Nadia Urbinati on Populism, Representation, and Rhetoric: Some Critical Remarks

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The Philosophical Journal (Filosofický časopis),
Special Issue 3/2022 on Nadia Urbinati's Political Theory.

Abstract

This paper examines Urbinati's theory of populism with the aim of bringing to the fore a lacuna in such theory. The lacuna concerns her appreciation of the role of rhetoric in populism and more in general in democracy. If Urbinati's general understanding of politics recognizes an important role to rhetoric, such recognition is not accompanied by a systematic analysis of what rhetoric is and how it operates. The effects of such deficiency can be appreciated in her theory of populism. On the one hand, her critical account of populism seems to hinge significantly on the kind of rhetoric and more generally of style it adopts, on the other the question of what precisely characterizes such rhetoric and style is left mostly unaddressed. The result is that Urbinati's account of populism loses some explanatory power, with regards both to the nature of populism and the responses to it.

Introduction

In the last years Nadia Urbinati has published a number of important studies on democratic theory, which have made of her a point of reference on the debate about the current status of democracy. Whilst avoiding the worn-out and sometimes hollow language of 'crisis' in commenting the state of our democracies,[1] Urbinati has developed one of the most compelling accounts of some of the main threats our democratic regimes face today. At the same time, she has accompanied her diagnosis with the elaboration of a substantive normative model of democracy, which is at the same time original and indebted to a long tradition of political thinking. Following the teachings of figures such as Bobbio, Kelsen, Condorcet, and J.S. Mill, Urbinati's theory of democracy puts at the very core of this regime the value of political equality and makes of procedures and representation the main pillars to guarantee such value. It is precisely this capacity Urbinati has to put in dialogue canonical thinkers of the past and contemporary questions and theories, and to combine diagnoses and normative proposals, which I think represents one of her main merits.

Urbinati is a prolific writer. But if we want to locate the core of her model of democracy, we can focus on her last three books published in English. The first one *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy* (2006) is a defence of representation that tries to demonstrate the central role it covers in a democratic regime, against the traditional argument that relegates it to the status of a second-best option in comparison to direct democracy. Against this argument, Urbinati compellingly argues that representation – as a form of politics based on mediation and indirectness – has a unique democratic potential, which cannot be found in direct democracy. Differently from direct democracy that tends to reduce all political issues to a dichotomic choice, representation has the capacity to galvanize the public

[1] Urbinati, N., *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press 2019, p. 18.

debate by triggering a battle of interpretations that multiplies the positions in dispute. Representation thus has the great advantage of promoting a politics of judgment and ideas rather than one of physical presence and decision. Thus it is precisely what has traditionally been considered representation's main shortcoming – the fact that it operates through mediation and indirectness – that for Urbinati constitutes instead its strength, since it is precisely thanks to these features that representation can promote reflexivity.[2] Furthermore, Urbinati sees in representation the key mechanism that makes possible the passage from the social to the political, since, through these very processes of mediation and indirectness, it asks citizens to transcend their particularistic attachments and organize themselves along ideological lines.

In *Democracy Disfigured* (2014) Urbinati has furthered her analysis of democracy and its current predicaments. She has identified three major threats to democratic legitimacy: namely the epistemic, plebiscitarian and populist models of democracy. All these models, according to her, deeply misconceive the key role opinions have in democracy and, in different ways, endanger the correct relationship between the two domains in which democratic legitimacy is formed: the domain of the procedurally organized processes of lawmaking and decision-making (the domain of the will) and the domain that hosts the informal, but equally essential, processes of opinion-making (the domain of judgment). More specifically, according to the analysis developed in this book, what these three 'disfigurations' of democracy undermine is the process through which opinions should translate into decisions: in the case of epistemic democracy, because of the attempt to replace the free confrontation of different *doxai* with *episteme*;[3] in the case of populist and plebiscitarian democracies, because of the attempts to reduce the public debate to its aesthetic dimension and belittle the reflective one.[4]

Taken together, *Representative Democracy* and *Democracy Disfigured* outline a model of democracy more substantive than the realist-minimalist conception of Schumpeter but less prescriptive than the deliberative democrats *à la* Habermas. A model in which the founding principle is political equality understood as the possibility for everyone to participate on an equal basis in the democratic process through a set of institutions and procedures that guarantee such a possibility.

In her last book, *Me the People*, Urbinati extends her analysis of one of the three disfigurations previously identified, probably the most urgent one: populism. Populism is characterized in this book as a distorted form of representative politics, which, especially once in power, can cause significant distortions in the way democracy should work even if formally respecting its principles.

