



# Populism and the Reshaping of the Political Imaginary

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**Abstract** From a sociosemiotic perspective, this paper argues that, independently of what it might be from the point of view of its genus, populism implies a challenge to the way in which the political is imagined by members of society, particularly by those that feel more marginalized and excluded from mainstream politics. If the political is conceived as a specific discursive field in which political actors struggle to 'fixate meaning', underlying populism there is a strategic intention of manipulation (Landowski 2014) aimed at reshaping the 'political imaginary' (Pereira 2019) by means of the discursive construction of a social actor called 'the people'. As it is argued, the semiotic mechanisms of actorialization, generalization and axiologization play a key role in this process.

**Keywords** Populism | The people | Political imaginary | Sociosemiotics | Political theory





Since the vote in support of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States in 2016, together with other political events and trends that have taken place in a number of Western European countries, the concept of ‘populism’ has gained a central position within academic and public debates on current political issues. While Anselmi (2017) believes that 2016 will be remembered as ‘the year of populism’, Mudde (2018) declares that populism is ‘the concept that defines our age’, and Fukuyama (2018) speaks of a ‘populist surge’. In spite of its centrality as a category of analysis of contemporary politics, scholars have been struggling to find common ground regarding its definition: from a theoretical perspective, there is still no consensus regarding what populism is (Abts & Rummens 2007; Casullo 2019; Fukuyama 2018; Panizza 2005; Pappas 2016). Is it an ideology? A political movement? A discourse? A style of doing politics?

Various accounts compete in trying to establish a standard definition of populism that can encompass the broad spectrum of events regarded as ‘populist’. The debate is characterized by a ‘conceptual cacophony’ (Müller 2015), what has led to theoretical confusions and difficulties in empirical research (Pappas 2016). Furthermore, the fact that populism is a phenomenon that can be found both on the left and the right ends of the political continuum does not facilitate the conceptual discussion. In addition, the concept has normally been used pejoratively, as a way of denigrating political opponents (Casullo 2019; Stavrakakis 2017; Urbinati 2019), making it a value-loaded concept with ‘normative baggage’ (Aslanidis 2015), usually with negative connotations: as Casullo (2019) argues, populist political actors do not usually identify themselves as ‘populist’, in opposition to what liberal or socialist politicians do. Due to this lack of clarity, some authors have even suggested to abandon the concept of populism, as it has become “sloppy to the point of meaninglessness, an overused epithet for multiple manifestations of political anger” (Cohen 2018).

Nevertheless, even if there is a lack of agreement on its genus, scholars tend to agree on some defining features of populism, like the conception it proposes of society as constituted by two antagonistic groups, ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, as well as its normative stance regarding how the political should be organized around the ‘general will’ of the people, depriving elites of their privileges and positions of power. In short, populism aims at giving “power back to the people and restore *popular sovereignty*” (Abts & Rummens 2007, p. 408).

The thesis I put forward in this paper is that populism, whatever it is from the point of view of its genus, implies a challenge to how politics have been and are conceived – imagined – in the contemporary world, i.e., as an activity carried out by ‘politicians’, a collective actor composed of individual *politicians* –human beings with a real existence–



that is part of a social discourse regarding how political life is organized<sup>1</sup> and that usually carries specific connotations, in many cases not positive, like technocracy.<sup>2</sup> As a signifying phenomenon, populism aims at reshaping the political imaginary based on the premise of giving the power back to 'the people'. To support this thesis, from a sociosemiotic perspective based on a constructivist approach to social reality (Searle 1995), in what follows I discuss how the political is conceived and represented in populist discourse, as well as how this semiotic strategy is an attempt to reshape the contemporary 'political imaginary' (Pereira 2019). The idea of 'reshaping the political imaginary' becomes of utmost relevance when conceiving the political realm as a specific 'discursive field' (Verón 1987) in which actors struggle to 'fixate meaning' (De Cleen 2017) by means of the deployment of discursive strategies aimed at manipulating beliefs, emotions and actions.

Regarding the structure of the article, in the first section I briefly review the debate around the definition of populism, so that in a subsequent section I can discuss theoretically why sociosemiotics has some light to shed into the political when conceived as a 'contest over meaning' (Pytlas 2016), with a focus on the role that social imaginaries play within this conception. Finally, based on the selected theoretical framework, I engage with the argumentation to support my thesis regarding the intended effects of populism on the political imaginary.

