

# Populist Mobilization across Time and Space

## Introduction

In the municipal elections in May 2015, the incumbent mayors of Madrid and Barcelona, both from established parties, suffered a smarting defeat. Both were replaced by the candidates of a broad coalition of left-wing groups, which, in turn, crucially depended on the support of Podemos, a new radical left-leaning movement. Podemos was founded in January 2014 by a group of intellectuals, many of them academics. Within a few months, Podemos developed into a formidable challenge to the Spanish political establishment. Between August and November 2014, support in the polls rose from eleven to 28 percent, way ahead of the two major established parties, the conservative People's Party (PP) and the Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE). Although in subsequent months, support for the movement somewhat declined (in part because of the dramatic gains of a second new movement, *Ciudanos*), Podemos continued to represent a decisive force in Spanish politics.

The success of Podemos is to a large extent owed to its leaders' populist strategy. In fact, before engaging in politics, several prominent current and former members of the movement's top echelon had closely studied the most recent wave of populism in Latin America. One of them had acted as an advisor to several left-wing populist governments in the region. Podemos's stunning foray into a hitherto relatively stable party system is emblematic of the potential of populist mobilization in established liberal democracies. The concept of populist mobilization is adopted from Robert Jansen, who has convincingly argued that more than anything else, populism represents a "mode of political practice," a political project aimed at mobilizing "ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action."<sup>1</sup> From a larger historical perspective, Podemos's surge to political prominence is hardly exceptional. Populist insurgencies have occurred in a range of polities, from nineteenth century United States, early twentieth-century Latin America, to late nineteenth-century Western Europe. Their impact has varied. In some cases, it was fleeting, in others far-reaching. Late nineteenth-century American agrarian populism, for instance, albeit short-lived, had a profound influence on the progressive agenda that informed US politics in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> In Latin America, the legacy of Peronism and Aprismo continues to endure until today. Finally, in contemporary Western Europe, populist parties have posed a serious challenge to liberal democracy and the continued process of transnational integration.

In what follows, I propose to put the rise of Podemos in a larger comparative historical context. The objective of the analysis is to gain a better understanding of both the conditions propitious to populist mobilization and the mechanisms peculiar to populist strategy. In this way, I hope to make a small contribution to a better understanding of the nature of populism itself. The empirical evidence derives from four major cases of populist mobilization (in addition to the case of Podemos): late nineteenth-century American agrarian populism (the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert S. Jansen, *Populism Mobilization: A New Theoretical Approach to Populism*, *Social Theory*, vo. 29, no. 2, 2011, pp. 72, 82.

<sup>2</sup> John Gerring, *Party Ideologies in America, 1828-1996*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

People's Party); the short-lived episode of Boulangism that occurred at roughly the same time in France; the Gaitanista movement in 1940s Colombia; and the upsurge of the Lega Nord in the early 1990s in northern Italy.

### Episode I: The People's Party

The populist movement of the 1880s and 1890s emerged from the farms and rural communities in the South and Midwest of the United States. It grew out of the postbellum associations formed by farmers (the Alliance and the Grange) to promote cooperation and increase the farmers' bargaining power vis-à-vis banks, middlemen (such as grain elevator operators), and the railroads. In the late 1880s, farmers faced progressively worsening economic conditions, which stemmed from a growing "imbalance in terms of trade" between agricultural and industrial goods: "Agricultural goods simply bought fewer and fewer industrial goods."<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, falling shipping rates resulted in American grain flooding the European markets, lowering prices for wheat and flour for consumers in Europe. On the other hand, for a number of reasons, American farmers (and particularly those in the frontier regions) saw little gains from the increased demand for their products. To make things worse, starting in early 1893, the United States entered the worst depression the country had hitherto experienced. It lasted for four years. Many farmers, already indebted and overburdened by mortgages, went bankrupt and lost their farms in foreclosures.

Confronted with a dramatic deterioration of their economic situation, the farmers movement turned into an "agrarian revolt" which quickly found political expression in the form of a political party, the People's Party. The new party's main political demand was for the government to relax its tight monetary policy (i.e., abandon the gold standard and allow the "free" coinage of silver) and embark on a course of monetary inflation to redress the country's economic problems. This policy targeted primarily cash-strapped farmers, who hoped it would raise the price of their products and increase their income, but it also would have benefited the western mining states rich in silver deposits. The movement culminated in the 1896 presidential election, which saw the Democratic candidate, William Jennings Bryan, run on a populist "free-silver ticket." Bryan's defeat in the election marked the beginning of the end of the populist movement, with many leading populist politicians defecting to the Republicans and Democrats.

The agrarian revolt flared up at a time of profound socioeconomic transformation. This was a time where the "traumas of technological innovation, expansion of corporate power, and commercial and cultural globalization" caused deep anxieties; where deflation and successive periods of deep recessions left many Americans fearing for their livelihood, if not survival; where corporations "grew exponentially amid traumatic spasms of global capitalist development. Mark Twain called it the 'Gilded Age.' The rich amassed great fortunes, a prosperous section of the middle class grew more comfortable and hard times pressed on most

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Verdier, *Democracy and International Trade: Britain, France and the United States 1860-1990*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 116.

everyone else.”<sup>4</sup> And government, largely subservient to business interests, did little to alleviate the anxieties of ordinary Americans.

The fleeting success of agrarian populism was fanned by a deep-seated sense of injustice. As Mary Lease, the compelling speaker from Kansas, put it in 1891, this was “no longer a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, but a government of Wall Street, by Wall Street, and for Wall Street.” This was a country where the “common people are robbed to enrich their masters,” where a few handful of men owned more wealth than all the paupers of the land together.”<sup>5</sup> An editorial in the Populist *Kansas Agitator* from the same year similarly charged that “America (...) legislates for Wall street alone, creating conditions that take away from the poor the little that they have, and transferring it to the rich, and the ‘land of the free and the home of the brave’ will soon be the ‘home of the rich and the land of the slave’.”<sup>6</sup> A profound sense of disenchantment, alienation, and injustice also informed the “Omaha Platform” adopted by the People’s Party in 1892. It expressed a deeply felt disenchantment with a nation where “the fruits of the toil of millions [were] boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few, unprecedented in the history of mankind; and the possessors of those, in turn, despise[d] the republic and endanger[ed] liberty.” A nation, where the “prolific womb of governmental injustice” was breeding “two great classes — tramps and millionaires.”<sup>7</sup>

The populists’ anger was directed primarily against corporate power. In the words of Tom Watson, the prominent “agrarian rebel” from Georgia, populism was foremost “the protest of the plundered against the plunderers – of the victim against the robbers.”<sup>8</sup> At the same time, however, it was also a much broader protest against the state, the two major parties, and the political establishment in general, which had failed to shield ordinary people from the severe stresses caused by the economic turmoil and dislocations of the late nineteenth century while allowing themselves to become tools in the hands of big business and urban America. Tom Watson, however, insisted that populism was more than a protest, it was also a creed. As a creed, populism stood for “the doctrine that Government belongs to the governed and not to the governors,” that government was created for the people and not “for the benefit of those in office.” In essence, Watson maintained, populism was “antagonism to class legislation and to special privilege;” its main objective being “to check the tendency which concentrates political power and all material prosperity in the hands of the few.” As a political project, populism represented “an organized effort to restore the Government system of our fathers.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision*, p. vii.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Lease, “The Red Dragon of Wall Street Vs. the Farmer,” in Judith Anderson, *Ouspoken Women: Speeches by American Women Reformers, 1635-1935*, Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1984, pp. 106-107.

<sup>6</sup> *Governments for the Strong*, *Kansas Agitator*, April 21, 1891, p. 44, available online at <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83040052/1891-04-21/ed-1/seq-4/>

<sup>7</sup> Preamble to the “Omaha Platform,” adopted by the People’s Party, July 4, 1892, available online at <http://www.populist.com/populist.Omaha.platform.html> (accessed July 18, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas E. Watson, *The People’s Party Campaign Book, 1892: American Farmers and the Rise of Agrobusiness*, reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1975, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas E. Watson, *Populism*, *Tom Watson’s Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 3, September 1905, pp. 257-260.

