. Everything—the truth and what is not—is found online; it is public. And this is when facts and reality count for less in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotions and beliefs. Furthermore, public opinion is changeable.

Representative democracy seeks to correct such flaws. The key lies in the selection and prioritisation of available information, and the proper formulation of the news agenda.

The resurgence of populism globally has coincided with the proliferation of disinformation. Populism, disinformation and polarisation are intrinsically linked and feed into one another. Indeed, disinformation thrives in environments where there is high emotional polarisation (Rivera and González, 2024).

As a political phenomenon, it is characterised by its ability to connect emotionally with and mobilise the masses. It simplifies politics by dividing society into two opposing camps. The Manichean logic of populism, combined with disinformation, serves to underpin a polarising and divisive narrative. This undermines trust in democratic institutions and political actors (Rivera and González, 2024).

In short, disinformation is anything that hinders the correct use of available information. And this is not directly related to lying. In a century where the truth can be constructed from any fragment of reality and then completely detached from it, lying becomes almost childish, merely the result of a lack of imagination or incompetence.

Disinformation undermines the very foundations of democracy by eroding its basis, as democracy rests on the supposedly free and unconditional decisions of citizens.

Fake news or post-truth narratives offer some kind of benefit, given that their fabrication is economically costly. To combat them, it is imperative to understand their motives and identify the source that has fuelled them. As Derrida once noted: “What is relevant in a lie is never its content, but the liar’s purpose”.

Fake news and hoaxes have always existed throughout human history. There is nothing new about that. The real news is, in fact, the ease and depth with which they now penetrate society through information technologies, and the mass or strategic nature of this phenomenon. The mistrust they provoke serves to deconstruct societies.

All this is nothing new. The novelty lies in the technical apparatus with which it has been equipped. Furthermore, the lack of any filtering on social media means that the user is the sole judge of the veracity of the news.

And this is despite the fact that quite a few of these news items are genuine products of social engineering. The key is to focus or defocus the debate. And it is humans, not *bots,*

who are primarily responsible for the virality of fake news. And this should come as no surprise, as that is precisely what they were designed to do (Vosoughi, Roy and Aral, 2018).

It seeks to exploit periods of social tension to achieve this. One such period is, without doubt, elections. These create the illusion of a polarisation that does not exist, from which a breakdown in society is inferred. Such a moment allows for an effective strike at the very fabric of the relationship between society and its institutions, when their vulnerability is at its greatest.

It is not so much a question of supporting this or that candidate deemed most favourable, though that too; but, above all, of questioning the framework, of sowing doubt within the community, of highlighting the contradictions and shortcomings of the system, thereby weakening it. The aim is to undermine society's sense of security and, with it, trust – the cornerstone, as we have seen, of Moïsi's emotional strategy.

Disinformation also serves to neutralise the media's role as the fourth estate, thereby undermining the balances of democracy. This is a key element of many populist strategies designed to pave the way for a direct relationship between the leader and the people, whilst eliminating or limiting any mechanism of opposition to their proposals. And these are no minor issues, given that their regulation affects the very foundations of the West.

But the fact is that, historically, the media on the international stage have been used for precisely that purpose: to interfere. As an example, consider the suspension of such prominent news outlets as *Russia Today* and *Sputnik News,* at the behest of the European Council shortly after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This was subsequently upheld by the Court of Justice of the European Union, given the clear alignment of the news coverage on both channels with the positions held by Moscow and their capacity to influence public opinion in a way that could benefit a foreign state.

Populism and international relations

The rise of populism is linked to the crisis of the democratic model resulting from the twilight of ideologies and post-politics. On a larger scale, this has led to the liberal order being called into question, first at the national level and subsequently at the international

level. This manifests itself in the clash between liberal and illiberal regimes—as well as between democracies and dictatorships—which has shifted the struggle to a global scale.

In short, a country's foreign policy is an extension of its domestic policy and is therefore inseparable from it. This is all the truer in a democracy, where continuity and consistency are particularly essential. However, it sometimes happens that a particular country's foreign policy serves not so much its interests or values as the domestic agenda of a populist leader and his personal interests. As a result, state policy can undergo a complete and incongruous shift, making it difficult to predict. This, or the mere possibility of it, generates uncertainty at a global level.

