

In a previous issue of *Pravada*, we initiated a critique of populism in politics and scholarship. The re-generation of Right-wing populism in European politics has menacing implications for the Non-European world as well, particularly in the context of immigration to Europe of people from Asia, Africa and of late from the former Soviet Union. The following article, reproduced from *TELOS*, No. 90, Winter 1991-92, provides a critical account of the recent rise of Right-wing populism in France and Italy.

RE-BIRTH OF POPULISM IN ITALY AND FRANCE

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The crisis of political forms of representation seems to have been accelerated by the impact of international events such as the collapse of "really existing socialism," the end of the Cold War, growing migratory pressures, and disruptions in various industrial sectors resulting from competition from areas with lower labor costs. As a result, there has been a "rebirth of populism" both in Western and Eastern Europe. Despite national differences, a series of populist movements have developed over the last decade. Characterised by anxieties, uncertainties and widespread fear, they seem to exhibit important common features: the destruction of traditional symbolic codes, the appeal to "common sense" against politicians and intellectuals, the return to "authentic" communitarian traditions and reliance on charismatic personalities.

The Populist Model

Populist movements have been characterised by their reference to the "people" as an homogeneous social unit and the exclusive locus of positive and permanent values.¹ They usually lack an organic theoretical elaboration, and ideology plays a secondary role. This is why different political movements such as fascism and National Socialism, Stalinism and Castroism can all be labelled "populist." Recent comparative studies of typical cases of populist movements have identified several constants collectively defining a specific "model" or "populist syndrome."²

- A) Populism contraposes the "people" to those who are not part of the people.³ In historical and territorial terms, those who are not part of the people usually include political, intellectual and economic elites and the forces advocating ideologies "foreign to the people."
- B) Historical heritage and authentic popular will cannot be expressed rationally (by means of the rules and procedures of formal democracy). They are generally intuited and articulated by a leader. Populism is constituted by a bond between "the

supremacy of the will of the people and the direct relation between the people and the leadership."⁴ As such, populism rejects the political representation typical of parliamentary democracy in favor of referenda, direct democracy and the presidential system with an emphasis on strong leadership.

- C) In defining popular interests and sensitivities, populist movements usually emphasize territoriality and nationality. The "nation" in question need not necessarily coincide with any particular state: it can simply be defined as a regional area seeking autonomy. Populism is thus contraposed both to cosmopolitanism (often attributed to elites) and localist closures.
- D) Often populism also exhibits racist elements.⁵ Even if not openly articulated, hostility towards those who are not part of the "people" (or who cannot be easily integrated), is fed by the suspicion of the presence of parasitic or corrupting entities or, more broadly, that "diversity" breaks up the unity of the community.

Since the end of the 1980s there has been a resurgence of populism in the more industrialised European countries. Various new political forces have elaborated traditional populist themes successfully in terms of present conditions and different national contexts. Thus "neo-populism" is increasingly seen as a viable alternative political model. It can also be seen as the result of the crisis of traditional forms of political representation, which has created the *potential political space* within which populist politics can thrive. As articulated by *various new political subjects*, populist activities condition and transform both the contents and the contours of the potential political space created by the growing crisis of existing institutions.

The new populist political organisations come from many ideological directions. Some of them, such as the French National Front and a few German organisations, have emerged from various extreme right wing groups; in other cases, such as the Lombard League, the Northern League, or the Flemish Vlaams Block, from movements



seeking regional autonomy. Jorg Helder's Austrian Freedom Party (FPO) was originally a small centrist party; the German *Republikaner* party was originally a splinter group of the Bavarian Christian Socialist Union (CSU); while in north European countries the anti-tax revolt has been the new populist parties' point of departure. These organisations began as small groups on the political margins, where they remained for a long time. Unlike most other active minorities, however, they have succeeded in gaining considerable influence because of the intensification of the social and political crises in many advanced European countries in the second half of the 1980s.