As has often been noted, the populists considered themselves both heirs and champions of Jeffersonian democracy, of Jefferson's republican vision of a nation of independent yeoman farmers governing themselves. They evoked Jeffersonian republican virtue against rampant political corruption and monopoly power.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, they evoked a "producerist" ethos, extolling the virtue of economic independence threatened by "bankers, speculators, and loan-sharking merchants – parasites who produced nothing but made money only by manipulating it, sucking the lifeblood from the honest labor of farmers, mechanics" and others engaged in productive labor.<sup>11</sup> In this situation, as a prominent Texas populist put it, where monopoly threatened to destroy "the liberties of the people" what the country needed was a "true Jeffersonian democratic party" dedicated to defending "the producing classes against monopoly in every form."<sup>12</sup> In the face of widespread socioeconomic injustice, what the populists envisioned was the establishment of genuine economic democracy, "where opportunity was equal, where the distribution of the nation's wealth was equitable."<sup>13</sup>

Despite their somewhat nostalgic vision, the populists were hardly antimodernist reactionaries. Their hostility to the railroads, for instance, was not inspired by Luddism, but by their objection to the abuse of economic power at the expense of farmers and workers. This led them to argue for new rules and regulations that would finally force the railroads to "deliver on their promise of faster, cheaper, and more equitable access to global markets." The same was true for industrialization. What the populists feared was that industrialization would lead to a massive transfer of economic – and ultimately political -- power from erstwhile small, independent producers to a small group of plutocrats. In response, the populists advanced a range of radical solutions. Perhaps most radical of all was the notion that railroads and other monopolies should be owned and operated by the people via their government.<sup>14</sup> This, of course, exposed them immediately to the charge of being socialists – or worse.

Yet what the populists envisioned was a fundamental reform of the system, rather than its demise. As Charles Postel has convincingly shown, theirs was a vision of an alternative way toward a modern, progressive industrial-capitalist America, more inclusive and cooperative, based on an educated, politically aware citizenry and an active government serving the people and controlled by them (via referenda and initiatives) rather than one that acted as an agency of a small "corporative and wealthy minority."<sup>15</sup> Dismissed as "wild-eyed, rattlebrained fanatics," cranks, and fools "who advocated communism" and to a large extent crushed by the

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<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Gregg Cantrell, "A Host of Sturdy Patriots": The Texas Populists, in David O'Donald Cullen and Kyle G. Wilkinson (eds.) *The Texas Left: The Roots of Lone Star Liberalism*, College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2010, p. 57.

<sup>11</sup> Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009, p. 156.

<sup>12</sup> Ebenezer LaFayette Dohoney, *Political Parties: Their Objects and Uses*, *The Southern Mercury* (Dallas), July 16, 1891, available online at <http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapht185421/m1/6/> (accessed July 20, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Walter T. K. Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 236.

<sup>14</sup> William Peffer, *Populism; Its Rise and Fall*, no. XII – Difference Between Democracy and Populism, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 7, 1899, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 288.

defeat of 1896, the populists nevertheless scored a major and lasting victory.<sup>16</sup> In the decades that followed many of their central demands (e.g., the introduction of a graduated income tax, the regulation of the railroads, the direct election of senators by popular vote) were successively enacted by progressively-minded administrations. As Mary Lease noted in 1915, the seed that the populist movement had sown in the late nineteenth century, had fallen fertile ground.<sup>17</sup>

## Episode II: The Boulangist Crisis

The “Boulangier Affair” came to its final end in September 1891, when General Georges Boulanger, once an acclaimed war hero and Minister of War, committed suicide on the tomb of his mistress in Brussels, his chosen exile. This was an ignominious end for a man who just a few years earlier had been hailed as the “man of Providence” destined to fundamentally revolutionize the political landscape of the French Third Republic (1870-1940). Instead, the Boulangist movement fizzled out as quickly as it had risen to prominence, way before Boulanger’s death. Yet, despite its ephemeral nature, *boulangisme* left a deep and lasting imprint impact on French politics.

The “Boulangier adventure” started in 1896, when the general was nominated Minister of War at the suggestion of the Radical deputy Georges Clemenceau who appreciated Boulanger’s republican convictions, a rarity in a military still largely dominated by monarchist elements. A “charismatic hero on horseback” who understood how to appeal to Parisian crowds, Boulanger soon seemed to confirm all of the negative sentiments Jules Ferry, the former two-time prime minister, had expressed at the time of Boulanger’s nomination.<sup>18</sup> For Ferry, Boulanger was nothing but an “audacious demagogue and seductive orator,” a “dangerous actor” endowed with an “immense vanity” and a gigantic sense of self-importance – and that was only half of the story. The other half, Ferry warned, was a “rare intelligence at the service of unlimited ambition, which informed a “well-conceived plan” which the general unrelentingly pursued.<sup>19</sup> Boulanger’s ministerial colleagues soon came to share Ferry’s judgement. In the spring of 1897, Boulanger was relieved of his duties and sent to the provinces. Soon thereafter he was forced to retire from the military and thus released into civilian life, which, ironically, allowed him to reenter political life.

Starting in 1888, Boulanger’s allies put his name on a series of by-election ballots, all of which he easily won, to a large extent because of the support he garnered among royalist conservatives.<sup>20</sup> The Boulangist wave crested in January 1889, which saw Boulanger carry

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<sup>16</sup> The first quote is from William Allen White’s famous editorial “What’s the Matter With Kansas,” The Emporia Gazette, August 15, 1896, available online at <http://www.journalism.ku.edu/school/waw/writings/waw/newspaper/editorials/whatsthematter.html> (accessed March 18, 2012). The second refers to how eastern media viewed the Populists. Rebecca Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery: Fender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 107

<sup>17</sup> Faith Jaycox, *The Progressive Era*, New York: Facts on File, 2005, p. 88.

<sup>18</sup> Alice L. Conklin, Sarah Fishman, Robert Zaretsky, *France and its Empire since 1870*, second ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, p.84.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Fresnette Pisani-Ferry, *Le Général Boulanger*, Paris: Flammarion, 1969, p.55.

<sup>20</sup> William D. Irvine, *French Royalists and Boulangism*, French Historical Studies, vol. 16, no. 3, 1988, p. 397.

the day in a hotly contested by-election in Paris against an alliance of opponents united for the sole goal of his defeat. At this crucial point, Boulanger's entourage urged the general to act and dare a coup d'état against the parliamentary regime. Boulanger, however, was not convinced, believing instead that the upcoming general election to be held in the fall of 1889 would sweep him into power. A serious miscalculation. Aware of the danger posed by the Boulangist movement, all of the general's political adversaries banded together "using every means possible, legal and extra-legal, to liquidate *boulangisme* before the September-October election."<sup>21</sup> Boulanger was charged by the Minister of the Interior with conspiracy and treason, and issued a warrant of arrest. Instead of facing his detractors, the general chose to flee the country, seeking refuge in Brussels and London. Deprived of its icon, the Boulangist movement was soundly defeated in the fall election and soon disappeared from the political landscape of the Third Republic.

The Boulangist movement owed its dynamic to its ability to mobilize a panoply of disparate groups ranging from provincial peasants to Parisian workers, from staunch monarchists to far-left socialists, all united in their revulsion against "a ruling body monopolized by a corrupt oligarchy." As a populist movement it "sought to give vent to a vox populi that had been stifled by parliamentarism" while promoting its leader as the man of Providence who, "in the role of metaphorical Hercules, would clean the Augean stables."<sup>22</sup> The Boulangist populist mobilization derived its impetus from the confluence of several crises which compromised the legitimacy of the parliamentary regime. One was psychological: France's catastrophic defeat at the hand of the Prussians in the Franco-Prussian war and its loss of Alsace-Lorraine. The traumatism of the national disaster gave rise to wide-spread sentiments of revenge. Among its most prominent champions were Paul Déroulède, leader of the League of Patriots, and the journalist cum novelist Maurice Barrès, both of them prominent figures in the Boulangist movement.<sup>23</sup> What united these sentiments was both a profound sense of national humiliation and an obsession with retaking the two lost provinces from the Germans.