In this paper I want to focus on this last book and advance some critical remarks on the way Urbinati understands populism; remarks that, I think, could be generalised to her theory of representation and democracy. Mine, however, will be a largely sympathetic reading. The critical remarks I will develop, indeed, point not much to some substantive theoretical or normative disagreement, but rather to what I consider a lacuna, or ambiguity, in her theory. This lacuna, or ambiguity, concerns the way Urbinati understands the role of rhetoric in politics. To anticipate my argument, I think that, whilst Urbinati's theory of representation and democracy recognizes the importance of such aspect, at the same time it leaves the very idea of rhetoric untheorized, or undeveloped. The consequence is that, precisely as Urbinati grants to rhetoric an important role, her appreciation of such role remains ambiguous and thus unable to fully

[2] Urbinati, N., *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2006, p. 113.

[3] Urbinati, N. *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People.* Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2014, Ch. 2.

[4] Ibid., Chs. 3 and 4.

grasp its positive aspects, so as its possible threats. Such shortcoming is particularly significant in the case of populism. In effect, as I will argue, Urbinati's analysis of populism seems to suggest that what differentiates populism from the kind of partisan politics attuned to liberal democracy has to do, to some extent, also with their different use of rhetoric. However, if this is the case, we'd need to develop an account of populism able to assess its rhetorical, and more generally stylistic, dimension thoroughly, to understand whether it can be reduced only to strategic reasons, or if it plays a more substantive role. I think Urbinati leans towards the second hypothesis, but not explicitly and consistently. This, as I will conclude, creates an ambiguity with regards to how she understands populism and thus democracy itself.

Urbinati's theory of populism

Me the People is a densely argued book on a topic that has generated a vast literature in a few years and on which it is becoming increasingly difficult to propose original arguments. One of the merits of this work becomes apparent precisely if we keep in mind this situation. Differently from many works on populism, in effect, Urbinati develops her account of populism in the framework of a broader normative account of democracy. This approach allows her, on the one hand, to base her critical appraisal of populism on a solid basis and, on the other, to explore more in depth the meaning of this phenomenon. Differently from many scholars (above all political scientists of a more empirical orientation), who tend to reduce populism to a mere question of style, or others who minimize its impact on democracy, Urbinati repeatedly emphasizes that populism is an important phenomenon that has the capacity to deeply 'disfigure' democracy by changing 'both the style and the content of public discourse.'[5] This capacity to disfigure democracy becomes much more visible, as populism moves from the status of a movement of opinion and contestation to that of a political party that reaches power. It is precisely from this perspective that Urbinati analyses populism in this last book. Differently from *Democracy Disfigured*, where she dealt more with populism in the former sense, in *Me the People* Urbinati deals with populism as a project aiming at obtaining political power and a system of decision making.

This is, in my opinion, the second important merit of Urbinati's book. In effect, whilst there are other scholars who have started to focus on populism not only as a protest movement but for what it can accomplish once it reaches political power, Urbinati's contribution has the merit to deal with populism as a very substantive political phenomenon – one with a goal and a vision of society, despite its inarticulation and ambiguity at the ideological level. The level of political substantiveness attributed to populism, in effect, is so important for her that she adopts it as the key criterion to differentiate among different approaches to populism. In this respect she proposes to divide the most influential approaches into two broad categories – 'minimalist' and 'maximalist'– according to the political import they attribute to populism. If the former approach wants to maintain a neutral stance in relation to the normative status of populism and thus tends to (in Urbinati's view wrongly) minimize its effects on democracy, the latter fully realizes the political import of populism, identifying it in its ability to mobilize a large collective subject under the banner of 'the people' and to employ such force to rearrange the democratic order.[6] In the minimalist approach Urbinati includes a variety of theories of populism, among which the most important is the influential characterization of Mudde and Kaltwasser, who define populism, employing the terminology of Michael Freeden, as a 'thin-centred ideology'. Populism, in their view, is essentially an

[5] Urbinati, N., *Me the People,* op. cit., p. 18.
[6] Ibid., p. 28.

ideology, but a thin one. An ideology whose content can be boiled down to a Manichean vision of society as a body divided into two homogeneous and antagonist groups: the pure people and the corrupt elites. Against such account Urbinati raises a powerful criticism: the 'thin ideology of morality ascribed to populism', she writes, 'conceals a thick ideology that goes to the fount of power' and which consists 'in the antipolitical idea that power corrupts.'[7] That is, behind a vague moralistic view of society, populism conceals a thicker core: an anti-political ideology that rejects politics as a way of dealing with pluralism and that denies the very idea that such pluralism exists, by treating its expression as an artificial invention of the establishment to further its interests. This is an important point Urbinati makes that highlights how, despite its inconsistency at the ideological level, populism can have very significant effects. Nonetheless, as it stands, this point also highlights an inconsistency in her rendering of the relation between form and substance of populism, on which I will come back at the end of the paper.