## 1. The debate on what populism is

Although due to the frequency of its appearances during the last years in the media, in academic discussions and in popular debates populism might seem to be a 'new' concept, it is not: as Pappas (2016) suggests, political scientists have been dealing with it for half a century, since a seminal congress on the topic took place at the London School of Economics back in 1967.<sup>3</sup> According to Urbinati (2019), populism is a phenomenon that "emerged along with the process of democratization in the nineteenth century", and if one might regard it as a 'new' concept, it is due to "the intensity and simultaneity of its manifestation in almost all countries ruled by a constitutional democracy" (p. 112). As a result, the debates regarding 'contemporary', 'modern' or 'new' populism are to a great extent embedded into a normative discussion that mainly sees the phenomenon as a threat to democracy (Urbinati 1998).

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<sup>1</sup> Moffitt & Tormey (2014) use the expression 'normal politics' to refer to the mainstream way of doing politics in Western liberal democracies which "favours the coldness of 'office politics' and the technocratic style" (p. 393).

<sup>2</sup> Mouffe (2018) argues that in our age politics "has become a mere technical issue of managing the established order, a domain reserved for experts", what has led to a state of affairs in which "popular sovereignty has been declared obsolete" (p. 17).

<sup>3</sup> The output of the conference can be found in the book *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics* (1969), edited by G. Ionescu & E. Gellner.



As mentioned in the introduction, there is still no theoretical consensus regarding the concept of populism.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it could be stated that the dominant conceptual paradigm nowadays is the one that conceives populism as an *ideology* (Abts & Rummens 2007; Canovan 2002; Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008). According to Mudde (2004) populism is a 'thin-centered' ideology, i.e., an ideology composed of a small core of ideas that is usually attached to other fully-fledged ideologies like communism, nationalism and socialism, to mention only a few, and that consists of a specific conception of society as constituted by two antagonistic groups, both heavily moralized: 'the elite' –also referred to as 'the establishment'–, usually depicted as corrupt and self-interested, and 'the people', usually romanticized and depicted as noble and pure. Following Abts & Rummens (2007), in the context of populist politics "the establishment is attacked for its alleged privileges, its corruption and, especially, for its lack of accountability to the people" (p. 408). Based on this dichotomous conception regarding the structure of society, populist ideology gives normative priority to 'the people' and their interests, as politics should express their 'general will' (Mudde 2004). The essence of populism when conceived as an ideology is therefore set on the *structure of power* in society (Abts & Rummens 2007). According to this account, then, what makes populism a distinct concept is a core set of ideas, that is, a specific *content*.

Stemming from a scholarly tradition with a stronger anchorage on language and meaning, a second account argues that populism is rather a *discursive* phenomenon reflecting power struggles within society. According to their representatives, defining features of populism should be looked for not in its content –that is, in the ideas it proposes–, but in its *form* (Laclau 2005). For discursive accounts of populism, what matters is *how* populist leaders construct discursively the collective actor 'the people' by means of a fundamental opposition with the group of 'the elite' (De Cleen 2017). This fosters the establishment of a sort of 'politics of antagonism' (Stanley 2008) anchored on the employment of 'empty' or 'floating' signifiers that are filled with specific content depending of the context of use (Laclau 2005). Populism is hence not an ideology consisting of specific political contents, but a *logic of discursive articulation* of those contents, which vary depending on the context (Laclau 2005). Similarly, Casullo (2019) believes that populism consists of the systematic use of a specific type of social discourse that she calls 'populist myth' and that is to be regarded as a discursive *tool*, consisting of a "core in which the identification between followers and the leaders is anchored" (p. 18). I shall come back to the identification between leader and followers later. For the discursive accounts on populism, then, what matters is not the content, but the articulations by means of which populist discourse is constituted.