A second was socioeconomic: The 1880s were marked by a severe depression, which affected both agriculture and industry, with devastating social consequences. Under increasing pressure from new competitors in the international market, France suffered from a precipitous fall of its exports. At the same time, French agriculture experienced dramatic losses as a result of competition from cheap imports from overseas. French industry, in turn, faltered, partly because of protectionist barriers keeping French manufactures out of major markets (e.g., the United States), partly because French industrial productivity and technological innovation fell behind its main competitors.<sup>24</sup> Workers and peasants bore the brunt of the depression, with the threat of unemployment, poverty, and misery omnipresent.

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<sup>21</sup> Michel Winock, *Nationalisme, antisémitisme et fascisme en France*, Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 2004, p. 271.

<sup>22</sup> Michel Winock, *Socialism and Boulangism*, in Edward J. Arnold (ed.) *The Development of the Radical Right in France: From Boulanger to Le Pen*, p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Zeev Sternhell, *Maurice Barrès et le nationalisme française*, Paris : Presses de Sciences Po, 1972, ch. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Maurice Levy-Leboyer and François Bourguignon, *L'Économie française au XIXe siècle*, Paris, Economica, 1985, pp. 43-53.

Paris alone, in 1883, counted more than 200,000 unemployed.<sup>25</sup> In response, social tensions significantly mounted, revealing the extent to which French society had become divided.

The anxieties and animosities engendered by these crises led to profound and widespread disenchantment with the governing Republican elite, which soon turned into a repudiation of the parliamentary regime. On the one hand, there was growing disgust with a government that seemed far too accommodating to Bismarck; on the other hand, there was deeply-felt anger toward those in charge who appeared to be indifferent to the suffering of ordinary people and dragging their feet on the question of social reform. The Boulangist movement benefited from both. Boulanger not only promoted himself as the resolute defender of French national pride in the face of German provocation (at the time of Schnaebelé incidence); he also marketed himself as a man of the people, who, as his 1888 program claimed, was on the side of those who suffered, who were desperately looking for work. It mattered little that Boulanger's program was rather short on concrete measures to alleviate the socioeconomic crisis.<sup>26</sup>

This was hardly surprising. Rooted in traditional radical republicanism (the Boulangist deputies had their seats on the far left in parliament), ideological home of many of its closest circle, but to a large extent dependent on the financial support of royalist sponsors, Boulangisme could not but promote itself as ideologically amorphous – neither left nor right. If there was a common denominator, it was the fundamental rejection of the existing parliamentary regime.<sup>27</sup> Boulangist propaganda was relentless in attacking the parliamentary regime, characterized as a corrupt oligarchy; an assembly of irresponsible, ineffective “*tripoteurs*” (shady dealers), indifferent to the concerns of ordinary people; thieves and “vampires” (in collusion with “Israelite” circles – an association increasingly evoked by the Boulangist propaganda) accused of sucking out what was best in France and leading the country to ruin.<sup>28</sup> Corruption scandals did their part to lend credence to the charge that this was a “republic of thieves” desperately in need of a national savior who would sweep out the stable (the broom was the symbol of the Boulangist movement) clean up the mess, thus bringing about national renewal and restoring honor to the republic.<sup>29</sup> To accomplish this

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<sup>25</sup> Hubert Bonin, La grande depression française de la fin du dix-neuvième siècle : Réflexion sur la datation et sur sa fonction, Histoire, Économie et Société, vol. 6, no. 4, 1987, p. 516.

<sup>26</sup> Zeev Sternhell, Barrès et la gauche, du boulangisme à *la concorde* (1889-1895), Le Mouvement social, no. 75, April – June 1971, pp. 85-89 ; Jean Garrigues, Le boulangisme comme mouvement social, ou les ambiguïtés d'un social-populisme, in Michel Pigenet et Danielle Tartakowsky (eds.), Histoire des mouvements sociaux en France, de 1814 à nos jours, Paris : La Découverte, 2012, pp. 238-248.

<sup>27</sup> See Jean Garrigues, Le boulangisme est-il antiparlementaire? Parlement[s], no. 3, 2013, pp. 49-58.

<sup>28</sup> According to Zeev Sternhell, anti-Semitism “was primarily a feature of the Boulangist left.” Boulanger himself was not anti-Semitic and “refused form of any alliance with anti-Semitism.” Zeev Sternhell, The Roots of Popular Anti-Semitism in the Third Republic, in Herbert A. Strauss (ed.), Hostages of Modernization: Studies on Modern Antisemitism 1870-1933/1939, Berlin/New York: deGruyter, 1992, p. 464; on the antisemitism of the Blanquist left, see Patrick H. Hutton, The Cult of the Revolutionary Tradition: The Blanquists in French Politics, 1864-1893, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981, pp. 158-159.

<sup>29</sup> Marc Angenot, «Chapitre 33. La propagande boulangiste», Médias 19 [En ligne], Publications, 1889. Un état du discours social, I. Champ politique, mis à jour le : 08/05/2013, URL : <http://www.medias19.org/index.php?id=12316>; see also



goal, Boulangism advanced a “heterodox democratic project” of a “plebiscitary and integrative democracy underpinning a strong state legitimized by universal suffrage.”<sup>30</sup>

Boulangism represented the prototype of successful populist mobilization at a crucial period of transition from elite-dominated to mass politics. Backed by financially potent, predominantly royalist, sponsors (notably the Duchess of Uzès) the Boulangists were in a position to far outspend their political rivals. The general’s 1889 campaign was masterfully orchestrated by Georges Thiébaud, a leading Bonapartist figure who “employed all the techniques of modern mass politics – advertising, sloganeering, spectacle – to fasten the public attention on the General’s personality.”<sup>31</sup> The campaign employed dozens of billposters to plaster the walls of the city with millions of posters extolling the general.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, peddlers were sent out into the countryside to distribute a whole slew of visual propaganda material, ranging from “brilliantly colored” portraits of the General on horseback to iconographic depictions of the General, “draped in the Tricolor, nailed to the cross.”<sup>33</sup> The Boulangist press disseminated dozens of poems, commissioned by a close friend and financier of Boulanger, glorifying “*notre brav’ général.*” And “an army of ambulant merchants” set out to hawk the text of popular songs eulogizing Boulanger.<sup>34</sup>

Boulanger’s triumph in the election was a triumph of a populist marketing campaign that almost exclusively focused on exploiting widespread popular sentiments of socioeconomic malaise at the service of mobilizing popular resentments against the political regime. The results revealed the extent of disenchantment among the popular classes -- and particularly urban workers --, who in large numbers defected from the established left parties to Boulanger: The Boulanger strongholds were predominantly located in the working-class areas of Paris and the industrial suburbs.<sup>35</sup>

Despite its rapid decline following Boulanger’s flight into exile, the Boulangist movement left a significant mark on the subsequent history of French politics. As a popular movement that “took seriously the task of integrating the ‘people’ into the political process, Boulangism prefigured the mass movements of the twentieth century.”<sup>36</sup> Ironically, in this way, Boulangism, whose main goal had been to stamp out the parliamentary regime, contributed to the consolidation of the reviled Third Republic. In fact, it was the Boulangist crisis, which effected the “assimilation of the republic and the parliamentary regime.”<sup>37</sup> This, in turn, forced the major political forces to reorient themselves programmatically, from the far left,

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<sup>30</sup> Guy Hermet, *Les populismes dans le monde: Une histoire sociologique XIXe-XXe siècle*, Paris : Fayard, 2001, p. 182.

<sup>31</sup> Philip Nord, *The Politics of Resentment: Shopkeeper Protest in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, p. 304.