On the other hand, the maximalist approach – which Urbinati identifies essentially with the theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe – fully recognizes the political scope of populism. Laclau and Mouffe indeed see in populism the expression of democracy's highest possibilities. In their case, therefore, the problem doesn't consist according to Urbinati in not fully recognizing populism's political scope. It rather consists in misreading it: that is, in not understanding the anti-democratic dimension intrinsic in the very logic of populism. Without any specific social ideology and normative conception of democracy, she argues, populism is inevitably prone to assume authoritarian and illiberal connotations because, at its core, it is a hyper-realistic and voluntarist attempt of seizing power.[8]

The distinction between maximalist and minimalist approaches is interesting because to some extent it cuts across a different kind of differentiation that can be made of the ways in which populism is conceptualized: that between *ideational* and *stylistic* approaches, that is, between those approaches that identify in populism a type of ideology (even if, a thin one) and those which instead characterize populism essentially as a form of doing politics.[9] In my opinion, Urbinati's division makes clear an important point: that the way the ideational content of populism is articulated – that is, its form – cannot be reduced to a mere question of style.[10] On the contrary, different forms of articulation produce different political outcomes (different political relations, identities, etc.) and at the same time presuppose different political positions. In other words, the forms of politics have a politically substantive meaning. This is in effect a point that we can find in Laclau's seminal work on populism. For him, all social and political phenomena are discursively constructed through a rhetorical play of significations and re-significations.[11] And this is particularly evident in populism, which Laclau describes at the same time as a discursive strategy devoid

[7] Ibid., pp. 63, 50.

[8] Ibid., pp. 33-34.

[9] For instance: Aslanidis, P. Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective. *Political Studies* 64, 2016, No. 1, pp. 88–104. Also Urbinati refers to the distinction between ideological and stylistic approaches, to which she adds a third approach: the strategic one. Urbinati, N., *Me the People,* op. cit., pp. 29-31. This third approach, for the reasons I will provide in what follows, can be subsumed in a broader appproch to populim that combines the ideological and stylistic dimensions.

[10] For 'form' or 'style' I mean all the ways, linguistically and extra-linguistically, in which political contents are articulated. In this sense, I accept the Wittgensteinian conception of 'articulatory practice' adopted by Laclau and Mouffe. For instance: Laclau, E., and Chantal, M., *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy.* 2nd ed. London, Verso 2001, pp. 108-111. Laclau, E., *On Populist Reason*. London, Verso 2005, p. 13.

[11] Laclau, E., *On Populist Reason*, op. cit., pp. 13, 71, etc. Laclau, E., *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*. London, Verso 2014.

of any substantive ideological content and as the best way to radicalize democracy, because of its potential to mobilize the people and materialize popular sovereignty.[12]

Despite such different readings, however, Urbinati and Laclau share a similar approach on populism in two important aspects: first, they analyse it from the perspective of what it does, rather than from that of what it is; and second, they treat it essentially as a form of representation, among other reasons because they believe that it is from this perspective that the scope of populism appears most clearly. In the case of Urbinati, it is dealing with populism as a form of representation that we can grasp in the best way its basic illiberal nature. Indeed, for her the main reason why populism can disfigure democracy is its endorsement of an undemocratic idea of representation: the idea of representation as embodiment, rather than as mandate. Such form of representation for Urbinati entails the anti-democratic idea of being able to extract 'the "true people" from the "empirical people".'[13] The populist model of representation thus violates the principles of liberal-democracy insofar as it undermines what, in Lefort's terms, we can call the constitutive indeterminacy of democracy and the resulting procedural idea of the people. Because populists consider themselves the only authentic representatives of the people, once they reach power, they start treating the institutions of the state as a matter of property and thus to endanger the basic principle of political equality.[14]

