

## CAN POPULISM BE AN ALLY OF DEMOCRACY?

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### *Abstract*

The paper focuses on the concept of populism and its relationship with democracy. At the beginning, a brief history of the origins of populism is outlined. Then, the paper analyses the social and political qualities of populism and whether and how they relate to democracy. The core of the paper is represented by a consideration of Dewey's view of populism and democracy and his role in the League. The paper concludes with an assessment of populism as possible ally of democracy.

**Keywords:** populism, democracy, political philosophy, citizenship, Dewey.

### **1. Does apathy originate populism?**

When politicians, intellectuals, and common people end up by talking of populism, they usually imply a negative assessment in their judgments: populism is historically labelled as the political tendency to assume certain requests from specific social classes – generally poor and marginalized – as the basis of a political programme, overlooking the possible implications of the ideology, history, and electorate of a political party. Precisely, many charge that populism is narrow-minded, paying attention to specific social problems with a limited view, which focuses on immediate results, out of a long-term perspective. This would also mean that populism tends to pursue all its possible sources, falling apart from a wider political strategy. But these views on populism are as limited as the populism they describe. As Jansen well explains, “the fundamental problem is that

most academic discussions of populism continue to rely on folk theories. Everyday usage of the term is overly general, applying to any person, movement, or regime that makes claims by appealing to ordinary (i.e., non-elite) people. Such usage may be appropriate for journalistic purposes, but it is inadequate for social scientific analysis” (Jansen 2011, p. 76).

So, what is the origin of populism? The raise of populism at a certain moment is the symptom of a diffused powerlessness across wider and wider sectors of society. If populism comes up, then social injustice has increased to some extent. Precisely, it should be said that populism has to do with people’s perception of injustice and with a common and increasing feeling of powerlessness, whose first effect is a pervasive disengagement of people from political participation.

Powerlessness is only one of the possible causes of an important socio-political phenomenon: apathy or alienation. Apathy is a central category in political philosophy and in sociology of political phenomena, and can result in several social behaviours – from a total disinterestedness in the community facts to a subversive, even violent, rebellion. As Dean reported in his study, “the manifold references to Alienation [...] may be classified under three subtypes: Powerlessness, Normlessness and Social Isolation” (Dean 1960, p. 185). Generally speaking, social apathy implies a progressive disengagement of individuals from social and political life within their own community. While normless involves (the perception) of unclear norms or a conflict among norms, and social isolation implies the perception of losing real connection, impact and a role within one or more social groups, apathy emerging from powerlessness provokes a deeper feeling of social and political frustration in people. Particularly, “by ‘alienation’ is meant that men pursue goals, and use means in their pursuit, determined either by social entities with which they do not feel intimately identified or by forces which they may be unable to recognize at all” (Gouldner 1950, p. 86).

A comprehensive study on the origins of apathy wonders: “If we accept that the democratic ideal encourages political interest and participation, then the question naturally arises: what are the factors which bring about this absence of political interest and activity?” (Rosenberg 1954, p. 349). Distrust in the elected representatives, futility of political agenda, personal inadequacy about political opinions or activities, perception of powerful anonymous forces and the likes all generate a deep sense of isolation and alienation, which usually results in a progressive disengagement from political activity, terminating with a total disinterestedness in any political theme.

But democracy is participation. Even more telling, “democratic theory assumes, not only that Man should be, but that actually he is a political animal who participates. Being ‘by nature’ interested in the political process, he gathers information, forms opinions on issues, attends meetings, and organizes groups or otherwise communicates opinions to his legislators, local and national, whenever he feels it necessary (or they ask him) to influence policy decisions” (Gans 2001, p. 277). There are two main reasons why this fails to happen, according to Gans: “1. He is not emotionally involved in any aspect of the political process which would motivate him in any way to be actively interested in it. 2. There is no political function for him to exercise or a sanction which would force him to be politically interested or active whether he liked it or not” (Gans 2001, p. 277).