<sup>32</sup> Angenot, «Chapitre 33.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Burns, *Rural Society and French Politics: Boulangism and the Dreyfus Affair, 1886-1900*, p, 70.

<sup>34</sup> Marc Angenot, *La poésie socialiste au temps de la Deuxième Internationale*, *Discours social*, vol. 33, 2010, p. 11 Jean Garrigues, *Boulanger, ou la fabrique de l’homme providentielle*, *Parlement[s]*, no. 1, 2010, pp. 17-19.

<sup>35</sup> Jean Garrigues, *Le boulangisme comme mouvement social, ou les ambiguïtés d’un social-populisme*, in Michel Pigenent and Danielle Tartakowsky (eds.), *Histoire des mouvements sociaux en France de 1814 à nos jours*, Paris : La Découverte, 2012, p. 245.

<sup>36</sup> Patrick H. Hutton, *Popular Boulangism and the Advent of Mass Politics in France, 1886-90*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 11, 1976, p. 86.

<sup>37</sup> Miche Winock, *Nationalisme, antisémitisme et fascisme en France*, p. 273.



important bastion of Boulangism, which considered direct democracy an indispensable pillar of the republic and still harbored dreams of revolution, to the royalist right, for whom the end of Boulangism, the movement they had so lavishly financed, meant abandoning the dream of a restoration of the monarchy. Last but not least, out of the ideological brew characteristic of the Boulangist period, with its blend of populist socialism and virulent nationalism, its antiparliamentarism suffused with a strong dose of antisemitism, emerged a new modern far right, which would continue to pose a fundamental challenge to the democratic order.

### Episode III: The Gaitanista Movement

On April 9, 1948, Jorge Eliécer Gaitan, at the time one of Colombia's most prominent political figures, was shot dead in the streets of Bogotá by an apparently mentally-unstable gunman, himself lynched by an enraged crowd shortly after the assassination. Gaitan's murder triggered a massive riot in the capital (*el Bogotazo*), which resulted in hundreds of deaths and left the center of Bogotá in ruins. Gaitan's assassination had a lasting impact on the country. It killed "the hope of a peaceful transition to a more open, participatory, and democratic society," instead setting Colombia on a course of persistent violence that has lasted until today.<sup>38</sup>

Daniel Pécaut has characterized the Gaitanista movement as "one of the most characteristic examples of a populist configuration."<sup>39</sup> Because of Gaitan's tragic end, however, it has commanded considerably less academic attention than the populist mobilizations in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Peru.<sup>40</sup> The Gaitanista movement, unlike similar movements elsewhere in Latin America, never established an organizational form, never managed to get institutionalized. During the period of intense violence following his assassination many of the movement's leaders met a violent death. Others took up arms and went underground.

Unlike other prominent populist leaders, Gaitan was a political insider. A leading, albeit unconventional, figure of Colombia's Liberal Party, Gaitan held a number of high-level positions, among them a short stint as mayor of Bogota and, equally short, minister of education. Yet, because of his modest origins, mestizo background (which earned him the disdainful epithet "negro Gaitán" from his detractors), and his heterodox socialist convictions, Gaitan was very much of an outsider in the party. For much of his career, Gaitan sought to transcend the rigid bipolarization (i.e., Liberals versus Conservatives), which structured Colombia's political system. He even founded an independent political movement with the intent "to push Liberalism left." After the Liberals appropriated much of his program, Gaitan returned to the Liberal fold.<sup>41</sup> In 1944, he started campaigning for the presidential election of 1946. However, his candidacy was largely undermined by the party leadership, which instead

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<sup>38</sup> <http://uwpress.wisc.edu/books/0800.htm>.

<sup>39</sup> Daniel Pécaut, *Populismo imposible y violencia: el caso colombiano*, Estudios Políticos, no. 16, January-June 2000, p. 51, available online at <http://aprendeenlinea.udea.edu.co/revistas/index.php/estudiospoliticos/article/view/16703>.

<sup>40</sup> See, for instance, Flavia Freidenberg, *La tentación populista: Una vía al poder en América Latina*, Madrid: Editorial Síntesis, 2007, which lists Gaitanismo among "other experiences."

<sup>41</sup> W. John Green, "Vibrations of the Collective": The Popular Ideology of Gaitanismo on Colombia's Atlantic Coast, 1944-1948, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. 76, no. 2, 1996, p. 289.

chose the mainstream Gabriel Turbay as its official candidate. In response, Gaitan launched a massive popular mobilization, promoting himself as the “people’s candidate” who would bring about a moral and democratic restoration of the republic. With the Liberal vote divided between the two candidates, the party lost the election to the Conservatives. The following year, after finally gaining control of the party Gaitan launched a new mass mobilization supposed to win him the presidential election of 1950 – a campaign tragically cut short by his assassination.

Like other populist movements in Latin America, gaitanismo derived its impetus from its full frontal assault of the “oligarchy,” defined primarily as the country’s political class. In typically populist fashion, the gaitanista discourse pitted the oligarchy, a small, corrupt, “unproductive and meritless elite” against the vast majority of ordinary people, whose “productive impulses” were stifled by the oligarchy.<sup>42</sup> Gaitán defined the resulting antagonism in terms of a fundamental confrontation between the “political country” (el país político), i.e., the oligarchy, and the “national country” (el país nacional), i.e., the people (el pueblo). In this way, Gaitán not only established the distinction between oligarchy and ordinary people, but also elevated the people in moral terms, reflected in the slogan “the people are superior to their leaders” (el pueblo es superior a sus dirigentes). At the same time, gaitanismo sought to transcend the political partisan divisions and unite the people behind the gaitanista project. As Gaitán famously put it, there was no difference between “the malaria of the liberal peasants and the malaria of the conservatives,” and “hunger does not have a political color.”<sup>43</sup> They were united in common misery and had a common enemy, the oligarchy which was only interested in enriching itself and could care less about the plight of ordinary people.

Gaitanismo occurred at a time of profound change throughout most of Latin America, which also, albeit to a lesser extent than other countries, also affected Colombia: industrialization and urbanization engendered far-reaching sociostructural and sociocultural transformations, which generated new pressures on the political system to which the political establishment was loath to respond. In addition, worsening economic conditions reflected in a dramatic rise in the cost of living increased popular disaffection with those in power.<sup>44</sup> Against that, gaitanismo offered a relatively comprehensive and coherent vision for the modernization of the country, promoted by Gaitán in numerous speeches. Central to this vision was a staunch belief in social justice as a precondition for democracy and social progress.<sup>45</sup> As the movement’s political platform of 1947 put it, there was no political democracy without economic democracy.<sup>46</sup> As long as the people lacked the basics in terms of health, education,

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<sup>42</sup> Herbert Braun, *The Assassination of Gaitán*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. 101; Pécaut, p. 54.

<sup>43</sup> Malik Tahar Chaouch, *La presencia de una ausencia: Jorge Eliécer Gaitán y las desventuras del populismo en Colombia*, p. 256 ; Pécaut, p. 53.

<sup>44</sup> In 1947, according to a contemporary observer, the cost of living index in Bogotá rose more than 30 points to an all-time high. Donald Marquard Dozer, *Roots of Revolution in Latin America*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1949, p. 285.

<sup>45</sup> W. John Green, “Vibrations of the Collective”: The Popular Ideology of Gaitanismo on Colombia’s Atlantic Coast, 1944-1948, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. 76, no. 2, 1996, p. 305.

<sup>46</sup> Richard E. Sharpless, *Gaitán of Colombia: A Political Biography*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978, p. 131.

and economic power, they lacked the fundamental capabilities necessary to participate in the political process.