Rhetoric, representation, and populism

To the extent that the key difference between populism and liberal-democracy pivots around the way of representing the people and articulating the principle of popular sovereignty, we can say that it is a difference both of principles and styles, contents and forms. The relevance of the latter dimension indeed is emphasized by Urbinati throughout her book. As she remarks, the legitimacy of populist movements depends on the capacity they have to deploy specific rhetorical strategies. This is consonant, in effect, with Urbinati's diarchic conception of democracy, according to which legitimacy is not only an institutional and legal matter, but has to do also with the processes 'of belief formation, persuasion, and rhetorical strategy through which representatives make themselves and their constituency.'[15] However, as Urbinati remarks, what happens in the domain of opinion becomes particularly relevant for the legitimacy of populism, because of the particular kind of representation it tries to enact – what she calls direct representation: representation as embodiment of the people by a leader.[16] The belief in the capacity of the populist leader to fully incarnate the 'authentic' people is, as she writes, a 'matter of fiction and imaginary construction', which has to be sustained through 'relentless propaganda.' The legitimacy of populism 'rests entirely on the strength of this belief.'[17] And this is particularly true when populism reaches power. Indeed once populist parties are in power, they need to solve a dilemma, which is not unique to them, but which is in their case particularly pressing: the dilemma of how to maintain the illusion of purity and the possibility of redemption, being at the same time able to carry on a real, pragmatic politics. Such a dilemma, Urbinati

[12] Laclau, E., *On Populist Reason*, op. cit., p. 47.
[13] Urbinati, N., *Me the People,* op. cit., p. 79.
[14] Cf. Urbinati, N., *Representative Democracy,* op. cit., p. 32. Urbinati, N., The Democratic Tenor of Representation. In: Brito-Vieira, M. (ed.), *Reclaiming Representation: Contemporary Advances in the Theory of Political Representation*. London, Routledge 2017, pp. 198-99.
[15] Urbinati, N., *Me the People*, op. cit., p. 86.
[16] Ibid., p. 62.
[17] Ibid., pp. 131, 137.

argues, cannot be solved if not with a strong amount of rhetoric. It is for these reasons thus that populism, more than other forms of politics, can be said to belong to the very 'craftwork of persuasion.'[18]

In contrast with rationalist approaches, however, Urbinati recognizes the key role of rhetoric not only in the case of populism but as a general feature of democracy itself. Representation, in a certain sense, accentuates this rhetorical dimension. For her, indeed, representative democracy is made of passionate ideological affiliations and partisan disputes on questions that cannot be solved once for all. In mediating the passage from the social to the political through the construction of political subjectivities around ideological narratives representation 'renders democratic society an intricate fabric of meanings and interpretations of citizens' beliefs and opinion.'[19] This work of mediation operates through a variety of intermediary bodies and discourses that populate the public arena and that nurture the game of interpretations. As a constitutive activity that essentially contributes to the creation of the object it claims to represent, representative politics cannot but be rhetorical. Its aim, as Urbinati writes, is 'to construct the interpretation that makes the constituency' and to preserve and expand consent 'by attracting new people and developing new claims.'[20] And this is something that requires rhetoric. In effect, according to the classical understanding of rhetoric – that of Aristotle or Cicero, for instance – the essential role of this art consists precisely in being at the same time receptive of the particularities of a specific audience (in other words, to represent it as it is) and, through persuasion, able to move that audience in a new direction (or, to represent it in a new way). That is, we can say that in a certain sense the function of rhetoric coincides with what representation does as it mediates the passage from the social to the political by providing partisan interpretations of the general interest.[21]

But what kind of rhetoric?

Urbinati thus clearly recognizes the rhetorical character of representative politics and especially of populism, which, as we have seen, she understands primarily as a form of distorted (in democratic terms) representation. So, what is the problem with her approach? In my opinion, the problem consists in the following: on the one hand, Urbinati seems to argue that the key difference between populism and liberal-democratic politics hinges to a significant extent on their different ways, not only of conceiving, but also of enacting the representation of the people – so a difference that manifests itself, not only at the level of principles but *at the same time* also at the stylistic and rhetorical one. On the other hand, she seems to avoid dealing with the question of how to differentiate between these different kinds of rhetoric, with the implicit argument that such question is either theoretically untreatable or irrelevant. Apart from not providing any ground to differentiate the role of rhetoric in populism from that of standard partisan politics in liberal democracy, this neglect has the additional negative effect to suggest that the key difference between populism and non-populist ideologies in liberal democracy is a difference that concerns primarily their ideational content and that only subordinately manifests itself at the aesthetic level, in different rhetorics and forms of representation. This idea is problematic for a number of reasons: first of all, because it is at odds with a constructivist understanding of representation, which the same Urbinati endorses; second, because it ends up attributing to populism a higher ideological consistency than it actually has and