The following focus is on two national contexts in which the phenomenon has become significant and may result in the destabilization of the entire political framework. Yet in many respects the French and the Italian political situations are entirely different. One need only consider the French electoral system and other political institutions of the Fifth Republic (typically presidential and majoritarian) and the Italian situation (characterised after WW II by parliamentarianism and proportional representation) as well as the traditional distinction between the French and the Italian sense of national identity: the first very strong; the second weak and aloof. Even more telling is the impact of extra-communitarian immigrants in the two countries.⁶

Crisis of the Italian and French Systems of Representation

Since the 1970s, transformations in social stratification, education and modes of communication have significantly altered relations between citizens and political parties. Traditional cleavages defining various social groups have become blurred. Increasingly, complex social organisations involve individuals in numerous situations generating various types of loyalties. At the same time, there is a weakening of the ability of political parties to represent their traditional constituencies because of the general tendency to become "catch-all parties," increasingly more independent of particular social interests. This evolution is mirrored by the better informed citizen's tendency to privilege "issue-oriented" over "ideology-oriented" forms of political participation.

The anomaly of Italian political culture *vis a vis* other Western democracies often has been characterised in terms of "political alienation," "social isolation," and the "absence of a civic culture."⁷ In the mid-1970s cultural particularism was still prevalent in Italy. Italian culture was still characterised by loyalty to restricted domains such as family, clan, village or neighbourhood, lacking altogether a national consciousness.

Political integration based on partisan political cultures and on the major political parties' direct and indirect associational networks substituted for a national civic

culture and individual public commitment. The typical project pursued by the major mass political parties (especially the Christian Democrats and the Communists) has been to broaden their support by means of a network of subsidiary organisations (unions, enterprises, student and cultural groups, recreational associations etc.) in which individuals could be integrated "from cradle to grave."

The influence of these traditional political subcultures in Italy has been determined for the most part by their ability to establish "vital" relations with the most important subcultural organisations based on region or class by assimilating and transforming them. Thus it has become a commonplace to designate "white" and "red" zones to refer to territorial areas in which the predominant political tradition has been strongly integrated with local subcultures. An analogous relation has developed with various class-based subcultures. One need only recall the relation between the workers' subculture and socialist-communist institutions and those diversified within regional contexts - between the traditional middle classes (small entrepreneurs, artisans, farmers) and the two main political subcultures. This is why these typically Italian particularisms have not been superseded by any national political cultures (with liberal-democratic orientations).

Over the years this state of affairs generated such a stable political framework that it had no problems withstanding the crisis of the 1970s. Since WWII, elections have been characterised by the constant presence of some 7 or 8 parties (the Christian Democrats, the Communists, the Socialists, the Neo-Fascists, the Republicans, the Social Democrats, the Liberals and - up to the 1970s - the Monarchists).

In the last ten years, however, large sectors of the electorate have shown dissatisfaction and restlessness. One indication of this state of affairs is a growing abstentionism, up from 8.4% in 1976 to 19.1% in 1990. Similarly, electoral mobility has increased, reflecting not any particular shift to the "Right" or the "Left", but merely a vague search for alternatives. This also indicates a growing erosion of the long-standing practice of voting on the basis of subcultural belonging, documented by the fall of the sum of the votes received by the two main political parties (the Christian Democrats and the Communists), from 67.8% in 1975 to 46.4% in 1990. The strength of the two main governing parties (the Christian Democrats and the Socialists) became increasingly dependent (especially in the South) on their control of the flow of state funds and the means of mass communication. Although successful *vis a vis* the traditional opposition parties (the Communists and Neo-Fascists), this way of maintaining the dominant governing positions has led to an erosion of the citizens faith in the party-system—especially in the northern regions. Consequently, during the 1980's, along with

abstentionism, the electoral strength of parties outside traditional ideological oppositions has grown from 2.5% in 1976 to 12% in 1990.

In France there is a long tradition of distrust of political parties going back to the 19th century. This impatience with the *partitocracy* reached the breaking point during the crisis of the Fourth Republic. Criticism was focused primarily on the excessive number of parties in parliament, and on the government's chronic instability. At that time, little more than half the citizens identified with one of the existing parties.

This picture changed radically in 1958 with the Fifth Republic. The number of Parliamentary groups fell from 14 (in April 1958) to 4 (in 1982). Party identification grew significantly to 66% of the votes in 1963 to 85% in 1978. The government shift which took place with Mitterand's further increased faith in the system of representation. The old distrust of parties, however, progressively re-emerged in the second half of the 1980's as a result of disillusionment with the politics of the two main poles of the French political system.