One of the worst effects of powerlessness is that it “generates hopelessness and the substitution of personal solutions for public approaches. [...] Redressing powerlessness is essential to meet other challenges facing humanity” (Boyte 2007, p. 4): no crisis or emergencies, from water scarcity to the oceans and air pollution, from climate changes to world hunger and poverty, from terrorist threats to pandemics control, and so on, can be discussed and solved without even the minimum engagement of people.

## **2. Does populism originate democracy?**

But is this (always) true? Populism has a long history in political philosophy. It is a shared view that probably the first political writing representing populist ideas was Marsilius of Padua’s *Defensor Pacis* (1324). This work, which was censored by the Papacy, focused on the social unsafety that marked that period along with the previous decades, relating it to the Papacy as its main cause. Particularly, as Brett reminds us, Marsilius thought “that the source of human salvation was also the source of political damnation” (Brett 2005, p. XXVII). Marsilius’ work not only was anticlerical – and not just because he accused the military priesthood of being the main cause of lack of peace – but also because it invoked the necessity of people’s active participation in politics. From this viewpoint, populism – at least as intended in the initial Marsilius’ theory – has to do with people’s political engagement. This is not a gentle invitation to take part to the political decisions, but it is a reference to a clear assumption in Marsilius’ work: the dependence of political action upon knowledge. The strengthening of certain powers has been possible thanks to people’s ignorance of certain facts. The knowledge of their own political and social situation is the pre-requisite for

people to have a just community. Marsilius takes much into consideration Plato's and Aristotle's political concepts of order as harmony – though Plato's and Aristotle's views certainly were not populist at all. As he states, “a city and its parts would therefore seem to be in the same relation to tranquillity as an animal and its parts is to health. We can place our trust in this inference on the basis of what everyone understands about both” (Marsilius of Padua, I: 2, 3).

Therefore, Marsilius' populism is grounded in the necessity that people be engaged in the politics of their own community and has not the negative implications, which it gained in the democratic societies nowadays. So, can we claim that populism is contrary to democracy? Not at all, I would say. On the contrary, as Wolin states, “the reason why democracy should be grounded in a populist culture is not because those who live it are pure, unprejudiced, and unfailingly altruistic. Rather, it is because it is a culture that has not been defined by the urge to dominate and that has learned that existence is a cooperative venture over time” (Wolin 1986, p. 286).

So, why does populism generally look like a sort of anti-political movement? Following the ancient Greek political tradition, political participation has always been limited to a few social classes and to an anti-democratic principle of competence. This approach lasted with no great changes till the 19th century, when the first democratic movements began to raise. One of the most important contributions in understanding the new emerging democratic push is Tocqueville's work, *Democracy in America*. In the First Book reporting his brilliant analysis during his journey, Tocqueville asserts that in the USA “a sovereign power exists above these institutions and beyond these characteristics features which may destroy or modify them as its pleasure – I mean that of the people” (Tocqueville 2004, p. 197). The danger that American democracy carries, according to Tocqueville, is that it totally relies on people: “The governments of the American republics seem to me just as centralized and more energetic than those of Europe's absolute monarchies” (Tocqueville 2004, p. 299). The consequence is the emerging of the ‘tyranny of majority’, whose final effect is anarchy; or Trump's election, according to Arquilla: “So there it is; at the turn of every Trumpian corner we find Tocqueville. Whether the topic is personality, populism or power politics. Coincidence? Maybe. But I think not” (Arquilla 2016).

Beyond Trump and long before his election, it must not be forgotten, Tocqueville's view was somehow echoed by Stuart Mill, who also criticised democracy on a similar basis of Tocqueville's one. Again, Stuart Mill's proposal was grounded in an anti-democratic principle, which had to limit