[18] Ibid., p. 118.
[19] Urbinati, N., *Representative Democracy*, op. cit., p. 30.
[20] Urbinati, N., The Democratic Tenor of Representation, op. cit., pp. 185-186.
[21] I have developed such parallelism between representation and rhetoric in my article: .....

thus somehow reifying it as the liberal democracy's foe. This in turn obscures one of its most prominent traits: its capacity to assume different shapes according to different contexts, in itself a clear manifestation of populism's rhetorical nature.[22] These negative effects are clearly interrelated: if it is true, as I argue, that Urbinati's account of populism recognizes only partially and not fully consistently the role rhetoric in it, then such account cannot provide guidance to distinguish such role in populism compared with that in standard partisan politics in liberal democracy.

Let's start with the first point. On a couple of occasions in *Me the people*, Urbinati underlines that the kind of rhetoric scholars attribute to populism is in fact a feature of all normal, partisan politics within the liberal democratic paradigm. Significantly, however, the rhetoric she refers to is related to an aspect many consider to be at the very core of populism: the postulation of a basic contraposition in society between the honest many and the corrupt few. Actually, we could say that this is a point that concerns more the ideational dimension of populism – its dichotomic and Manichean view of society – rather than its rhetoric. Nonetheless, this opposition is clearly also rhetorical in character.[23] As Urbinati argues, 'the dualism of "we are good"/"they are bad" is the motor of all forms of partisan aggregation'. However, as she specifies, it presents itself in different 'intensities and styles.'[24] That is, seen from this perspective the difference between populism and the rest of partisan politics in liberal democracy hinges on the rhetorical form in which such opposition is presented.

In a second passage, which can be found in an interesting section on the analogies and differences between demagoguery and populism, Urbinati discusses the role of manipulation and rhetoric in these two phenomena. Here she notes that, even if rhetorical manipulation is essential for the demagogue to seize power, this form of discourse is common to all modern political parties that are involved in electoral politics. So, she concludes, 'there is nothing scandalous in the rhetoric of demagoguery and populism per se.' In a form of government based on opinions, as democracy is, 'populist style is ubiquitous' and therefore 'it is difficult to distinguish between populist rhetoric and party rhetoric.'[25]

Now, Urbinati is certainly right in stressing the ubiquity of *this kind* of rhetoric in democracy. In this respect, her position is very close to that of Hannah Arendt. Arendt in effect was never tired to stress that politics is the realm of opinions and persuasion, rather than of truth and conclusive demonstrations because politics can only exist when a plurality of equal individuals, each of whom with her perspective on the world, is able to find a provisional shared ground to act in common.[26] Nonetheless, drawing from the admission of the difficulty to distinguish between different kinds of rhetoric, the conclusion that to do so is impossible, or not important, is a mistake. In effect, the different use of rhetoric by populist parties compared with non-populist ones, according to Urbinati's same argument, seems to be a key element to establish whether the former can be said to remain within the liberal democratic paradigm or not. And even if, as she says with regards to the discourse 'we are good'/ 'they are bad', the difference manifests

[22] This capacity is something Urbinati recognizes but doesn't examine in depth. Urbinati, N., *Me the People,* op. cit., p. 17.

[23] For instance, Aslandis, Norris and Inglehart believe that the opposition between the people and the elite – which they take as the defining feat of populism – is better understood as a question of rhetoric (or of 'discourse' as they say) rather than ideology. Aslanidis, P. Is Populism an Ideology?, op. cit. Norris, P., and Inglehart, R. *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Authoritarian-Populism.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2019, p. 4.

[24] Urbinati, N., *Me the People,* op. cit., p. 29, (emphasis added).

[25] Ibid., p. 103.

[26] For instance: Arendt, H., *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1998. Arendt, H. Philosophy and Politics. *Social Research* 57, 1990, No. 1, pp. 73-103.

more in quantitative than qualitative terms (it is a difference of 'intensities and styles', as she says), it is nonetheless a *rhetorical* difference.