The Right (the RPR; *Rassemblement pour la Republique* and the UDF: *Union Democratique Francaise*) was no longer able to represent effectively the 'conservative bloc,' especially after Jaques Chirac's defeat in the 1988 presidential elections. The success of the National Front further contributed to intensifying the crisis of the moderate Right. The governing politics of the Socialist Party disappointed the Left and the Center-Left electorate *vis a vis* the expectations raised after Mitterand's victories in 1981 and 1988. In 1989 the number of French citizens claiming to be "very close" or "close enough" to a political party reached extremely low levels in comparison to other European countries. In the last two years, the parties' credibility has collapsed even more. According to a recent study, only 20% of the French identify with a party, 19% with a political leader, and 15% with a union. A similar study conducted by the same institute in 1989 measured party identification as high as 39% for parties, 35% for political leaders and 23% for unions.

The crisis of the system of representation can also be measured by other means. Electoral support for parties that have hitherto managed the institutions of the Fifth Republic has rapidly declined during the last 15 years. In the 1976 legislative elections the Socialist party, the UDF and the RPR received together 73.6% of the votes. In a march 1992 opinion poll only half of the people seemed inclined to vote for these parties (18% for the Socialists and 33% for RPR-UDF. The same opinion poll also showed that, along with distrust of the "historical" political parties of the Fifth Republic, support for the new parties grew: with 15.5% of the vote going to the National Front and 14% to the Greens. At the beginning of the 1990s the crisis of the Italian and French systems of representation seemed to have reached a crucial turning

point. Traditional political organisations seemed to have been delegitimated, raising once again questions concerning the existing rules and procedures for voting.

National-Populism of the National Front

The National Front was founded in 1972 by Jean-Marie Le Pen, after a long period of collaboration with groups and movements associated with the extreme Right. In the 1950s he was elected to Parliament as a member of the *Poujadiste* movement.⁸ With the founding of the National Front he sought to regroup the "national, social and popular" Right⁹ - a variety of different people, from those nostalgic of the Vichy regime, to those opposed to Algerian independence, to the youth of the New Right born in 1968, to the national Catholic fundamentalists still identifying with Charles Maurras' *Action Francaise*.

At the beginning, the Front underwent various splits, losing in the process its most extreme right-wing elements. For many years its electoral results were insignificant. In the 1978 legislative elections the Front received only .76% of the vote and in 1981 Le Pen even failed to gather the 500 signatures needed to sponsor his own presidential candidacy. In the legislative election that same year he received only 0.18% of the vote. The qualitative leap came in March 1983, when he received 11.3% of the vote in Paris' 20th *arrondissement*. In September the National Front obtained 16.7% of the vote in Dreux, finally attracting national attention. From then on its success spread over the whole country. In the 1984 European elections its average support was 11.1%, with a maximum of 16.9% in the South. By the 1988 presidential election Le Pen was able to garner 14% of the vote nationally, and 22.9% in the South.

Where did these votes come from? According to a study of those who voted for Le Pen in 1984, 18% were people who had hitherto voted for Chirac's RPR, 12% from ex-supporters of Giscard D'Estaing's UDF, 6% from Mitterand's Socialist Party and 2% from Marchais' Communist Party. It was an electorate coming predominantly from Centre-Right parties, but also including former members of the Left.

After 1984 the National Front's electorate changed. A study conducted in the Parisian area to establish its source of support showed that the party had altered its profile after initial electoral successes: "Between 1984 and 1988 support for Jean-Marie Le Pen changed. From bourgeois, it became popular, from 'extreme Right' it became a protest electorate."¹⁰ A series of national studies have confirmed this evolution. In 1987 only 12% of Le Pen's potential electorate indicated sympathy for the UDR-RPR, against 39% in 1984. Similarly, support for the National Front among the working class went from 9% in 1984 to 19% in 1988. During the same period, the



support of the petty bourgeois (i.e., businessmen and artisans) increased from 15% to 27%. As Jaffre put it: "The all too real facade of immigration hides the drama of unemployment and the consequences of the crisis that exacerbate the reactions of part of the popular electorate disoriented by the politicians' impotence, from both the Left and the Right, to deal with its problems."¹¹