In order to promote social and economic progress, gaitanismo advocated a strong, interventionist state that was in a position “to promote industrial and agricultural development” and implement “major economic and social policies.” Many of its proposals aimed at directing investments into productive enterprises that would create employment and contribute to economic growth. At the same time, the program called, among other things, for the protection of domestic industry, the prohibition of monopolies, and the introduction of price controls on basic necessities, such as food staples, transportation, and rents.<sup>47</sup> Although objectively, this mixture of regulation and intervention was hardly particularly radical, it would have entailed a dramatic departure from the existing model and thus posed a far-reaching challenge to the political establishment, ultimately averted by Gaitán’s death.<sup>48</sup>

During the short span of its existence, the gaitanista movement managed to mobilize a broad range of social groups, both urban and rural. Gaitán’s appeal to the masses stemmed to a large extent from his ability to address ordinary people in their own language, evoking images of daily life. An indefatigable orator, Gaitán had the ability to use “words as weapons,” turn a phrase, and create a symbiotic relationship between himself and the crowd,” reflected in his famous slogan, “Yo no soy un hombre, yo soy un pueblo.”<sup>49</sup> The appeal of the gaitanista mobilization lay finally also in the fact that Gaitán accorded his followers recognition and dignity by, for instance, insisting that the “crowds on the streets,” which the political establishment both despised and feared, constituted a vital part of true democracy – the achievement of which constituted, together with social justice, the main tenets of gaitanismo.<sup>50</sup>

#### Episode 4: The Lega Nord

In April 2012, Umberto Bossi, until then the undisputed leader of the Italian Lega Nord, resigned his position as the Federal Secretary of the party in response to financial irregularities benefiting members of his own family. This was rather ironic, given the fact that the Lega Nord owed its dramatic rise in Italian politics in the early 1990s to a large extent to the corruption scandals that led to the collapse of the postwar party system and the disappearance of the major established parties. It took the party some time to recover from the fallout of the financial scandal and Bossi’s resignation and reestablish itself as a major force in Italian politics. By 2015, the Lega Nord had not only regained its former strength in its traditional strongholds in northern Italy but made significant inroads in other parts of the country.

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<sup>47</sup> Robert Dix, *The Varieties of Populism: The Case of Colombia*, *The Western Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 31, no.3 (September 1978), p. 346; Sharpless, p. 132.

<sup>48</sup> Frank Molano Camnargo, *La coyuntura histórica del asesinato de Jorge Eliécer Gaitán Ayala*, Ciudad Paz-Ando, vol. 1, no. 2, 2008, pp. 37-50.

<sup>49</sup> Braun, pp. 99-103.

<sup>50</sup> Braun, p. 102; Green, p. 305; see also Carlos de la Torre, *Populist Seduction in Latin America*, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010, p. 17.

The Lega Nord is the result of the merger of various regional leagues that emerged in northern Italy at the end of the 1970s (Lega Veneta) and the early 1980s (Lega Lombarda). In late 1989, Umberto Bossi, who headed the Lega Lombarda, proposed to form a single organization, the Lega Nord. The merger was ratified at the new party's first federal congress in 1991, shortly after the Lega Lombarda's dramatic gains in the regional elections of 1990 in Lombardy and a significant upsurge of support for the other leagues in the rest of the north. Shortly after its foundation, the Lega Nord started its mobilization campaign for the upcoming parliamentary election of 1992. The campaign gained momentum from a series of revelations of massive political corruption (aka Tangentopoli), which led to the arrest of a growing number of local and national politicians, highly publicized on nightly TV. The scandals contributed to an "electoral earthquake," with the Lega Nord gaining a fifth of the vote in the north, largely at the expense of the Christian Democrats and Socialists. The ensuing collapse of the political establishment and its replacement by new political movements, such as Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and Gianfranco's Alleanza nazionale, promised new opportunities for the Lega Nord for the new parliamentary elections to be held in 1994. Despite the fact, however, that as a result of the Lega Nord's alliance with Berlusconi, the party did well in the elections, Bossi soon came to realize that Berlusconi's popularity posed a fundamental threat to the Lega Nord. After a number of attempts to gain room to maneuver (by, among other things, making overtures to the left), Bossi finally decided that his best option was to throw in his lot with Berlusconi, a political and personal alliance, which would last until his resignation in 2002.

The Lega Nord's campaigns of the early 1990s combined virtually all elements of a typical populist mobilization: a charismatic leader, who used ordinary language, often interlaced with vulgarities to appeal to ordinary people; a discourse that clearly identified what had gone wrong in the country and who was to be blamed for it; and finally the presentation of a straightforward, easily understood remedy supposed to solve all the problems. As Bossi relentlessly maintained, the Lega had one central objective, the radical transformation of the Italian political system.<sup>51</sup> This meant the dissolution of the Italian centralized state to be replaced by a modern federalist state. Federalism was not only supposed to resolve the main problems plaguing the north, such as the transfer of resources via taxes from the productive north to the rest of the country; it was also supposed to break the political class's monopolistic hold on power, eliminate the existing system of clientelism and patronage (represented as "Roma Ladrona" in Lega propaganda) and replace the existing "partitocracy" with a genuine "democracy for the citizens."<sup>52</sup> The Lega program, Bossi maintained, aimed at bringing about a comprehensive revolution, involving all aspects of the Italian institutional, socioeconomic, sociocultural, and sociopolitical system. Its ultimate objective: to advance the cause of liberty, which, in Bossi's view, had replaced social justice as "the engine of

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<sup>51</sup> "L'obiettivo della Lega è rifondare lo Stato." Umberto Bossi with Daniele Vimercati, *La rivoluzione*, Milan: Sperling & Kupfer, 1993, p. 143.

<sup>52</sup> Intervento del Segretario Federale, On. Umberto Bossi, Congresso Federale 25 ottobre 1998, available online at [http://www.leganord.org/phocadownload/ilmovimento/Presidente\\_Federale/discorsi\\_assemblee/1998\\_25ottobre\\_congresso.pdf](http://www.leganord.org/phocadownload/ilmovimento/Presidente_Federale/discorsi_assemblee/1998_25ottobre_congresso.pdf)

history.”<sup>53</sup> In practical terms, the promotion of liberty meant above all freeing the productive forces in the advanced north from the burden inflicted on them by Italy’s unproductive, protected, and subsidized sectors.<sup>54</sup> In case of failure, there was only one alternative – outright secession of the northern regions.

The electoral success of the Lega Nord during the period of massive populist mobilization in the early 1990s depended to a large extent on Bossi’s ability to give expression to what Ilvo Diamanti has characterized as “il male del nord.”<sup>55</sup> With his aura of credibility and authenticity, Bossi managed to articulate the diffuse sentiments of disaffection and resentment that pervaded large parts of northern society – with respect to the established political parties, the shortcomings of the bureaucracy and infrastructure, widespread corruption, the Mezzogiorno, and, last but not least, the growing number of immigrants from outside the EU (extracomunitari).<sup>56</sup> The Lega adopted the question of immigration right from the beginning and quickly established itself as the most intransigent advocate of highly restrictive immigration controls. For, as Bossi wrote in 1992, a country that was not in a position to provide enough resources for its own people, hardly was in a position to offer these resources “to millions of immigrants.” If Italy had opened its doors to “a million of potential unemployed,” it was because there was a lack of “political will” to stem the tide. There obviously was a plan to transform Italy into a “multiracial, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious society,” which, Bossi charged, was “closer to hell than to paradise.”<sup>57</sup>

Immigration was not central to the Lega Nord’s populist mobilization of the early 1990s. As it became more and more clear, however, that the party’s main objective, federalism, was not going to be attained and that there was not going to be a revolution, the party increasingly focused on the question of immigration in order to boost electoral support. At the same time, the Lega Nord established itself firmly in the institutional structure of Berlusconi’s republic, its organization getting increasingly dependent on public financial support. The party’s newspaper, *La Padania*, alone, received more than 50 million euro between 1997 and 2013 from what once was denounced as “Roma ladrona.”<sup>58</sup>

## Episode 5: Podemos

As indicated above, Podemos was founded in 2014 by intellectuals and academics (most prominently Pablo Iglesias, Íñigo Errejón, and Juan Carlos Monedero), some of them

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<sup>53</sup> Bossi, *La rivoluzione*, p. 15.