Close to the discursive account in the sense that there is the underlying assumption that social reality is constructed through actions and interactions, a third account is that

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<sup>4</sup> As Panizza (2005) puts it, "it has become almost a cliché to start writing on populism by lamenting the lack of clarity about the concept and casting doubts about its usefulness for political analysis" (p. 1).



which considers populism as a performative or communicative style, that is, a *way of doing* something within the political realm. This is the thesis put forward by Moffitt & Tormey (2014) who, departing from the hypothesis of the mediatisation of politics,<sup>5</sup> suggest to focus the analysis in the *style* used by the leaders identified as populists, and argue that populism consists of “a repertoire of performative features which cuts across different political situations that are used to create political relations” (p. 394). For this account, what matters is how the *relationship* between the leader and the electorate is constituted by means of performative strategic acts and interactions. Jaegers & Walgrave (2007), for their part, suggest that populism is a style of political communication consisting of a permanent allusion to ‘the people’ in which political actors claim to speak on their behalf.

These are only three accounts on what populism is. As shown by Pappas (2016), other scholars have attempted to define it in different ways: as a frame, as a movement, as a strategy and as a specific political culture, among other proposals. Nevertheless, according to his judgment, all these fail in establishing clearly what is exclusive and differential of populism, leading to a dead-end in the conceptual debate. However, as mentioned in the introduction, in spite of the lack of theoretical agreement on the side of definitions, some common features are agreed upon regarding what populism might consist of.

One of those features is the conception of society as divided in two groups: ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’. Whatever form it takes –left-wing, right-wing–, populist political actors usually depict reality in a simplistic manner, frequently by employing *binary formulas* (Cosenza 2018) like the one based on the ‘us’/‘them’ dichotomy. In such a representation of the social realm, there are acts of enunciation involved. These, although usually assumed to be referring to an actual, ‘real’ social actor, actually refer to socially constructed categories –in semiotic terms, ‘cultural units of meaning’ (Eco 1975)– that lead to the creation of homogeneous and monolithic ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1983) based on arbitrarily chosen criteria that set their boundaries. Where does the group ‘the people’ end and ‘the elite’ begin? Which are the boundaries that distinguish these two groups? Are there actually any common traits that are shared by the members of ‘the people’ as to conceive them as part of a unique homogeneous and monolithic group? Is there actually anything like ‘the people’, or is this only a rough discursive generalization and assumption based on the construction of a collective imaginary anchored on romantic, idealized nationalistic and nativist intuitions?<sup>6</sup> Such a conception of society –to some extent a ‘world view’ (*Weltanschauung*) and, as such, an ideologically loaded narrative– is the result of a

<sup>5</sup> According to Moffitt & Tormey (2014), the hypothesis of mediatisation implies that “politics becomes increasingly more ‘stylised’ and the aesthetic and performative elements of politics become more prominent” (p. 394).

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note how in some languages, like for example German, the word used to refer to both ‘the people’ and the imagined ethnic group is the same: *das Volk*. Something similar happens with *el pueblo*, in Spanish (de Cleen 2017).



series of cognitive and discursive mechanisms, like segmentation of reality in specific units of meaning, generalization, actorialization and axiologization, amongst others, by means of which collective actors such as ‘the people’ are constructed in discourse as meaningful categories, giving place to a specific interpretation and discursive structuration of the political realm in narrative terms. These mechanisms are of utmost interest from a semiotic perspective.

A second agreed-upon feature of populism is of normative order: the political dimension should be organized following the ‘general will’ of ‘the people’ (Mudde 2004), aiming at giving sovereignty back to them and discrediting political representation as a mechanism of politics. The point here is that people in power –‘the elite’– might be doing politics in their own benefit and not to pursue the ‘general will’ of the individuals they are supposed to represent. It is relevant to point out how the dominant social imaginary regarding the essence of democracy as a form of government for and by the people is reflected in this feature. In this regard, I believe it could be argued that by means of the employment of a combination of discursive resources –ideas, styles, frames, etc.–, populist leaders try to transfigure how ‘the masses’ *imagine* the political. That is why I dare to suggest that when discussing populism it is useful to have in mind the *strategic intentions* that underlie this *way of doing something* –a semiotic practice (Fontanille 2008)– in the political domain. Rather than policy-oriented, these intentions seem to be aimed at *transforming structures of meaning* within the political imaginary. It is here where (socio)semiotics can be of help.