the access to government positions to competent people only, whereas common people represented what Ortega y Gasset would call 100 years later “the mass” of mediocre and vulgar, conformed individuals. As Stuart Mill explains, “an employer of labour is on the average more intelligent than a labourer [...]. A banker, merchant, or manufacturer, is likely to be more intelligent than a tradesman, because he has larger and more complicated interests to manage. In all these cases it is not having merely undertaken the superior function, but the successful performance of it, that test the qualifications; for which reason, as well as to prevent persons from engaging nominally in an occupation for the sake of the vote, it would be proper to require that the occupation should have been persevered in for some length of time (say three years). Subject to some such condition, two or more votes might be allowed to every person who exercises any of these superior functions” (Stuart Mill 1861, p. 175). According to Brilhante and Rocha, Stuart Mill “failed to perceive that his proposal of valuing the votes of citizens according to their standards of education was not appropriate to stimulate the participation of most of the electorate in public life and tended to incorrectly equate political knowledge to expertise in governmental issues” (Brilhante and Rocha 2013, p. 54): which is, again, the issue that was already remarked by Marsilius. Nonetheless, a discussion on alternative systems of plural voting is always possible, as Latimer (2015) explains.

Actually, the situation in the USA came from a struggle between two opposite movements, Progressives and Populists, which emerged in 1870s. Despite the fact the both movements shared the concern for what democracy was becoming under the pressure of corrupted capitalism and materialism, they significantly differed: Progressives aimed to social and political long-term reforms, planned and led by them, according to an elitist (and traditional) approach to politics, reinforced by the fact that most of them came from the upper classes. This conception of politics was clearly theorized by Michels, whose ‘iron law of oligarchy’ focused on the assumption that “democracy is unconceivable without organization” (Michels 1968, p. 61); and the proof of this ‘law’ was apparent in the origins of education and labour organization itself: the existence of excellence colleges is a means to prepare certain members to the future command. In Michels’ words, “it is undeniable that all these educational institutions for the officials of the party and of the labour organizations tend, above all, towards the artificial creation of an *élite* of the working class, of a caste of cadets composed of persons who aspire to the command of the proletarian rank and file. [...] The technical specialization that inevitably results from all extensive organization renders

necessary what is called expert leadership. [...] Organization implies the tendency to oligarchy” (Michels 1968, p. 70).

Again, this is particularly true for the American situation, which presents a dynastic tendency: “American politics has long been dominated by an elite that has successfully insulated itself against the whims and tides of public opinion” (Eiermann 2016). According to Eiermann, and contrary to old Marsilius’ suggestion, since the draft of the American Constitution “political participation has often remained a minority phenomenon: After peaking in the 19th century, voter turnout rates have hovered around 55 percent for presidential elections at around 40 percent for midterm elections for much of the 20th century. Party affiliation is at an all-time low. The expansion of the franchise and the introduction of the primary system have changed the ostensible procedures of democracy, but have retained the influence of party elites in the form of super delegates and through control of the allocation of campaign funds. Elite politics is a feature of the American political system, not a bug” (Eiermann 2016). This can ultimately have the effect, which has extensively been explained by Schumpeter, of the inversion of the relationship between politicians and electors (people): “Suppose we reverse the role of these two elements [...]. To put it differently, we now take the view that the role of the people is to produce a government [...]. And we define: the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote” (Schumpeter 2003, p. 269).

Opposite to Progressives were Populists, who believed in reforms arising from the lower classes, denying all the possibilities to an elitist approach. By 1880s, Populists were absorbed by The Democratic Party, whereas Progressives became the soul of Republicans at the change of century. Populists tended to be a little inconsistent with regards to minorities, particularly black people and immigrants, though this attitude changed at the beginning of the new century. As Lukacs states, “Richard Hofstadter in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* was wrong. He identified Populism with anti-intellectualism. Not quite: then, as now, American (as also other) populists would venerate certain intellectuals whom they saw as their own. [...] Even more telling: despite their dislike of capitalists, populists in every country respected and supported millionaires of their own kind” (Lukacs 2005, p. 61).