National populism

Populism is, not infrequently, closely linked to nationalism. These are undoubtedly distinct concepts—both incomplete and porous—but they are not entirely independent of one another. They share quite a few values, starting with their emotional, if not anti-rational, nature.

Not surprisingly, nationalism, Schiller's "crooked twig", is an ideology of identity; that is to say, it finds its foundation in a certain collective identity. Populism also belongs to this logic and, as such, serves to articulate it. The difference between the two lies in the fact that whilst nationalism relies on the inside-outside logic, populism adds to this the top-bottom confrontation, that is, between the people and the elites (Fernández-García and Valencia, 2022).

Following this logic, "national populism" is a discourse that articulates the frustrations of the nation-people along the vertical axis of populism; that is, it pits the people against elites, whether national or international. It thus refers to the political primacy of national identities in the international context by aligning both spheres.

In this sphere, national-populist actors claim to embody and represent the sovereignty of the people—defined in strictly national terms—in opposition to elites and power structures based abroad, which are presented, once again, as anti-democratic, oligarchic and corrupt, but also as dominating national elites that act as their branches. Such discourses

can prove particularly appealing in opportunistic crisis contexts and serve to exonerate through their external projection (Fernández-García and Valencia, 2022).

Populism is thus a logic that feeds off nationalism, as it involves an overvaluation of national identity. To this end, it likewise draws on the mythologisation of the past and of traditions. This explains its protectionist and conservative nature, and its opposition to any community-based project or multicultural logic that dilutes the nation.

Anti-globalism and anti-regionalism

Globalisation has brought about a shift in the world order, within the context of which there has been a loss of relative power in the West as a result of the "rise of the rest" referred to by Fareed Zakaria. In terms of purchasing power parity, according to the World Bank in 2023, China accounted for 18.76% of global GDP, the US for 14.8% and the EU for 14.68%. The sum of the three is less than 50%.

There is a backlash against the system of rules that has brought about this change, and there are calls for a return to power politics as a way of overcoming an undesirable trend resulting from the current multilateral regulatory framework. Populism, in this geopolitical context of the West's loss of relative power, may even be a precipitating factor.

But it is also true that globalisation has caused an internal rift in countries such as the United States. This is the result of the unequal distribution of the benefits and burdens that globalisation has brought to the country. This has made it a particular source of grievance for a segment of the population and, consequently, has sparked protests against it, which populism exploits.

The so-called "losers of globalisation" claim that there has been a loss of control, but also of the people's autonomy to determine national economic and employment policy. They infer from this what is, *in effect*, the hijacking of both democracy and national sovereignty itself.

This is because national populism also regards multilateral or community projects as undermining the decision-making capacity of the nation-people and, as such, as an undue restriction on the power of the state (Aranda, 2025). The tensions this causes within regional organisations such as the European Union are evident.

Globalisation, however much it may be a process of cultural rationalisation imposed by the dominant culture—which is, after all, Western—implies an exchange from which a degree of mixing follows, however minimal it may be. And hence, once again, the reactive and anti-globalisation nature of populism, even in the West, which is the very cultural axis it draws upon.

Similarly, populism opposes the cultural hybridisation advocated by globalisation and, of course, takes a stand against migratory flows, using xenophobia to foster mistrust among the population.

In doing so, it also gains support. And this, despite the fact that such migration—which is a factor of interpenetration and cuts across the inside-outside logic—responds to a powerful demand for labour from national economic actors, particularly in the West, and is, moreover, the result of the demographic problems it suffers, a sort of demographic winter.

We are facing a postmodern form of tribalism that has managed to shape the political agenda of the West. This is part of the backlash against policies aimed at resolving humanity's common problems, from Covid to the environment. Thus, the absence of a specifically national responsibility or a clear attribution is often highlighted, along with the costs arising from national efforts in this regard or their asymmetrical nature. This hinders any intended global agreement, such as on the issue of the *global commons:* cyberspace, outer space, the environment or the high seas.

It is a reactionary movement—otherwise fully in keeping with the Hegelian nature of globalisation—against what has been termed liberal cosmopolitan commitments, that is, against cultural and lifestyle tolerance, international cooperation, fundamental rights and freedoms, etc. It is a "traditionalist" or conservative reaction opposed to the dominance of post-materialist, cosmopolitan and liberal values (Aranda, 2025).