<sup>54</sup> Bossi, *La rivoluzione*, pp. 179-180.

<sup>55</sup> Ilvo Diamanti, *Il male del Nord: Lega, localismo, secessione*, Rome: Donzelli, 1996.

<sup>56</sup> Oliver Schmidtke and Carlo E. Ruzza, *Regionalistischer Protest als „Life Politics“: Die Formierung einer sozialen Bewegung: die Lega Lombarda*, *Soziale Welt*, vol. 44, no. 1, 1993, p.8; Dwayne Woods, *The Crisis of Center-Periphery Integration in Italy and the Rise of Regional Populism: The Lombard League*, *Comparative Politics*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1995, p. 197.

<sup>57</sup> Umberto Bossi, *Vento dal nord*, Milan: Sperling & Kupfer, 1992, pp. 147-147; for a discussion of the Lega’s positions on immigration see Roberto Biorcio, *La Padania promessa*, Milan: il Saggiatore, 1997, pp. 145-165.

<sup>58</sup> Francesco Giurato and Antonio Pitoni, *Soldi ai partiti, 180 milioni di rimborsi: così la Lega ha spremuto “Roma ladrona,”* *il Fatto Quotidiano*, April 13, 2015, available online at <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/04/13/soldi-partiti-180-milioni-rimborsi-cosi-lega-spremuta-roma-ladrona/1583791/> (accessed August 21, 2015).

professors of political science, as a movement of the populist left. They drew their inspiration from three sources: first, from the experience of Latin American neopopulist movements in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador; second, from the organizational strategies of the indignados (aka Movimiento 15-M) movement, which, starting in spring 2011, had launched a series of demonstrations against the austerity politics of the conservative Rajoy government; third, from social theorists such as Antonio Gramsci and Ernesto Laclau, whose conceptual work on hegemony (Gramsci) and the “formation of an internal antagonistic frontier” (Laclau) provided central building blocks for a political strategy of populist insurgency.

The dramatic rise of Podemos has to be seen against the background of a profound post-2008 economic crisis, reflected in mass unemployment, particularly among the young, and levels of inequality higher than in any other country in Western Europe that only accelerated social divisions.<sup>59</sup> The result was a profound political crisis, reflected in massive disaffection with the two major political parties, marred by a series of major corruption scandals. As the country’s leading newspaper, *El País*, put it in the summer of 2015, in Spain, corruption “is a characteristic of the system,” pervading all major political parties as well as all major institutions.<sup>60</sup> A survey taken at the time of the European elections showed that Spanish citizens ranked corruption and fraud second (36 percent) only to unemployment (81 percent) among the principal problems afflicting the country. Politicians, politicians and the political parties followed closely behind (26 percent).<sup>61</sup> In the course of the year, concern about corruption increased dramatically. In November, more than 60 percent ranked it among the most important problems.<sup>62</sup> As a result, there was a massive increase in disenchantment with the political establishment, the political parties, politics in general.<sup>63</sup> In fact, in no other country in Western Europe, dissatisfaction with the workings of democracy was as pronounced as in Spain, a fact not lost on the founders of Podemos.<sup>64</sup> Under these circumstances, Podemos’s attack against the political class, which on the one hand relentlessly pursued a politics of austerity at the expense of ordinary citizens while lining its

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<sup>59</sup> Alejandro Bolaños, España sufre la crisis más desigual, *El País*, June 19, 2014, available online [http://economia.elpais.com/economia/2014/06/19/actualidad/1403175466\\_879515.html](http://economia.elpais.com/economia/2014/06/19/actualidad/1403175466_879515.html) (accessed August 23, 2015).

<sup>60</sup> José Álvarez Junco, Parábola de la corrupción, *El País*, July 15, 2015, available online at [http://elpais.com/elpais/2015/07/09/opinion/1436456462\\_170609.html](http://elpais.com/elpais/2015/07/09/opinion/1436456462_170609.html) (accessed August 23, 2015).

<sup>61</sup> See CIS, Barómetro de Mayo 2014, May 2014, available online at [http://datos.cis.es/pdf/Es3024mar\\_A.pdf](http://datos.cis.es/pdf/Es3024mar_A.pdf)

<sup>62</sup> CIS, Barómetro de noviembre 2014, study no. 3045, November 2014, p. 4, available online at [http://www.cis.es/cis/export/sites/default/-Archivos/Marginales/3040\\_3059/3045/es3045mar.pdf](http://www.cis.es/cis/export/sites/default/-Archivos/Marginales/3040_3059/3045/es3045mar.pdf) (accessed August 17, 2015).

<sup>63</sup> The only country where political disenchantment was higher was Greece. See Klaus Armingeon and Kai Guthmann, Democracy in crisis? The declining support for national democracy in European countries, 2007–2011, *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 53, 2014, p. 432.

<sup>64</sup> Ignacio Jurado, La insatisfacción con la democracia en España, *eldiario.es*, December 16, 2014, available online at [http://www.eldiario.es/piedrasdepapel/insatisfaccion-democracia-Espana\\_6\\_335676450.html](http://www.eldiario.es/piedrasdepapel/insatisfaccion-democracia-Espana_6_335676450.html) (accessed August 28, 2015); Carolina Bescansa, one of the founding members of Podemos, conducted an investigation in 2013, which revealed the extent of popular political disenchantment and convinced her that the time was propitious for a movement such as Podemos. Carolina Bescansa, *Le succès social de Podemos*, in *Podemos: Sûr que nous pouvons*, Montpellier : Indigène éditions, 2015, p. 80.

own pockets, fell on fertile ground. It was Podemos's self-declared goal to convert widespread public indignation into radical political change.<sup>65</sup>

The core of Podemos's strategy was to mobilize ordinary people, victimized by the economic crisis and government austerity policies, by bringing together disparate popular claims and demands and focusing them against a common enemy. In this way, the leaders of Podemos sought to provoke the establishment of Laclau's internal antagonistic frontier pitting ordinary people against the ruling class (to which Podemos referred as *la casta*), accused of ignoring the plight of ordinary people and instead governing "in the service of the economic elites."<sup>66</sup> Crucial for the success of this strategy was, as Pablo Iglesias has insisted, to break the dominant narrative (i.e., the cultural and political mechanisms used by the ruling class to justify the existing political and economic order), which secured *la casta's* hold on power and assured its political and cultural hegemony. For Podemos to win the struggle for hegemony and bring about real change, it would have to be able "to impose new interpretations of the situation and new possibilities of transformation" with the people (*el pueblo*) playing an active role.<sup>67</sup>

The discussion paper for the party's economic program provides an illustration of this strategy. Written by two well-known left-wing economics professors, it argued for democratizing the economy as the only viable way to get out of the profound socioeconomic crisis afflicting the country.<sup>68</sup> What differentiated the paper was its "reading of the causes of the Great Recession," which marked a fundamental departure from the established interpretation which lay the blame at excessive public spending. Against that, the paper's authors charged that the crisis was the "consequence of the neoliberal policies (...) which had engendered a massive increase in inequalities." This was the result of a significant lowering of real wages resulting in falling demand and a great increase in profits, particularly in the financial sector -- a result of the growing indebtedness of the population and the dramatic increase in financial speculation, which, once the bubble burst, provoked the Great Recession.<sup>69</sup> The authors' alternative interpretation of the crisis led them to advance policies that were diametrically opposed to the ruling consensus: breaking with the politics of

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<sup>65</sup> See the January 2014 manifesto Mover ficha: convertir la indignación en cambio político, available online at <http://www.cuartopoder.es/alsoldelacalle/files/2014/01/Mover-ficha-convertir-la-indignacio%CC%81n-en-cambio-poli%CC%81tico.pdf> (accessed August 21, 2015).