The point I am trying to make should become clearer if we look at another part of *Me the people,* where Urbinati canvasses Laclau and Mouffe's theory of populism. The main criticism she raises against them seems to pivot around the question of rhetoric and persuasion: as she says, the problem for her consists in 'the sole role that consent plays in proving the validity of hegemony' in their theory, to the extent that 'consent could imply (or at least does not exclude a priori) the imposition of the winning principles on groups that do not agree with them.'[27] What for Urbinati can be grasped from Laclau and Mouffe's view of populism as discursive logic is that populism is 'a domain of pure voluntarism and rhetoric, similar to that described in the first book of Plato's Republic' where Thrasymachus famously defends the idea 'that power is always the power of the winning part, and that justice always the justice of the strongest part.' It reveals that populism is a 'rhetorical-ideological mechanism, which conceals the intentions of power by making it appear as if it were the embodiment of the true interest of the people.'[28] The key point Urbinati raises here is that, differently from what Laclau, Mouffe and other leftist thinkers who support populism believe, populism is not a neutral style, a tool without content that can be cunningly employed for a progressive agenda. As she says:

> Pro-populist leftist assumptions about populism are mistaken, because populism is not merely a tool that can be harnessed to reformist or conservative plans. It is not simply "a style of politics"; in order to be successful, populism has to transform the basic principles and rules of democracy itself. [29]

Here, I think, a certain ambiguity with regards to the relation between form and content becomes apparent. Indeed, it is unclear whether Urbinati is claiming that, behind the apparently neutral populist style, there is a dangerous ideology that threatens democracy (the anti-political ideology of populism mentioned before), or instead that the populist style is in itself anti-democratic. As I argued before, however, Urbinati's same distinction between minimalist and maximalist approaches seems to point to the latter option: that the political style can have significant effects by itself; that is, that it can be politically substantive. Urbinati indeed situates Laclau's (and Mouffe's) theory among the maximalist approaches, even if he defines populism *only* as a discursive strategy. And this impression is confirmed also by another passage where Urbinati writes:

> populism is not merely a claim-making form of representation … [t]he leader does not merely perform before the audience; and his or her representation is not supposed to be 'merely symbolic' ... [t]he populist leader plays the role of the 'reconstructor of authority,' not merely that of counterpower.[30]

This passage hints at the idea that the style of politics cannot be understood as a question of merely giving form to an already existing reality. On the contrary, the style essentially contributes to creating its content. This is in effect one key aspect of the argument put forward by the constructivist turn in representation theory, in which we can certainly locate Urbinati. So, the style performed by populist parties or movements

[27] Urbinati, N., *Me the People,* op. cit., p. 145.
[28] Ibid., p. 151.
[29] Ibid., p. 206.
[30] Ibid., pp. 117-118.

generates political consequences, even major ones. This is an idea that Urbinati seems to agree with, but, I think, without fully drawing its consequences.

In a political regime based on opinions as democracy, the power of rhetoric is particularly strong. Rhetoric has the capacity to mould the symbolic space of the public sphere not only for *what* it says, but also for *how* it says it. To speak in public means much more than expressing a point of view. It means to mould the very space in which opinions can be framed and thus to control the opportunities and modalities others have to express their points of view. Populist rhetoric is emblematic in this respect. As Urbinati writes, populism is 'the language of politics when there can be no politics as usual.'[31] But here we need to underline that populism doesn't merely take advantage of a critical situation. It rather actively participates to create this situation. It participates to create the context where politics as usual is not more possible and does so also, and crucially, through its style and rhetoric. For instance, the polarization that Urbinati takes as a key condition for populism to grow cannot be understood only as a condition. It is also an effect of populism and especially of the rhetoric it employs.[32] It is an effect that populism tries to achieve to capitalize on it politically and advance its vision of society. In this respect we could say that, similarly to the ancient demagogues, the contemporary populist leaders need to be masters in the rhetorical capacity to deal with what the Greek called the *kairos*: the possibilities and constraints that a specific context offers to act.[33]

Now, these considerations shouldn't be taken to imply that I want to reduce populism to demagoguery. In populism, as the very word seems to suggest with its suffix *-ism*, there is an ideological dimension (even if a thin one) that is absent in demagoguery.[34] What they indicate however is why a theory of populism (and of democracy in general) should give more attention to the question how the content implies the form and viceversa. This would require, in particular, a thorough rhetorical analysis to assess the political effects and views some styles and discourses produce and imply. This sort of combined analysis should be able to provide, if not clear-cut criteria, some grounds to differentiate between forms of democratic rhetoric and others that, such in the case of populism, can instead disfigure democracy. But in order to do that we would need also a theoretical account of rhetoric itself. And it is precisely such an account that is missing in Urbinati's analysis of populism, despite the attention she devotes to rhetoric. In this respect, as I have said, her position is ambiguous. In some points of the book, she seems to identify in the manipulatory rhetoric of populism a key element to explain its anti-democratic character. An example in this respect is her reference to the sophist Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic* and his conception of rhetoric as the art of persuasion at all costs, or the idea she defends that populist representation is problematic for democracy as it promotes a relationship between the leader and his supporters based on

[31] Francisco Panizza cited in ibid., p. 108.