It is interesting to bring up in this context, by way of example, the thought of Alexander Dugin. He creates a critical blend of liberalism, postmodernism and Marxism, which he intertwines with classical fascism to distil a whole political theory from the mixture. Thus, starting from the idea of *Dasein* [being] formulated by Martin Heidegger, he moves from the individual to the collective, to the "people", and from there to "our people" (Galcerán, 2022).

The Russian people, he argues, are entrusted with a messianic mission: to oppose the global and universalist liberalism that is destroying the world. For, in his view, liberalism has no place in Russian thought and is being imposed to justify a consumer society that offers nothing of value—just as neither postmodernism nor the ideological framework of the New Left do (Galcerán, 2022).

Their offer to the Russian people is, in Dugin's view, extraordinarily precarious and devoid of any future. In fact, he believes that these foreign ideas are destroying rational society, which is why he calls for a "crusade" against liberalism and neoliberalism, postmodernity, post-industrial society, globalisation and its logistical and technological foundations (Galcerán, 2022). These assertions are not far removed from President Trump's view of Europe.

Thus, he reformulates and gives coherence to a populist alternative by weaving the present with Russia's own traditions and history. In doing so, he reaffirms Russian identity at a time when it is being undermined and reinforces a national civilisation whilst emphasising the existence of a powerful identity of its own—the Eurasian one—and does so through a call to action:

> 'There is no barrier to the integration of the vast Eurasian space surrounding Russia, as these regions were politically, culturally, economically, socially and psychologically united over the course of many centuries. The western border of Eurasian civilisation lies slightly east of Ukraine's western border, which is why the newly established state is unviable and fragile (Galcerán, 2022).'

This vision is not strictly conservative, but rather reactionary and imperialist in nature. His ideas serve as the "fig leaf" that President Putin uses to provide cover for internal control of a country with low democratic standards; but also for external expansionism. Russia seems to be able to exist only as an empire, and Dugin provides it with a narrative to match.

In short, the fact that populist parties uphold shared values and proposals—as significant as the very questioning of liberal democracy—acts as a mutual draw and, consequently,

fosters alliances. Thus, their anti-liberal agenda is not confined to the national sphere; rather, despite its individualistic and tautological nature, through emulation it generates new international and regional alliances that are hardly compatible with multilateralism and global governance. This reinforces the notion of a clash between liberal and illiberal orders, which also extends to the international sphere.

This is because the populist agenda, expressed in national terms through slogans such as "*America First*", emphasises the full and unrestricted use of national power and a willingness to make, at most, transactional concessions. Yet it transcends the national sphere and seeks ideological affinities to forge alliances internationally, or even fosters national parties of a similar persuasion.

The result is a certain convergence among populist leaders across the West in the transformation of foreign policy. This is evident even in the creation of parliamentary groups that bring them together and serve to demonstrate a shared platform. Furthermore, European populist movements have forged links with their American counterparts, forming what sometimes appears, despite its inconsistencies, to be a united front.

This will be formally endorsed by the US National Security Strategy of 2025, in which, in a manner at times even reminiscent of Dugin, criticism is levelled at Europe's decadence and its loss of roots, in line with the so-called "Great Replacement" theory—a formulation lacking any real basis whatsoever and yet widely disseminated by extremist movements— whilst calling for cooperation with "patriotic parties" to prevent it.

Such parties act as a centrifugal force and serve to draw in all those who oppose certain policies within regional and even global organisations, helping to coordinate their efforts and reinforce their narratives.

Conversely, and viewed from the opposite perspective, this strategy carries the risk of delegitimising those political options which, whilst legitimate in themselves, may be accused of being unpatriotic and acting as a fifth column should they act, or be perceived to act, in the service of interests identified by a foreign power. We are thus faced with a two-pronged interference whose result is damage to European democracy at all levels and the weakening of its institutions, a fact that is far from welcome.

This has also led to the establishment of new thematic agendas, geographical priorities, unilateral use of force and anti-liberal rhetoric that impede or undermine international consensus in areas such as the environment, migration, trade, peace-building processes, the fight against drug trafficking or the very use of force, thereby confirming the influence of populist rhetoric and practices in foreign policy (Aranda, 2025).