Considering populism as a mere distortion of pure political ideology or an incubator for demagogues is simplistic and reductive. Of course, since populism is not a definite political model,

for it is rather empirical in its developments, it can turn into something different and feed other forms of political thought, from nationalism to demagogy. And, in all the possible cases, the results cannot be taken for granted: nationalism, for example, can reveal itself as positive patriotism or as negative xenophobia. But despite of any possible distortion, which can affect every form of government and political ideology, as Plato and Aristotle had well explained, populism has its core theme, which is centred on people's engagement and reinforcement of the civic background, as a shield to protect the community from possible elitist attempts to command people against people's own interests. Moreover, "populist movements also speak a different language than modern, 'scientifically minded' elites. They are culturally based more than structurally based. Their agent, 'the people,' is not historically indeterminate, but it is a different kind of category than 'class' or 'interest groups,' a different idiom than charts and statistics of modern social science, a different politics than political campaigns with their focus groups" (Boyte 2007, p. 9).

Therefore, despite the anti-populist efforts to depict populism as something parochial and without a real political planning, populist pushes seem to recur at different cycles, emerging with new strength and qualities, which render populism not ignorable by institutional political powers and parties. This necessary understanding of populism is not requested only for the electoral struggle (as Schumpeter thought), or just during specific critical situations – immigrants, unemployment, unsafety, that people tend to connect – which populism fosters and feeds itself of. Till populism will be intended as a movement of protest, arising from lower classes and their suffering conditions, without clear political plans and actions, that is – to mention Michel's "iron law" – with no organization, populism will always be about to turn itself into something different and dangerous. On the contrary, populism can bring new energies and impelling emergencies into political debate and agenda, if it is considered as a valid political actor. One possible initial step on the way to the proper interpretation of populism could be the link between populism and democracy. Embracing Marsilius' suggestion, and despite of Tocqueville's and Stuart Mill's fears and warnings, can populism be an ally of democracy? The question, which is also the title of this paper, already invites a positive response that is possible by assuming that populism can have a philosophy. As Boyte explains, "at the core of democratic populist movements is a philosophy of civic independence that distinguishes populism from either socialism or unbridled market capitalism" (Boyte 2007, p. 9).

### 3. Dewey's view on populism and the League

Despite of being extensively and traditionally contested, democratic populism – as said so far – has its strengths. Echoing somehow Dahl's concept of polyarchy, Boyte states that “in democratic populism, [...] people defend their ways of life they develop in democratic ways. They become more conscious of other groups' interests, more inclusive in their understandings of ‘the people,’ and more expansive in their vision of future possibilities” (Boyte 2007, p. 10). This was also Dewey's wish. He tried to change populist tradition, which was generally anti-intellectual, irrational and romantic, into “a high Romantic synthesis of reason and feeling with a new dose of scientific and cultural standards. [...] He was trying to force a Romantic and Populist culture to accept the discipline of science and thought. [...] Dewey attempted to harness technology, science, and cultural standards to communal, Populist, and egalitarian ends, instead of private, elite interests. [...] His was a typically complex utopian balancing act, and it did not always work. Yet a marriage of cultural standards and Populism was consistently his aim” (Featherstone 1992, p. 84).

As it is well known, Dewey's efforts resulted in the constitution of the League for Independent Political Action at the end of 1928, whose initial function had to be linked to the foundation of a new third party, which never came to light. The League ended in 1936, alongside the start of Roosevelt's New Deal. The League was a development at a higher level of populist movements, for “Dewey expressed the same lack of faith in the two major parties that the Populists of the 1890's voiced and urged the formation of a third party with a far-reaching program of social control. But, unlike the Populists, the Dewey group was militantly international and said little that could be interpreted as nationalistic and fascistic” (Saloutos 1966, p. 249). The League was the direct result of a long-term feeling of political and social irritation, which caused political and social disengagement to some extent. As Westbrook reminds, “these men and women were veterans of a decade of frustration and failure in popular politics, and chastened by this experience, many in attendance believed it was time to retrench and opt for a strategy” (Westbrook 1991, p. 446).