[32] Moffitt and Tormey have showed how central is to populism the attempt to amplify the perception of an imminent crisis. Benjamin, M., and Tormey, S., Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style. *Political Studies*, 62, 2014, No. 2, pp. 381-397.

[33] For instance: Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Christopher Rowe. Warminster, Aris and Phillips, 1986 271e-277b.

[34] Moreover, as Urbinati points out, between ancient demagoguery and contemporary populism there is an additional difference related to the institutional contexts in which they operate: direct democracy in the former case and representation in the latter. If the ancient demagogues could have a direct effect on the assembly with their discourses, the contemporary populists operate in a mediated context that renders their words 'less dramatic in their impact on decisions and more capable of creating a continuity of narrative.' Urbinati, N., *Me the People,* op. cit., p. 87. However, as we have seen, representation contributes in another sense to emphasize the rhetorical dimension of politics in comparison to direct democracy: because its indirectness and mediation promote a game of interpretations that cannot but be rhetorical (and ideological) in nature.

irrational identification.[35] In other occasions, however, Urbinati seems to discard the idea that rhetoric plays a distinctive role in populism arguing, as mentioned before, that this kind of rhetoric is a common feature of all partisan politics in democracy and thus that to make a clear distinction is difficult.

How can we explain this position? I think there are two possible explanations: either Urbinati thinks that it is not important to try to discriminate the use of rhetoric in populism (because of its ubiquity in democracy), or she thinks that it is actually impossible. Let's start with the latter possibility. Is it really relevant to understand whether rhetoric plays a special role in populism in comparison with standard partisan politics in liberal democracies? As I have just mentioned Urbinati is ambiguous on this point. Such ambiguity, as I have suggested, is due to an inadequate thematization of the question of the relationship between form and content in populism, that is, the question of how different kinds of rhetoric and style produce different political outcomes and entail different views and, inversely, of why particular views entail particular rhetorics and styles. Now, if such relationship is essential in politics in general, in the case of populism it is particularly so because of the inarticulation and vagueness of its ideology.

As we have seen, to stress the ideological thinness of populism doesn't mean to deny the political significance of this phenomenon. Urbinati provides a strong argument in this respect to show that behind its thin core, populism hides a 'thick' anti-political ideology. But we should be careful to clarify in which sense we understand the adjective 'thick' here. According to Freeden's distinction, thickness refers to the quantity and internal coherence of the ideational components of the core of an ideology.[36] In this sense, then, we cannot apply it to populism. Thick, in the sense Urbinati uses to describe populism, has to be understood more generically as politically substantive. Recognizing that populism is politically substantive, however, shouldn't imply to deny its ideological thinness (in Freeden's sense) – that is, the inarticulation and vagueness of its ideology – which, indeed, Urbinati doesn't deny. This inarticulation and vagueness however is not an incidental feature of populism. On the contrary it belongs to the very core of its worldview. This becomes clear when we connect it to other cognate elements normally ascribed to populism, such as anti-intellectualism and its voluntarist and decisionist understanding of politics. The centrality of the rhetorical, and more in general stylistic dimension, in populism has to be understood precisely in connection with the worldview formed by this cluster of related ideas. Indeed, the complementary side of populism's penchant for practice rather than theory, for immediate and decisive action rather than reflection and deliberation, or for its realistic and strategic conception of politics, is its predilection for emotionally charged and confrontational discourses, the recurrent use of demagoguery, or the promotion of irrational forms of identification with strong leaders. In this sense we can say that it belongs to the very ideational core of populism the idea that politics is essentially rhetorical and, more generally, mainly concerned with form rather than content. And indeed it is essentially through such styles and rhetoric that populism tries to obtain its goals and implement its view of society. Its politically substantiveness thus is the result to a significant extent of its stylistic dimension (as Laclau's 'maximalist' approach recognizes). For these reasons, therefore, we can say that in populism rhetoric plays a special role in comparison to other more articulated ideologies.

What I have being arguing so far should also answer, at least in part, the question of whether to distinguish the role of rhetoric in populism from that played in non-populist politics in liberal democracy is possible or not. But this question makes clear also why in order to develop such kind of analysis we need

[35] Urbinati, N., *Me the People,* op. cit., p. 163.