The case of Trumpism

President Trump's policies have, due to their uniqueness, been given a name of their own, a brand: Trumpism. These policies are characterised by particular ways of operating. The reason is that they resort to "alternative facts", are frequently disruptive in nature—as are the terms used to articulate them——obvious exaggerations with hyperbolic elements—and even the gestures that accompany them—sometimes at odds with basic standards of courtesy. Through this, they always seek to demonstrate power.

In this way, it responds to the country's loss of relative power in the context of globalisation. And it does so through political theatrics, with an entire geopolitical narrative being constructed from instances of a lack of decorum in diplomatic practice.

In this vein, any decision to shift power to the global arena is amplified by the media, creating a brand and capitalising on it. But this, paradoxically, amounts to a public acknowledgement of its lack. As De Gaulle said, "silence is the language of power". Words and gestures complement power. Their overuse betrays its absence and, consequently, its substitution.

This is accompanied, in practice, by actions such as those carried out in Venezuela, which were justified on grounds of national security and drug trafficking, although it was hinted that the underlying issue was oil. This is also a warning to neighbouring and dissenting countries.

It should be noted, incidentally, that these actions involve focusing the fight against drugs on external supply—rather than internal demand—which shifts the burden of a struggle for US benefit onto Central Americans, whilst ignoring the public health dimension of a problem that has led to more than 100,000 deaths a year from overdose in the US.

Without policies addressing the root causes, no programme works in the long term, however much it may appear otherwise and however much it may be misleadingly appeasing the concerns of certain electoral niches. The same applies to migration policies, as these arise from the country's economic needs; or with regard to the regimes in Cuba and Venezuela, which have many naturalised Americans and companies with business interests

And all of this is carried out in a strident manner: abuse of force, breach of public international law, resorting to 19TH-CENTURY norms and sending migrants to substandard prisons or to El Salvador, defying the US judiciary, interfering in European politics, etc.

These are some of the methods; then there is its political agenda, which also represents a breakdown in the foreign policy the United States has pursued, however much it may seem like yet another eccentricity.

It is true that, until the Second World War, this country was torn between isolationism and a global policy, with Europe being the key to this strategic duality. But its National Security Strategy 2025 — which departs from traditional models for this type of document and is imbued with ideological overtones — identifies neither Russia nor China as enemies, but rather, in a sense, its traditional ally, the European Union, which, however, it does not mention.

In fact, the president already championed Brexit during his first term and now promotes policies of the same ilk by supporting Eurosceptic governments and parties with whom he interacts and whom he encourages and promotes. One might therefore think that he is seeking to foster a strategy of joint action that could undermine from within what the United States undermines from without.

There is neither past nor allies, only interests. His commitment to transactional arrangements establishes a new starting point and disregards the benefits gained from the relationship thus far. He seeks a new balance in the distribution of burdens, and exploits the strategic dependencies created amongst his partners for his own benefit. This weakens international organisations such as NATO and reduces the predictability and reliability of US foreign policy.

But this is by no means an irrational actor. Such policies also stem from the need for what has come to be known as "*imperial overstretc*"; that is, they are a consequence of the fact

that its role as a global power is becoming difficult to sustain from an economic perspective due to the loss of relative power. Thus, US public debt stood at 122% in 2024, which has even caused the country to lose its top credit rating. And private debt stood at 142%. The sum of the two is 264%, an exorbitant figure, which is, incidentally, not far off China's 287%, to say the least.

The core of President Trump's controversial policy is directly linked to the country's financing. This ranges from tariffs to demands on NATO member states for higher levels of military spending; investment commitments in the US negotiated with the EU and other actors alongside the tariffs; the restructuring of US military deployment, etc.

The United States perceives a kind of decline—a striking loss of its relative power—in a world organised according to rules, and seeks to reverse this trend. And this despite the fact that it contributed to the establishment of these rules and has benefited from them.

That is why it has begun to retreat into its own hemisphere. It had previously been sheltered by its global leadership; but as this has weakened, other powers, such as China, have emerged to challenge its hegemony in that very region. This retreat is the reason for the weakening of ties with Europe, whose involvement is neither necessary nor desired in this process.

As for President Trump, in addition to his use of tariffs, one might cite his statements on Canada or Greenland, the capture of President Maduro, interventions to curb drug traffickers, or his proposal to rename the Gulf of Mexico. This, coupled with what he has termed the "Trump corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine in his National Security Strategy 2025, constitutes an explicit acknowledgement of this withdrawal from what is one of Haushofer's pan-regions. His strategy is regional leadership, now rebranded as a sphere of influence.