Particularly, in Dewey's terms, people's dissatisfaction is due to a distortion of the democratic spirit, which is still in itself the ground of any political and social development. It is self-evident that “those who have power, rule. [...] Democracy was born of the idea that political institution of the ballot and officials elected for a term would give the people power, the people and not a class. For a time the scheme worked, even though haltingly. Why have power and rule passed from the

people to a few? Everybody knows who the few are, and the class-status of the few answers the question. They are not engineers, scientists, any more than they are an aristocracy of birth. They are an oligarchy of wealth. They rule over us because they control banks, credit, the land, and big organized means of production. [...] In order to restore democracy, one thing and one thing only is essential. The people will rule when they have power, and they will have power in the degree they own and control the land, banks, the producing and distributing agencies of the nation” (Dewey 1986a, p. 76). Dewey knows that his view could echo communism and socialism, but he explains that they are irrelevant to this truth (1986a, pp. 76-7).

A news article appeared in the *Toronto Daily Star* in 1931 had already reported a similar statement by John Dewey, as founder of the League. The title of his intervention was *What We Call For*:

“1) Public Control of natural resources by taxation of all land values [...] in order to prevent monopoly and speculation [...].

2) Public Ownership [...], by nation, state and municipality, of transportation, communication, water power and public utilities [...].

3) Resumption by the National Government of its constitutional power to issue money and control credit.

4) Equal Rights, economic, legal and political, for all citizens and all civil rights, including free speech, free press and peaceable assembly, as guaranteed by the Constitution” (Dewey 1931).

This was part of the League’s political program in four points as a response to the verification of people’s feeling of powerlessness, to use Boyte’s words. Actually, it is not just a feeling, it is the reality: “Power today resides in control of the means of production, exchange, publicity, transportation and communication. Whoever owns them rules the life of the country, not necessarily by intention, not necessarily by deliberate corruption of the nominal government, but by necessity” (Dewey 1986a, p. 76). In order to invert this tendency, a new use of intelligence is required. This step implies a redefinition of intelligence, which can help people’s struggle against the elitists, who fear intelligence and limit it by relying on coercion and violence.

#### **4. Democratic, civic populism**

As such, is it possible to outline a general view of democratic populism and its basic qualities, which could make us avoid any ambiguity of the term? According to Boyte, not only is it possible,

but we can clearly know what populism is. He provides us with some specific elements of evaluation. He writes that “as a democratic movement and philosophy, populism has three elements. It is a movement building popular power to break up unjust concentrations of wealth and power. It is a culture-making movement, sustaining and advancing values of community, liberty, and equality. And it is a civic learning movement, developing people’s civic identities, imaginations, and skills” (Boyte 2007, p. 3). Some could argue that other political approaches have already taken into account the importance of community for the social and political development, as communitarianism did. Nonetheless, the populist perspective is rather different, because it implies a more complex relationship between politics and people: while communitarianism offers a top-down view of this relationship, populism inverts it. As Boyte asserts, “in contemporary America, there is enormous ferment over how to improve *citizenship* and *civic engagement*. Civic engagement efforts have increasingly been shaped by communitarian theory and its practice, community service. [...] Yet as a theory of citizenship, communitarianism has major flaws. [...] The way citizens actually think about ‘values’ shows greater understanding of underlying social and structural forces” (Boyte 2003b, p. 737).

Particularly, according to Boyte (2003b, p. 737), communitarianism tends to overlook both the importance of wide and structural political, economic and social dynamics in the shaping of individuals’ values and projects, and individuals’ ability to understand these dynamics to some extent. “America’s civic life is thus thorn between images of the compassionate, apolitical volunteer and the demanding claimant and protester. But there is an emerging alternative. [...] Civic populism represents a growing empirical trend [...] Implicitly or explicitly, all such endeavours entail a conception of politics as the interactions among citizens who have roughly equal, horizontal relationships with one another in many settings, not simply in vertical relation with the state” (Boyte 2003b, p. 738).

The dynamic connections among different classes and sectors of society can be grounded either in the class conflict or in citizenship. This is also Singer’s core argument about philanthropy and giving to the others. In *The Life You Can Save*, Singer reminds us how much the white collars of the big corporations are required to give of their salary and bonus to non-profit organizations. He asserts that they have “a commitment to philanthropy, based on the belief that a personal commitment to charity is an underpinning of good citizenship and fosters a more-rounded

individual” (Singer 2009, p. 71). This approach involves more from populism rather than from communitarianism, for it calls for a deep acknowledgment of the individual’s role in the community and the necessity to actively contribute as part of it. “What is left out of citizenship both left and right is the concept of the citizen as a creative, intelligent, and, above all, ‘political’ agent in the deepest meaning of the word, political — someone able to negotiate diverse views and interests for the sake of accomplishing some public task” (Boyte 2003a, p. 4).