[36] See for instance: Freeden, M. *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach.* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 485; Freeden, M. Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology?, *Political Studies*, 46, 1998, No. 4, pp. 748–765, 750. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for calling my attention to this point.

a more systematic conception of rhetoric. The responses to such question, indeed, would be very different if we endorse, for instance, the idea that rhetoric is opposed to rational discourse, or rather that it is a form of argumentation. Without oversimplifying, we can say that the former is the understanding of rhetoric that can be originally found both in Plato and the sophists such as Thrasymachus; or nowadays, in rationalist thinkers such as Habermas, on the one hand, and poststructuralist or postmodern ones – from Roland Barthes to (in part) the same Laclau – on the other who consider that all kind of discourse is equally rhetorical, which means equally strategic, a mere rationalization. The latter conception, instead, is the position originally defended by Aristotle, according to whom rhetoric is an argumentative practice based on the combination of rational and extra-rational means of persuasion.[37] An Aristotelian understanding of rhetoric can provide, certainly not clear-cut criteria, but at least some guidance to differentiate populist and demagogic kinds of rhetoric from more deliberative ones. This could be done in different ways. Eugene Garver, for instance, has argued that the Aristotelian conception of rhetoric as an argumentative art implies a difference between a kind of discourse whose only aim is persuasion, which is an 'external' aim of such an art, and one that is instead moved by the aim of finding the best means of persuasion, rational and extra-rational, in every circumstance (independently to some extent from the result of persuasion), which is instead an 'internal' or 'guiding' aim for it.[38] Otherwise, we could look also at the recent rhetorical turn in deliberation theory (mainly an Aristotelian rhetorical turn), which has provided important insights on how rhetoric can contribute to democratic deliberation: for instance, by showing how it is necessary to create the motivational and affective basis without which reason and thus deliberation cannot operate, or how it can contribute to establish bridges among different groups in a society by engendering trust among them, or, more in general, how to develop not only more inclusionary but also more realistic models of public deliberation.[39] As Bryan Garsten has rightly underscored, what is central to such turn is the idea that rhetoric is not a supplement to reason, but rather a form of reasoning itself, and thus that it cannot be reduced to instrumental considerations because, on the contrary, it plays a primary role in how we configure our political world.[40]

It is important to note, however, that in *Representative Democracy* Urbinati actually has expressed her preference for an Aristotelian conception of rhetoric, with the argument that it accepts both the passionate and partisan character of politics and its deliberative dimension. And coherently she is critical both of the rationalism of Habermas and other deliberative theorists and the sophistic conception of language endorsed by Laclau (which, as we have seen, she considers a sort of discursive voluntarism). Nonetheless in *Me the People* such a conception is not fully and consistently brought to bear to her analysis of populism[41]

To conclude, it should be clear that in calling for the introduction of a rhetorical perspective in a normatively oriented democratic theory I am advocating the necessity to produce absolute standards to distinguish between different kinds of rhetoric, according to their democratic status, as if it would be in a

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[37] For instance: Ginzburg, C., *History, Rhetoric, and Proof*. Hanover, NH and London, University Press of New England 1999, Ch. 1.

[38] Garver, E. *Aristotle's Rhetoric: An Art of Character.* Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1994.

[39] Abizadeh, A. The Passions of the Wise: "Phronêsis", Rhetoric, and Aristotle's Passionate Practical Deliberation. *The Review of Metaphysics* 56, 2002, No. 2, pp. 267-296. Allen, D. S. *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown V. Board of Education*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2004. For an overview of the recent use of rhetoric in political theory see: Garsten, B., The Rhetoric Revival in Political Theory. *Annual Review of Political Science,* 14, 2011, No. 1, pp. 159-180.

[40] Garsten, B., The Rhetoric Revival in Political Theory, op. cit.

[41] Urbinati, N., *Representative Democracy*, op. cit., pp. 119-120.

sort of enlarged, not-rationalist Habermasian theory of deliberation. Rhetoric cannot do that, because it is an art intrinsically resistant to systematization. In this sense the distinction between the different kinds of rhetoric cannot but be a work of fine-grained interpretation, a difficult exercise of judgment (such an essential political faculty for Urbinati) to assess how the means of persuasion are employed, under which circumstances, to what political ends and according to what political views, and all this with an eye to the specific contexts in which this occurs. Such impossibility to develop clear-cut standards however shouldn't be considered an obstacle because, as the same Urbinati has written (quoting Hanna Pitkin), judgment on democratic legitimacy is 'a matter of degree, an idea or ideal realized more or less well in various circumstances, conditions, and institutional arrangements.'[42]

[42] Pitkin cited in: Urbinati, N. The Democratic Tenor of Representation, op. cit., p. 186.