The histrionics of political theatrics are thus a means serving a strategic choice and are disconnected from the social discontent that lies at its root. Moreover, should his strategic model fail, given the personalism it espouses, the responsibility for this would fall on a president who presents himself in such an extravagant manner, shielding the American people from the consequences of his actions.

Conclusions

Let us not forget that populism emerges as a response to a certain reality: a deficit in political representation inherent in the model of representative democracy. Democracies incorporate an oligarchic or unequal component resulting from the imperfections, fictions and assumptions that underpin their legal and political construction, in which a multiplicity of concepts and realities are reconciled.

Populism exploits the idea of the general will to seize power. It thus represents an attempt to address these shortcomings and restore the people to their natural power, but it is also a sham.

Populism is not strictly an ideology, but a political strategy. It is neither right-wing nor left-wing, but cuts across the entire political spectrum, even though it is particularly useful to the extremes due to the inherently radical nature of the methodology it advocates for its approaches: a confrontation between the people and the elites. And it draws those who employ it towards these extremes by sheer logical consistency.

The problem is that the cost of such a restoration is the undermining of the institutional architecture that acts as a counterweight to its power, and also of the institutions that serve to bind society together. And it is no minor matter that democracy requires a loyalty to which populism does not commit. In the international arena, this is exacerbated, as seen in its stance against multilateralism or its detachment from partners and allies.

The twilight of ideologies that has accompanied postmodernity has led to a reduction in the space for politics and its hollowing out. Populism thus involves the mobilisation of a chain of unified yet heterogeneous demands that serves to overcome the post-politics against which it reacts, despite following in its wake.

The relationship between populism and democracy is thus a difficult one, not because populism is opposed to a formal concept of democracy or to the term itself, but because it claims to oppose the existence of limits on the will of the people, which leads it to clash with anything that implies permanence—that is, with institutions and the state apparatus. In any case, the result is the weakening of society, beyond the areas or aspects affected by the weakening of the political framework. Furthermore, if it gains ground, it leads to

the practical erosion of democracy due to the presence of authoritarian tendencies associated with political action.

And such policies serve to enshrine those who promote them. However, neglecting society's fundamental interests compromises the populist leader's future legitimacy, if not making them a prisoner of their previous decisions.

Communication strategy is one of the keys to populism. In the new politics, the conventional narrative once anchored in an ideology that bound and explained everything has now disappeared. Verifiable data and stories, however open to interpretation, have been replaced by fragmented narratives based on a diffuse plot that employs black-and-white logic to polarise the political landscape and assert itself on issues that are not the actual cornerstones of real politics and which, in fact, may have nothing to do with it.

Narratives are what give meaning and structure to society. Populism thus seeks to take over the news agenda and turn it into a political agenda, making it an expression of the will of the people. By undermining the media through disinformation, it eliminates an independent and key mechanism of control within the institutional architecture.

Polemological factors are the elements underlying the origins of conflicts. Populism is a polemological factor insofar as countries can project themselves onto the international stage based on the agenda of the populist leader—which may be domestic or even personality-driven—thereby introducing uncertainties into it. Furthermore, it interferes with the news agendas of third countries to align them with its own, favouring parties that support its theses.

Populism, in a geopolitical context of the West's loss of power resulting from the levelling effect of globalisation, can be a precipitating factor and make political governance difficult when there was a time in the past that was better.

It thus takes the form of a backlash movement accompanying the advances of globalisation, transferring its dynamics to the regional and global stages in the form of a national populism that hinders agreements whilst promoting its own alternative agenda. This emulation encourages the replication of similar models in other countries that collaborate with one another—sometimes despite having conflicting ideological models—staging a clash between

liberal and illiberal democracies which, in any case, weakens the West globally and, domestically, the institutional architecture of democratic countries.

This weakening of the West, its inward-looking stance, is further compounded by the fact that it is taking place against a backdrop of strategic competition with China. The world is being reshaped by shifting balances of power and the erosion of international law. The rules that international society has established cannot prevent these changes, but by affirming their validity and seeking to reform them, they can make them more orderly. Disregarding them, as populism does, causes changes to unfold at a faster pace, makes the process more ungovernable, and makes it more likely that, in the end, it will derail.

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