## 2. A sociosemiotic approach to the political

Semiotics is nowadays no longer conceived as the ‘science of signs’, but as the discipline interested in the scientific study of meaning and signification instead (Hénault 2012; Marrone 2018). Within this general understanding, *sociosemiotics* can be defined, following Landowski (2014), in two different but compatible ways: on the one hand, as the specific branch of semiotics that deals with ‘the social’ as its object; and on the other, as one of the main theoretical currents of analysis of signification *in general*, independently of the empirical domain one is dealing with (p. 10). For the purposes of this paper, it is enough to accept the first understanding and conceive sociosemiotics as the sub-branch of semiotics that deals with how meaning and signification emerge, circulate and are consumed within the social realm. In Landowski’s (2014) words:

“Today, besides the analysis of meaning invested in texts and discourses, semiotics [...] claims to account for the way how sense emerges from daily life and lived experience with its many dimensions, from our sensitive relations with the world around and with the objects we use; in a word, from all kinds of human practices” (p. 10).



Some paradigmatic studies in the field of sociosemiotics can be found since the mid-70s mainly in France, Italy and Latin America. In these, semioticians have focused on everyday life practices (Landowski 2014) and shifted their attention away from texts in a restricted sense –literature, advertisements, speeches–, with a specific interest in describing objectively how *semiosis* takes place in the many interactions that constitute and maintain the social sphere as such (Verón 1988). The main assumption of this account is that social reality is constructed *intersubjectively*, by exchanges and negotiations of meaning between social actors. Based on a constructivist premise, the scope of sociosemiotic analysis is no longer set on the description of *systems* of meaning, but on the analysis of the *processes* from which meaning emerges. Landowski (2014) argues that a number of ‘regimes of interaction’ can be postulated –manipulation, programming, adjustment and accident–, depending on the types of exchanges of meaning between actors.

How can this theoretical framework be applied to the study of the political realm? Pytlas (2016) argues that political action should be conceived as a ‘contest over meaning’ given that “any political activity is driven by the effort to create a consistent conviction of the attractiveness and effectiveness of a given political product as the best answer to voters’ material and ideal interests or values” (p. 48). This is why, according to the author, political communication between actors and voters is a crucial dimension of political analysis. As he argues, “political actors are not only required to fit a particular mindset but also need to fill it with a particular meaning” (p. 48). Similarly, De Cleen (2017) suggests that when studying how political projects attempt to ‘fix meaning’ and make their views prevail, it is essential to look at how these actors “produce a structure of meaning through the *articulation* of existing discursive elements” (p. 343).

The theoretical perspective underlying Pytlas’ and De Cleen’s ideas is strongly anchored in a discursive account in which meaning plays a key role as an analytical category to understand the dynamics that govern the political realm. Political discourse is *strategic* discourse, that is, one aiming at producing specific beliefs, emotions and behavioural responses from the electorate (Verón 1987). From a sociosemiotic perspective, underlying political action there is a ‘regime of interaction’ based on *manipulation*, which is a manifestation of the principle of *intentionality* (Landowski 2014). Understanding how politicians communicate with their audiences in order to ‘fix meaning’ –what they say, how they frame their arguments, what words and style they employ– is doubtlessly an essential dimension for a sociosemiotic analysis. But even more important is the description and analysis of the ‘structure of meaning’ that is implicitly proposed by populist leaders and actors, specifically regarding how the social and the political are and work –that is, a descriptive dimension–, but also how these *should* be and work –a normative dimension.

Dealing with how things *should* be opens the door to modality and possible worlds, and with it to what Pereira (2019) calls ‘counterfactual imagination’, that is, the rational “representation and anticipation of possible scenarios in which we see ourselves



performing a course of action and living the consequences of it, and it is from this anticipation that under certain conditions we make our decisions and act" (p. 8). When imagining and representing possible ways of structuring the political, social imaginaries play a substantial role.