The problem with populism is due to its romantic, passionate interpretations by certain trends of politics, which usually try to ride the wave of people’s discontent without a clear understanding of what civic populism and citizenship mean and imply. Dewey’s philosophy is the main antidote against any trivialized and abused view on populism: his conception of democracy is the core theme of every political and social program in favour of a developed, engaged, intelligent citizenship, able to gain its own responsibilities, so to avoid any passive attitude towards politics. True democracy implies civic populism and calls for a major change from being king’s subjects to being community’s citizens. Dewey is a milestone on the pathway to a proper understanding of civic populism, citizenship, and democracy and to the comprehension of how (much) they are intertwined: “What made Dewey’s populism prophetic is that he understood, far better than most of his contemporaries, key dynamics of power in an information society, where power is not simply a scarce good that requires a bitter struggle in which gains are matched by losses on the other side. Rather, knowledge power is increased through sharing transactions. Dewey believed, in particular, in what he called ‘the social’ quality of knowledge production and dissemination through education. He argued that recognition and development of knowledge’s social quality was key to the future of democracy itself” (Boyte 2003a, p. 5). And this perfectly matches Marsilius’ view on the relationship between knowledge and power.

It is easy to connect Dewey’s view on populism to his more general view on democracy, which is more a matter of mind rather than a matter of politics and governmental administration. His feeling of frustration was not caused by politics only, but, more widely, by the unbalance between natural sciences and social sciences: science and technique have succeeded in getting free from bias, dogmas and superstition, whereas social sciences still present a general disregard of experience and observation. Dewey’s philosophy is entirely devoted to this assumption, which is a hope after all: that intelligence will save humanity. He insists upon the necessity to extend scientific methodology

to all other fields of human activity, particularly logic, politics, and ethics. As he asserts, “absence of dogmatism and prejudice, presence of intellectual curiosity and flexibility, are manifest in the free play of the mind upon a topic. [...] Mental play is open-mindedness, faith in the power of thought to preserve its own integrity without external supports or arbitrary restrictions” (Dewey 1986b, p. 347).

Dewey’s conception of democracy calls for people’s active engagement, which has to be led by intelligence, as a means to solve problems. Intelligence is the real tool of power, which every individual is equipped with, though people tend to use it limitedly and when necessary only. It is not by chance that Dewey writes an essay in 1934, whose title is *Intelligence and Power*. Here, he holds that “intelligence becomes a *power* only when it is brought into the operation of other forces than itself. But power is a blanket term and covers a multitude of different things. Everything that is done is done by some form of power. [...] Intelligence becomes a power only as it is integrated into some system of wants, of effective demands” (Dewey 1986c, p. 109). This fundamental truth becomes particularly binding if we think that the “system of wants” is related to the capacity of people, since their young age, to know, select, and shape. In one word, which is Dewey’s main word in his philosophy: education. It is quite tough to expect social commitment and political engagement from people who have never been educated to such things. Education has a central role for the future social development, because what society will be almost strictly depends upon what people have been educated at. “Education should be seen and practiced as a transformative process, a dynamic engagement with the world, its problems, and its work. Education for democracy – education’s highest and most important goal – had self-consciously to cultivate the habits that once were generated through young people’s involvement in the life and work of families and communities” (Boyte 2003a, p. 7).