The kernel of Le Pen's political message was immigration, which he connected to unemployment and lack of safety: "The National Front relates these three terms (immigration, unemployment and lack of safety) and at the same time presents itself as the only entity able to solve the problem."¹² Of course, Le Pen condemned all forms of racism "including French racism."¹³ Allegedly, it was simply a matter of preventing immigration from penalising the poorest Frenchmen and from "threatening national cultural identity." It only means a privileging of French nationals in employment and social security (*les Français d'abord*), and of sending immigrants back to their countries of origin. Accordingly, "Le Pen's account is essentially a spoken one, impoverished and often negative. He does not analyze, but only asserts and denounces."¹⁴ The message is systematically and repetitively aimed at what are considered to be the cornerstones of the system of French representation: 1) the institutions of the Fifth Republic; 2) the "gang of four" (the four main French parties: the Socialist, the Communist, the RPR and the UDF); and 3) the "four superpowers governing France" (the Jews, the Masons, the Protestants and the Marxists). Le Pen's other main themes concern the reduction of the state's role to social control and defense, the "de-statisation" of France, support for free enterprise, and the reestablishment of the traditional moral order, emphasising the family and condemning abortion and homosexuality.

What allowed the broadening of Le Pen's support was the ability to combine rigidity and repetitiveness (with respect to the key stereotypes and in opposition to traditional parties and political institution) with a relative flexibility and pragmatic sense in addressing the "common people." This shift was facilitated by the sympathy shown for the National Front by some entertainment and sport figures and by the "conversion" of some former officials of the traditional parties. The media also unwittingly contributed to the National Front's success: by attacking Le Pen they inflated his relevance and cast him as an important political figure. Thus, after 1984, the themes forcefully emphasized by the National Front (immigration, safety, the defence of the traditional moral order) have been taken up by other political forces, broadening the acceptability of Le Pen's message within otherwise apolitical sectors.

The Lombard League-Northern League's Regional Populism

The political and cultural origins of the Lombard Leagues are completely different from those of the National Front. For the Lombard League's founding members the initial objective was regional federalism. The small group of "Lombard autonomists" sought to transform the geographical-administrative referent (the Lombard region) into a political locus defining particular interests. The kernel of the League's official doctrine was clearly stated in the very first issue of *Lombardia Autonomista* (March 1982): "Your age does not matter, nor does your occupation, nor your political preferences: what is important is that you, or rather we, are all Lombard." To the interchangeability and increasing meaninglessness of the traditional parties' programs the League contraposed defense of specific regional interests.

At least up to 1987 the League developed according to a pattern very similar to that of other federal-regionalist movements that have emerged elsewhere in Northern Italy.¹⁵ The outlook was clearly federal autonomism. The League came into being, gathered strength, and became "visible" for the first time within such a context. During this phase, support did not rise above a certain threshold. It was even weaker than that of the other Italian regional Leagues. In 1987 the Lombard League only managed to reach 3%, mostly in some of Lombardy's peripheral provinces, with little support in Milan's metropolitan area, compared to 4.3% for the Piedmont regionalist movements.

During the first half of the 1980's in Lombardy, "regional belonging" was not sufficient to constitute "spontaneously" a base for a new political movement. There was no autonomous Lombard culture grounded on a specific language and particular traditions. Local dialects were spoken only in peripheral areas, and varied from place to place. Often they were closer to the dialects of bordering regions than to those of other areas of Lombardy. Similarly, ancient local traditions had survived only in few sub-alpine valleys. The attempt to constitute a collective identity initially led the Lombard autonomists to emphasize the Lombard dialect by means of "provocatory interventions in representative institutions. This strategy, however, tended to degrade autonomism to an expression of "local folklore" and, most of all, seemed irrelevant to most Lombards.