Although frequently conceived wrongly as the opposite of what is 'real' or 'true' (Maffesoli 2001), social imaginaries are a constitutive dimension of social reality. Such a conception diminishes the role that such intangible, ideational constructions play in the social sphere. Having in mind that a great number of social facts are actually the result of social conventions (Searle 1995), the power of ideas in shaping social reality cannot be left aside of any serious conceptualization of society. Maffesoli (2001) uses Walter Benjamin's notion of the 'aura' of the artwork to explain what he understands under 'imaginary': something that goes beyond the material and that is to a large extent culturally determined. For the author, an imaginary is "a social force of spiritual order, a mental construction, which is ambiguous, perceivable, but not quantifiable" (p. 75). Social imaginaries surpass the individual and are *collective* phenomena, i.e., understandings shared by a community. Taylor (2004) defines them as the "common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (p. 24). Pereira (2019), in a similar line of thought, suggests that imaginaries should be conceived as "the self-understanding that the individuals of a society have of the way in which they lead their life in common" (p. 14). In this sense, imaginaries establish relationships within a community, as they entail "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (Taylor 2004, p. 23). According to Maffesoli (2001), even individual imaginaries are determined by those that prevail in the group in which the person is embedded. There is hence a *collective* dimension that is constitutive of the social imaginary, as well as a *normative* one.

The collective dimension of the social imaginaries brings us back to the aforementioned core tenet of sociosemiotics, that is, that the social realm is made of interactions. Understanding which imaginary narratives and frameworks underlie the practices from which meaning emerges seems to be crucial when aiming to grasp properly how the social works, particularly due to the fact that practices are interpreted and meaning is attributed to them by means of these collective frameworks, which somehow *enable* them (Taylor 2004). This brings the analytical concept of meaning to the centre of the discussion, making the relationship between social practices and signification crystal clear (Fontanille 2008).

This conceptualization is also valid when studying the political, which according to Maffesoli (2001) is a domain characterized by the deployment of rational arguments aimed at convincing, but also by *seduction*, oriented towards impacting the emotions. As the author suggests, "the political imaginary works on argumentation by means of a repertoire of emotional mechanisms" (p. 78), in a dynamic in which rational and



emotional components are constitutive parts, what gives ideas, and specifically social imaginaries, a privileged position in the attempts to fix meaning.

Regarding what is specifically political, Pereira (2019) employs the idea of a 'political imagination' to refer to the type of practical and counterfactual imagination that allows individuals "to anticipate what [their] life would be like with other citizens under a certain government or institutional design" (p. 28), enabling them to "review its different possibilities, the best ways to achieve it and the possible consequences that would follow from certain modifications" (p. 28). In this sense, political imagination consists of "the representation and anticipation of a set of institutions that regulate the way in which the decisions that affect a political community are made, and the way in which citizens assign one another the benefits and burdens resulting from social cooperation" (p. 26). Political imaginaries are then the resulting semiotic devices of this process and take the form of specific narratives, that is, articulated proposals of meaning based on relations of causality, in which certain floating signifiers referring to actors and objects are invested with specific general value and filled with meaning depending on the context of use. As will be argued in the following section, it is precisely here where I believe populism aims at having an impact, by means of reshaping the political imaginary.

### 3. Populism and the reshaping of the political imaginary

Pereira (2019) suggests that "the formulation of a government structure substantially different from the one that regulates the members of a political community is what has characterized the political transformations in history" (p. 25). This thought is directly related to the idea of 'counterfactual imagination' presented in the previous section, as well as with the notions of 'contest over meaning' and 'fixation of meaning', also already discussed. In this sense, at the beginning of the previous section it was mentioned how within the framework of sociosemiotics different 'regimes of interaction' can be postulated. One of them is called by Landowski (2014) 'manipulation' and is governed by the principle of intentionality. This implies the deployment of specific strategies by an enunciator in order to make the addressee believe, feel, want or do something according to his/her own will (Landowski 2014). In line with what has been discussed in the previous section, in the political realm manipulation could be conceived as the attempt of fixating a specific set of meanings throughout the interactions regarding forms of government, institutional designs or specific measures (Pereira 2019). How does populism try to do this in order to transform -manipulate- the perceptions and beliefs that the electorate has of the political? In other words, what counterfactual imaginary does populism present? One answer is the following: through the discursive construction of a specific social imaginary of the political in which its actors and power relations are based on a distinction between the categories of 'us' and 'them', which are invested with specific



moral values and connotations (Mouffe 2005). In this process, some interesting semiotic mechanisms are involved, like actorialization, generalization and axiologization. Let us have a closer look at them.