The democratic process is possible only in conjunction with a process of education to democracy, condition to stimulate people to free speech, free discussion, free comparison and debate, aiming to solving problems. And this approach calls for another requisite: the adoption of a scientific method in other fields beyond science, that is in politics, morals, and logic. In Dewey’s view, the necessary connection among democracy, education, and science cannot be but a program of action, which the League had tried to embody. Democracy’s aim is to foster participation; participation is nurtured by a certain kind of people’s education; so, democracy calls for education. Even more telling,

education also permits the knowledge, understanding, and use of a scientific approach in solving problems; therefore, education is the real cornerstone of the possibility of a scientific democracy, which would mean a civic democracy caring for real people's interests and aiming to solving them with the best available instruments.

Democracy is not just a governmental order; democracy is a quality of the mind and we should always wonder and gauge what the status of this mind is. "Consequently we cannot be satisfied with the general statement that society and the state is organic to the individual. The question is one of specific causations. Just what response does *this* social arrangement, political or economic, evoke, and what effect does it have upon the disposition of those who engage in it? Does it release capacity? If so, how widely? Among a few, with a corresponding depression in others, or in an extensive and equitable way? Is the capacity which is set free also directed in some coherent way, so that it becomes a power, or its manifestation spasmodic and capricious? [...] Are men's senses rendered more delicately sensitive and appreciative, or are they blunted and dulled by this and that form of social organization? Are their minds trained so that the hands are deft and cunning? Is curiosity awakened or blunted? What is its quality: is it merely esthetic, dwelling on the forms and surfaces of things or is it also an intellectual searching into their meaning? [...] What sort of individuals are created?" (Dewey 1982, pp. 192-193). As Dewey explains, questioning about whether social change depends upon individuals or whether individuals organically belong to society does not make any sense: social progress and individual development walk alongside each other. "The interest in individual moral improvement and the social interest in objective reform of economic and political conditions are identified. And inquiry into the meaning of social arrangements gets definite point and direction. We are led to ask what the specific social arrangement may be. The old-time separation between politics and morals is abolished at its root" (Dewey 1982, p. 192).

Requiring engaged citizens within a social arena that does not allow them for real struggle and involvement is a clear contradiction. It is not fair to complain about apathetic individuals when the democratic order follows its own path, makes decisions in confidential files, and just cares for the party's interests. Populism does emerge in these conditions: whenever the fragile thread which keeps politics and the people together – the thread of representativeness – gets thin and weightless. Thinking of democracy just as politics is the greatest attack to democracy itself. Limiting

democracy to a matter of parties is the end of democracy; and populism, soon or later, will alert us. Democracy calls for minds, educated minds, engaged minds. Otherwise it is not democracy; it is oligarchy.

### **Conclusions**

My conclusion is that populism is not only an ally of democracy, inasmuch it cannot be but democratic. And this is due to the fact that populism, by invoking people's participation to politics, embodies the spirit of democracy as participation. Nonetheless, the maximum of people's participation is, generally, the election of their representatives. Till representative democracy (the elected) succeeds in representing most of people's (the electors) interests (or in making them believe that it does), – evolutionarily speaking, in maintaining a balance that people perceive as such – people are not directly interested in what their representatives actually do. But as soon as the perceived representatives' political activity and the real people's interests start to contrast or do not sufficiently match, then populism arises and strengthens. So, democratic populism, in its most genuine invitation to the development of people's civic attitudes, could be intended as the real spirit of democracy, a sort of rough, unrefined democracy: it emerges whenever democracy is about to weaken. Populism is democracy's sentinel. As the warning dash light in a car illuminates or blinks in case of low fuel, so does populism when politics runs out of democracy, that is it stops caring for people's interests, breaking up the holy link between people's participation and representative democracy.

Populism is what we have when elites lose their ability to act democratic politics and fail to adjust it to the social changes, which call for ongoing adaptations. In this sense, populism could be a key-term in Dewey's philosophy, inasmuch it reflects the necessity of adaptation following a change. Populism is an evolutionary political concept; it warns that the balance has been upset and that a new set of political ideas, plans, and actions is needed. According to an old study by Mosby, "good citizenship requires that we devote much attention to public affairs. It is the only way in which we can hope to conserve our liberties, protect our families, and perpetuate free government. No man can be a good citizen in theory alone. Citizenship demands action" (Mosby 1898, p. 502). Populism seems to offer people some motives for action.

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