<sup>66</sup> Pablo Iglesias, *Disputar la democracia: Política para tiempos de crisis*, Madrid : Ediciones Akal, 2014, p. 155 ; see also Íñigo Errejón's eulogy for Ernesto Laclau, *Muere Ernesto Laclau, teórico de la hegemonía*, Público, April 14, 2014, available online at <http://www.publico.es/actualidad/muere-ernesto-laclau-teorico-hegemonia.html> (accessed August 21, 2015).

<sup>67</sup> Pablo Iglesias, *Guerra de trincheras y estrategia electoral*, May 3, 2015, available online at <http://blogs.publico.es/pablo-iglesias/1025/guerra-de-trincheras-y-estrategia-electoral/> (accessed August 21, 2015).

<sup>68</sup> Vicenç Navarro y Juan Torres López, *Un proyecto económico para la gente*, November 2014, available online at <https://web-podemos.s3.amazonaws.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/DocumentoEconomicoNavarroTorres.pdf> (accessed August 16, 2015).

<sup>69</sup> Vicenç Navarro, *La cobertura mediática sesgada del programa económico de Podemos*, University of Barcelona, May 8, 2015, available online at <http://www.vnavarro.org/?p=12102> (accessed August 19, 2015); see also Fernando Luengo Escalonilla and Ignacio Álvarez Peralta, *¿Podemos permitirnos la desigualdad?* Es País, October 8. 2014.



austerity; promoting demand via public spending; increasing taxes on the rich; combating tax fraud; extending and strengthening the social welfare state – policies which drew their inspiration to a large extent from the Scandinavian model.

At the time of its founding, the leaders of Podemos believed that there was a historical opportunity for political change. They were convinced that Spain was experiencing a “regime crisis.” With movements such as the *indignados* challenging the dominant official narrative, there had opened up space for a populist discourse of the left. A political discourse, however, would only reach ordinary people, if it managed “to establish a certain identity between your analysis and what the majority feels,” if it was inspired by common sense rather than dry, academic theory. The key to success lay in “making “common sense” go in a direction of change.”<sup>70</sup> This explains the central importance leadership has played in Podemos. For in order to mobilize ordinary citizens for change, Podemos needed to translate “complex diagnostics” into easily understood narratives to be diffused via the media. This became the task of Pablo Iglesias, the telegenic leader of the party, whose prominent visibility in the media and his ability to evoke “emotions and the symbolic” became the “most powerful communicative tool” for the party’s populist campaigns.<sup>71</sup> The party’s results in the 2014 European elections, roughly one year after its foundation – it received about 8 percent of the vote, which translated into five seats in the European Parliament – was a first indication that the strategy worked. In the months that followed, the party’s mobilization generated a groundswell of support at the polls, which for a time elevated Podemos beyond the 25-percent mark. At the same time, some of its new narrative, such as the notion of *la casta*, entered the common vocabulary while its analysis and demands provoked widespread debate in the mass media and forced the established parties to respond.

### The Logic of Populist Mobilizations

In the remainder of this paper I will briefly explore what lessons can be drawn from the five cases outlined above with respect to the logic of populist mobilizations. My primary interest is not in arriving at a new definition of populism or a new interpretation of its nature. Rather, I am interested in the question which circumstances and mechanisms might account for the appeal of populist mobilization.<sup>72</sup>

Any analysis of instances of populist mobilization should start with an investigation of the contextual conditions and historical conjunctures that prepare their ground and allow them to flourish.<sup>73</sup> More often than not, populism is associated with socioeconomic crises, which

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<sup>70</sup> Pablo Iglesias, The Left Can Win, Jacobin Magazine, September 12, 2014, available online at <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/12/pablo-iglesias-podemos-left-speech/> (accessed August 21, 2015).

<sup>71</sup> Íñigo Errejón, Qué es “Podemos”? Le Monde diplomatique, July 16, 2014, available online at <http://www.monde-diplomatique.es/?url=articulo/0000856412872168186811102294251000/?articulo=8c640f81-5ccc-4723-911e-71e45da1deca> (accessed August 23, 2015). See also Pablo Iglesias, Understanding Podemos, New Left Review, No. 93, May/June 2015, pp. 14-18.

<sup>72</sup> For a similar approach with different case studies see Takis S. Pappas, Populism Emergent: A Framework for Analyzing its Contexts, Mechanics, and Outcomes, Florence: EUI Working Papers, RSCAS 2012/01.

<sup>73</sup> Marco Palacios, Populistas – el poder de las palabras: Estudios de Política, Bogotá : Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2011, p. 63.

quickly translate into political crises. As we have seen, late nineteenth-century agrarian Populism in the United States and Boulangism in France occurred during a period of severe economic depressions; the emergence of Podemos has come in the wake of the Great Recession of 2008. In each of these cases, socioeconomic crisis quickly turned into a crisis of the established political parties and political representation in general. In the remaining two cases, populist mobilization was a direct response to a political crisis. Gaitanismo was part of a larger wave of populist mobilizations in Latin America, which was “intrinsically related to the crisis of these oligarchic regimes.” A direct response to “a crisis of political incorporation” of newly emerging social groups, they represented “a democratizing reaction against the shortcomings of the liberal, representative regimes of the oligarchic order.”<sup>74</sup> The rise of *leghismo* in northern Italy was intricately connected to the severe crisis of legitimacy of the postwar political system, which ultimately led to the collapse of the traditional party system.

Populist mobilization relies to a large extent on the appeal to diffuse sentiments of resentment. In fact, the Canadian critical theorist Marc Angenot ranks populism, together with nationalism, among his “ideologies of *ressentiment*” the pernicious influence and impact of which he sets out to expose.<sup>75</sup> In Angenot’s reading, resentment is nothing but vindictiveness and rancor and thus an entirely negative emotion, a pathetic weapon of the weak. This is a reading, which is grounded in Nietzsche, but which can also be found, at least in part, in Adam Smith, who classified resentment among the “unsocial” passions, together with hatred and spite.<sup>76</sup> More recent interpretations of resentment present it in a more positive light.

The philosopher Jeffrey Murphy comes to the defense of resentment as an affirmation of “respect for self and respect for the moral order.” In fact, Murphy goes on to charge that “lack of resentment reveals a servile personality -- a personality lacking in respect for himself and respect for his rights and status as a free and equal moral agent.”<sup>77</sup> What sustains resentment, the philosopher Amélie Rorty has noted, are “claims of rights, benefits, or privileges that seem unfairly distributed” – the result of “intentional malevolence or collusive intrigue.”<sup>78</sup> This suggests that resentment is intrinsically linked to the questions of power and social justice. As such, as the philosopher Robert Solomon maintains, it “involves a kind of blame and personal outrage, an outward projection, an overwhelming sense of injustice.” From this it follows that justice “requires taking resentment seriously.”<sup>79</sup> The rehabilitation of resentment has to a significant extent been prompted by John Rawls’s influential *Theory of*

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<sup>74</sup> Enrique Peruzzotti, *Populism in Democratic Times: Populism, Representative Democracy, and the Debate on Democratic Deepening*, in Carlos de la Torre and Cynthia J. Arnson (eds.), *Latin American Populism in the Twenty-First Century*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013, p. 73.

<sup>75</sup> Marc Angenot, *Les ideologies du ressentiment*, Montreal: XYZ éditeur, 1996, pp. 51-52.

<sup>76</sup> See Alice MacLachlan, *Resentment and moral judgment in Smith and Butler*, in Vivienne Brown and Samuel Fleischacker (eds.) *The Adam Smith Review*, vol. 5: *Essays commemorating the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, London: Routledge, 2010, pp. 161-177.

<sup>77</sup> Jeffrey G. Murphy, *Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Responding to Evil: A Philosophical Overview*, *Fordham Urban Law Journal*, vol. 27, no. 5, 1999, p. 1359.

<sup>78</sup> Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, *The Dramas of Resentment*, *The Yale Review*, vol. 88, no 3, July 2000, pp. 92-93.