With regards to *actorialization*, every social discourse normally presents, explicitly or not, actors that are involved in the narrative being told. In the case of populism, there are two main actors: 'the people' and 'the elites'. Both are less referential than constitutive of the 'real-world'-entities they are supposed to refer to. This makes them 'floating signifiers' that can be filled with different content depending on the context in which they are used (Laclau 2005). Due to their lack of reference, these two actors are mutually constituted as units of meaning (Eco 1975) by means of the differences that are discursively established between them (Mouffe 2005). Laclau (2005) argues that there is a "dichotomisation of the social space through the creation of an internal frontier" (p. 38), and Mouffe (2016) that "understood as a political category, the people always result from a discursive construction, and the 'we' around which it crystallizes can be constructed in different ways, depending on its constituent elements and how the 'they', whom the people confront, is defined". Similarly, Panizza (2005) believes that "the identity of both 'the people' and 'the other' are political constructs, symbolically constituted through the relation of antagonism, rather than sociological categories" (p. 3). The constructivist nature of these ideas is evident: political actors gain existence based on an opposition to other actors, in a process in which imaginary groups anchored around the collective pronouns 'us' and 'them' are constructed by means of specific semiotic strategies.

There is a central and constitutive antagonistic relationship between 'the people' and 'the elite', and the boundaries of each of these is set based on the idea of conflict. Panizza (2005) suggests that antagonism is "a mode of identification in which the relation between its form (the people as signifier) and its content (the people as signified) is given by the very process of naming –that is, of establishing who the enemies of the people (and therefore the people itself) are" (p. 3). Also from a constructivist stance, Casullo (2019) believes that the explanation of the conflicted social reality is done in *narrative* terms, in the form of a story articulated by a hero, a villain and a damage.

Besides these two main actors, in populist discourse there is a third one: the leader. This is the only actor that has a 'real', physical, off-discourse existence, and s/he has the task of discursively constructing the other two categories and of generating the impression of an identification of him/herself with 'the people'. For this purpose, it could be argued that populist leaders, in the attempt to manipulate their audiences and make them *want* a specific political outcome, employ a regime of interaction of *adjustment* (Landowski 2014), based on opportunism and aimed at making individuals *feel* something. Adjustment implies the values of closeness and coordination, generating the illusion that meaning is co-created (Landowski 2018), what in the case of populism manifests in the form of semiotic strategies of actorialization that put the populist leader and 'the people' on the same level.



As regimes of interaction, manipulation and adjustment are opposed: while the former reflects a structure of power, the latter is based on a more horizontal principle. In this regard, Cervelli (2018) argues that populism presupposes a model of community in which the borders between the citizens-electors and the elected representatives is blurry, establishing between them a sort of analogy or mimicry. According to Landowski (2018), a great extent of the 'art' of populist leaders is to make of their relative lack of political experience a virtue, emphasizing the identity of being *ordinary citizens* and, as such, close to 'the people'. That is why, in line with Moffitt & Tormey's (2004) account, there is usually a performative –and hence semiotic– use by populist leaders of the bodily dimension: as Cervelli (2018) argues, gestures, clothing, manners, use of colloquial language, etc. are means of conveying meaning used to "generate the effect of meaning of a rupture with the traditional forms of presenting the body in the political system" (p. 3).

Regarding *generalization*, the second semiotic mechanism mentioned above, it has been argued above that the categories of 'the people' and 'the elite' are something neither given nor fixed: if one had to find their members in the world and put them together in a room, this would prove to be a difficult task. Lacking a clear reference, they are discursive constructions which result of the employment of a mechanism of generalization based on common and shared traits that are *imagined*. As Mudde (2004) argues, in populist discourse 'the people' "are neither real nor all-inclusive, but are in fact a mythical and constructed sub-set of the whole population" (p. 546), while Jagers & Walgrave (2007) argue that populism usually considers 'the people' as a *monolithic* group without internal differences (p. 322). These are mechanisms of collective identity creation based on the logic of generalization, which resemble those dynamics of creation of imagined national communities (Anderson 1983) conceived as sovereign and limited. In the case of European right-wing populism, the identification of 'the people' with a national imagined community has led to the identification of populism with nationalism, nativism and xenophobia (De Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017; Wodak 2015). That is why it makes sense to refer to the categories of 'the people' and 'the elite' as 'floating signifiers' (Abts & Rummens 2007; Laclau 2005) resulting from a process of generalization that seems to forget that 'the people' actually consist of "a heterogeneous collection of social groups and individual subjects with diverse values, needs and opinions" (Abts & Rummens 2007, p. 409). In populist discourse, but also in politics in general, social actors are created by means of oversimplifying generalizations that have a decisive impact on the structure of that discourse, its logic and its normative claims (Mouffe 2005).