As a result, Umberto Bossi and his collaborators began to emphasize *another type of break* with the official national language. In opposition to the convoluted jargon with



which politicians and intellectuals describe social and political events, they pointed to a *second language* informally elaborated in various subcultural contexts. This made it possible to exploit popular resentment against the political and intellectual castes' expropriation of power and language, thus paving the way for the "populist" turn. Autonomist vindications became broadened and transformed so as to express the "common people's" resentment against the political caste. The anti-tax rebellion - something felt particularly by the autonomous petty bourgeoisie and typical of most populist movements - became one of the trademarks of the protest against the central government in Rome. As such, the League reappropriated a tendency that had emerged already after WW II during various clashes between the party-system and "the common people": a tendency privileging private activity and social order against the debilitating impact of politics.

Subsequently, the League deployed another typical populist theme: hostility towards "those who are different," i.e., towards those who threaten the people's homogeneity, and therefore its very identity. It encouraged regional belonging within the context of already existing latent antagonisms. In fact, the League's first successful mobilising efforts were in connection with clashes between Lombards and immigrants (first Southerners and subsequently the extra-communitarians). By the late 1980s the visibility of Third World immigrants in Italy had grown considerably and traditional anti-Southern hostility gradually gave way to hostility towards extra-communitarian immigrants.¹⁶

Various studies conducted in Lombardy during the 1980s have documented the extent to which latent hostilities were widespread, but relatively undifferentiated among the population: the tension between "the common people" and deviants (from criminals to anyone failing to become integrated within "popular" norms and customs), the tension between citizens and the political caste, and between citizens and the new immigrants. The League succeeded in presenting these three conflicting scenarios as at least partially overlapping and itself as the agency able to deal with them. Consequently, its political model was a combination of regionalism and populism - a very effective model which, within the Italian context, vindicated the values of hard work and efficiency identified with the Lombards' private initiative, in contraposition to the notorious shortcomings of the state apparatus. This resulted in a general assumption that a vote for the League expressed a revolt by the "healthy" parts of society against the political system.

The originality of the League's "regionalist populism" consists in combining common people's representational needs, no longer met by traditional political institutions, and a community defined in historical and territorial terms. The need for political identification is partially filled by the "Lombard nation" as a "strong" community

aware of its interests and able to defend them. The League interprets the political crisis through the contraposition of Lombardy to Rome, which effectively symbolises existing tensions between the common people and the party system. Thus a vote for the League comes to represent an immediate punitive popular pronouncement against the *partitocracy*.

The Lombard League's first Congress in 1989 prefigured the shift from federal autonomism to regional populism: the abandonment of the emphasis on dialects; the shift from the anti-Southern polemic to that against extra-communitarians; and the broadening concept of the Lombard people to encompass all sub-alpine regions of Northern Italy as a "multi-regional community sharing the same culture." As a result of this populist turn, support for the League grew rapidly, well beyond that for other regional formations, reaching 8% of the vote in the 1989 European elections and 19% in the 1990 regional elections.

On the strength of this success, the Lombard League has been able to "export" its own regional populism to other Italian regions. With the founding of the Northern League in 1991, it is no longer concerned with the autonomy of individual regions, but with a "Northern Republic" comprising Tuscany and other Italian regions.¹⁷ Thus the Northern League has promoted other Leagues in the Centre and South of Italy. The main objective has changed: the movement's focus is no longer primarily regional autonomy but political hegemony at a notional level. The division of Italy into three great autonomous sub-nations is meant to ratify - under the auspices of the "powerful" League - the inevitable centrality of Northern Italy, not only economically and culturally but also politically. In the April 5, 1992 elections the Northern League was represented in all Italian regions.

Two Neo-Populist Models?

Today the French National Front and the Italian Northern League constitute, respectively, the most clear-cut expressions of national-populism and populist regionalism in Europe. Because of different national contexts and outlook, there are profound differences between them. Their initial successes were recorded in areas most responsive to their respective original doctrines: for the National Front, among those voters dissatisfied with the politics of the moderate Right, and for the League, among the electorate of some peripheral provinces of Lombardy. In the course of their growth, however, both movements have rediscovered and reinterpreted all the fundamental elements of the populist model by adapting them to their respective contexts.