Finally, a third semiotic mechanism present in populist discourse is *axiologization*, that is, the action of discursively adding value-loaded connotative marks to these actors. In this sense, in populist discourse there is a clear attribution of positive and negative value to the two groups involved in the narrative employment of the conflict: while 'the elite' is imagined as corrupt, self-centred and evil, 'the people' have connotative marks of purity and nobility. Underlying this value-attribution there is a



binary dichotomy based on the oversimplified pair 'good' vs. 'bad' (Mouffe 2005). This axiologization leaves the door open for the normative core of populism, i.e., the idea that politics should be an activity carried out by the sovereign people, being critical towards political representation. According to the populist world view –or narrative–, as Abts & Rummens (2007) argue, “on the basis of a supposed shared identity, the people are considered to form a collective body, which is capable of having a common will and a single interest and which is able to express this will and to take decisions” (p. 409). The counterfactual nature of this political imaginary is evident.

As it should be clearly visible now, the main categories of populist discourse, as well as its normative core, are constructed discursively by means of a series of semiotic mechanisms that involve segmenting and representing the social world in a specific, value-loaded manner. That is why I believe it can be stated that populism, independently of how it is defined –as an ideology, a strategy, a movement, a style, a discourse, etc.–, implies a specific *strategic intention* with regards to the cognition, the emotions and the actions of the electorate, namely: to reshape the way in which the sphere of politics is imagined by members of society, particularly by those that feel more marginalized and excluded from mainstream politics. It is within this framework that the conception of populism as a *cognitive frame* (Aslanidis 2015; Casullo 2019) might seem appropriate: by means of an apparent closeness with the electorate, populist leaders put into practice a complex semiotic machinery aimed at reshaping how individuals conceive the political.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

The purpose of this article was to argue in favour of the thesis that populism, independently of what it is –an ideology, a discourse, etc.–, implies a deliberate challenge to the dominant social imaginary regarding politics in the contemporary world, i.e., an activity carried out by political representatives elected through democratic procedures, with the aim of reshaping it. From a sociosemiotic perspective based on a constructivist framework, I have discussed how the political, its actors and its power structure are conceived and represented in populist discourse by means of the employment of a series of semiotic mechanisms such as actorialization, generalization and axiologization, oriented towards the 'fixation of meaning'. In this sense, no matter what its genus might be, populism rests on a specific world view of how society is composed –the descriptive dimension– and how it should be organized –the normative dimension, opening the field for 'counterfactual imagination'.

From this perspective, it could be argued that populism proposes a sort of return to the conception of politics as an activity carried out directly by the people in their own interest, instead of by elected representatives, who might want to prioritize their own interests above those of the people. That is why scholars like Mouffe (2016; 2018) have argued that populism might actually be something positive for democracies and not a



threat. In any case, conceiving politics in this manner implies a challenge to the dominant social imaginaries regarding the political.

Besides the conceptual debate on populism, what seems to matter is how this phenomenon aims at engaging 'the masses' in politics by referring to a structure of meaning in which they are the most relevant political actors, and not only the basis of representative politics. In this sense, I believe it is clear why populism aims at reshaping the social imaginary regarding the political. Semiotics is in a privileged position to provide a theoretical framework that can shed light both to the descriptive and normative debates around populism, by helping to better understand the mechanisms by means of which the political is interpreted, represented and constructed - especially when taking into account that political identities, like every social identity, have a 'relational nature' (Mouffe 2005). Unfortunately, until now the semiotic examinations of the political are scarce. As it has been shown in this paper, opening the 'black box' of meaning of the semiotic strategies employed by populist actors in order to achieve their goals can be very useful when trying to understand what populism is, how it works, and what its effects are.



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