A) Both movements present themselves as the defenders of the "common people" against various elites (big politics, big government, big business, journalists



and intellectuals). The cultural model advocated is that of small industrial and artisan enterprises embodying the virtues of hard work, frugality, honesty and the entrepreneurship of the common people. Existing political parties are criticised for lacking any effective programs to tackle the various problems worrying the population. Worse yet, the suspicion lingers that in many cases the dominant elites are in collusion with the very sources of the problem. Here undifferentiated fear tends to translate into a "conspiratorial theory": the collusion of various "enemies" at the expense of the overwhelming majority of the population and their representatives.¹⁸

- B) There is nothing subversive about the critique of the existing systems of representation (the traditional parties as well as other political institutions). Accordingly, the alternative to the existing system can be developed through the electoral process.¹⁹ This alternative is thus prefigured in the new political organisation and the leader. Thus it is Le Pen who promises to return "France to the French," while League militants are asked to swear loyalty to and defend the interests of the people of the "Po Valley", the League, and its leaders. Disagreement with the leader is inadmissible: where it develops, it immediately turns into an organisational break, with the expulsion of dissidents invariably accused of being part of a plot and in the "enemy's pay." The League tries to relate to the electorate by allowing a form of "belonging without participation" with a maximum delegation of power to the leaders on the basis of their identification with the "people" (French or North Italian) and a minimum of input of personal opinions. The only thing the League requests is material adherence and/or support: everything else follows. The emphasis is on the role of "militants as loyal executors." Its current self-definition is "a party of *attacchini* (those who hang announcements on walls)." Similarly, the National Front claims that "militants owe everything to the party while the party owes nothing to them." Although federalism has historically advocated decentralisation, within the Northern League all local decisions are always inspired and carefully monitored by Bossi himself.²⁰
- C) In both the League and the Front the "people" has a national-territorial reference. In both they combine particular issues (usually systemic problems) with possible solutions in terms of a strong, territorially based community. Thus Le Pen combines the "return of France to the French" with problems of immigration, lack of safety and unemployment. For the League the national-territorial dimension (the "Lombard people" and, subsequently, the "people of the Po Valley") is the most important social and political identity.²¹ The founding of the "Northern Republic" and the

threat to call a "constituent assembly" of League parliamentarians elected in the northern regions prefigures the historical joining of nation and state. The League's sub-nationalism seems to substitute for the nationalist ideology which, in other countries, is an essential component of populist politics. The success of the Front and the League shows how the delegitimation of the welfare state leads broad sectors of the population to emphasize a strong community defined in national territorial terms as the indispensable basis for a concrete alternative.

- D) Hostility towards "immigrants" has played an essential role for both the League and the Front, even if managed differently because of national and ideological differences. Obviously there is no racism based on traditional biological theories. Instead, this hostility takes the form of a kind of common sense xenophobia predicated mainly on the "negative practical consequences" resulting from the presence of a large number of immigrants: rising criminality and unemployment, social degradation and the spread of new diseases. This renders the League's and the Fronts political analyses all the more convincing: the presence of "foreigners" threatens the people's internal unity and identity²² understood not solely as a past to be reactivated but as "an idealized community to be defended."²³ At any rate, although rather different, national-populism and regional populism are two variants of a political model gaining increasing currency in Europe.²⁴

Notes

1. Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, eds., *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970).
2. Peter Worseley, "The Concept of Populism", in Ionescu and Gellner, *op. cit.*
3. Margaret Canovan, *Populism* (New York and London: Harcourt and Brace Jovanovic, 1980).
4. Edward Shils, *The Torment of Secrecy: The Background and Consequences of American Security Politics* (London: Heineman, 1954).
5. According to Ionescu and Gellner, *op. cit.*, "Populism exhibits a strong tendency towards the racial myth."
6. Slightly more than one million in Italy, compared to five millions in France.
7. Gabriel A. Almond and Steven Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).
8. Organised by the shop-keeper Pierre Poujade, this movement became part of the anti-tax revolt (supported especially by small businessmen and artisans), fought public corruption, and developed an anti-parliament critique while exhibiting, directly or indirectly, anti-Semitic tendencies. The Poujadiste movement, within the context of the crisis of the Fourth Republic, anticipated the neo-populism of the 1980s. After receiving over two-million votes (9.26%) in the 1956 elections, it dissipated shortly afterwards because of internal conflicts.