<sup>79</sup> Robert C. Solomon, *One Hundred Years of Resentiment: Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals*, in Richard Schacht (ed.) *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, pp. 103, 119.

*Justice*. What distinguishes resentment and its close cousin, indignation, from emotions such as anger is that resentment “always claims to rest on moral principle” for justification.<sup>80</sup> For Rawls, resentment and indignation rank among what he calls “moral emotions” since they make “reference to an acknowledged right or wrong” and “invoke the concept of right.” What distinguishes the two emotions is that resentment is “aroused by what we regard as wrongs done to ourselves” while indignation “is concerned with wrongs done to others.”<sup>81</sup>

Populist mobilizations derive much of their energy from the ability to tap into that “overwhelming sense of injustice” and powerlessness that characterizes both resentment and indignation. The populist revolt of the early 1890s in the United States is a case in point. It was fueled by moral outrage and “righteous indignation” in the face of an “industrial capitalism running rampant, growing callous, and becoming each year more antidemocratic,” which left more and more citizens “impoverished, voiceless, and degraded,” while a small minority, as the author of the Omaha Platform put it, appropriated the “fruits of the toil of millions” in order to “build up colossal fortunes (...) unprecedented in the history of mankind.”<sup>82</sup> The same combination of moral outrage and righteous indignation in the face of rampant corruption and blatant social injustice has prepared the ground for Podemos’s populist mobilization in Spain, which has ridden the wave of widespread disaffection with the established political class and traditional politics in general. Similarly in late nineteenth-century France, corruption scandals and the sentiment that the country has fallen into the hands of dark political-financial circles which with their “obscure machinations ruin the nation create a climate of widespread resentment, which proves fertile ground for Boulanger’s populist campaign.<sup>83</sup> And in Colombia, Gaitán’s invectives against the corruption of the oligarchy had such an impact because they resonated strongly with widespread “resentment caused by the severe social differences.”<sup>84</sup> In the Italian case, the Lega Nord’s populist mobilization profited from a variety of resentments bubbling underneath the relative affluence of the northern regions: Resentment against the political class; resentment against the *Mezzogiorno*; resentment against immigrants; resentment against big business promoted and subsidized by the state and the big unions, all of them charged with profiting from the hard work and enterprising spirit of northern producers while giving little in return.<sup>85</sup>

The success of populist mobilization depends, however, not only on favorable conditions and emotive predispositions outlined above; it also depends on the availability of populist actors capable of putting diffuse sentiments of resentment and indignation into words and

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<sup>80</sup> Jerome Neu, *Rehabilitating Resentment and Choosing What We Feel*, *Criminal Justice Ethics*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2008, p. 34.

<sup>81</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition, Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 421, 423, 423. Descartes characterized indignation as a passion “directed against those who do good or evil to people who do not deserve it.” *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 398.

<sup>82</sup> Joe Creech, *Righteous Indignation: Religion and the Populist Revolution*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006; Norman Pollack (.ed.), *The Populist Mind*, Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1967, p. xxvii.

<sup>83</sup> Marc Angenot, *La propaganda boulangiste*, paragraph 25.

<sup>84</sup> María del Rosario Vázquez Piñeros, *La Iglesia y la violencia bipartidista en Colombia (1946-1953) : Análisis historiográfico*, *Anuario de Historia de la Iglesia*, vol.16, 2007, p. 320, available online at <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=35516021> (accessed August 12, 2015).

<sup>85</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of these sentiments, see part II of Biorcio, *La Padania promessa*.

articulating unmet demands in such a fashion as to clearly establish a new antagonistic “internal frontier” (Laclau) between “the people,” constituted discursively as a political subject, and a discursively constructed and clearly defined unitary “enemy” (the elite, the political class, the oligarchy, the caste, etc.). The result is a particular style of political discourse, which, as the empirical evidence provided above clearly shows, is a common characteristic of all five cases. In each case, the populist leaders successfully translated sentiments of resentment and indignation into striking and memorable words and phrases (*la casta, Roma Ladrona, Wall Street owns this country, El pueblo es superior a sus dirigentes*). Yet, what about the questions of justice, equity and fairness associated with resentment and indignation? Evidence presented above suggests that in almost all cases, there is a strong appeal to social justice and fairness in order to gain legitimacy for the populist revolt. The demand for greater social justice and equality was central to the People’s Party’s “hayseed socialism” and resonates strongly among the *indignados* of Podemos.<sup>86</sup> It was a central tenet of Gaitán and his movement. As John W. Green has noted, it was the “Gaitanistas’ shared moral sense of social justice and demands for more popularly based political representation” which “unified their multiclass mobilization and drew them to Gaitán, the symbol of their aspirations.”<sup>87</sup>

In the Boulangist movement, too, there was significant concern for social justice, promoted by the various dissident radical and socialist currents spearheaded by Maurice Barrès and Henri Rochefort.<sup>88</sup> The General’s program of 1888 explicitly evoked the social question using populist rhetoric designed to mobilize resentment. Following the claim that “Boulangier is work” the program went on to ask, “To whom do you owe unemployment, ruin, and poverty?” only to charge, “To those who pass their needs, their appetites, and their unhealthy ambition before your need, which they should be defending, and who see dry-eyed and with a light heart the worker suffer and die of hunger. For them positions, honors, luxury, power. For you poverty!” This leaves the Lega Nord as the only genuine exception among the five cases. This is perhaps not surprising given the strong spirit of ethnocentrism and individualist producerism informing the party’s populist mobilization campaign. If there was an appeal to justice and equity it was in the service of demands for redressing the unfair treatment, which the north and its hardworking ordinary people had allegedly suffered for decades.<sup>89</sup>

The discussion of the logic behind populist mobilization would not be complete without a few words regarding the question of charisma. In 1895, the French sociologist Gustave Le Bon observed that there “was not a village inn that did not possess a portrait” of General Boulanger. Boulanger was “attributed the power to remedy all injustices, all evils; and thousands of men would have given their lives for him.”<sup>90</sup> In a similar vein, W. John Green

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<sup>86</sup> Gene Clanton, “Hayseed Socialism” on the Hill, *Congressional Populism on the Hill, 1891-1895*, *The Western Historical Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1984, esp. p. 144.

<sup>87</sup> Green, “Vibrations of the Collective”, p. 310.

<sup>88</sup> Zeev Sternhell, *Maurice Barrès et le nationalisme français*, p. 171.

<sup>89</sup> In her study of the Lega Nord, Lydia Dematteo quotes an ex-militant of the Lega Nord who charges that in the early 1990s, northerners “felt more despised than even southerners (*meridionali*) did. Lydia Matteo, *L’idiota in politica: antropologia della Lega Nord*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 2011, p 57.

<sup>90</sup> Gustave Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules*, Paris : Felix Alcan, 1895, p. 64.

has noted the quasi-religious devotion of many followers of Gorge Eliecer Gaitán, who saw in him the “savior” and “new messiah” who had come to redeem Colombia and deliver the oppressed, the “apostle of social justice” who had set out to defend the ordinary working people against the *oligarquías*.<sup>91</sup> Charisma played also a significant role in the success of the Lega Nord’s populist campaign. As one early Lega supporter and activist put it, the Lega owed much to Bossi’s “charismatic appeal,” which led “the people to feel proud of who they are. For that they idolized him and followed him all the way.”<sup>92</sup> Finally, in the case of Podemos, it is yet too early to tell not only whether or not Pablo Iglesias’s personality and leadership qualities qualify him as a charismatic leader but also how his party (which, after all, grew out of self-organized grassroots movements and rejects the notion of leader in favor of that of “spokesperson,” would react if Iglesias were to establish himself as a strong charismatic personality.<sup>93</sup> Podemos might instead follow the example of the People’s Party. The party certainly had among its ranks a considerable number of politically savvy (e.g. William Peffer of Kansas and James “Cyclone” Davis of Texas) and rhetorically seasoned (e.g., Mary Lease) local and regional leaders quite capable of keeping a large audience enthralled. Yet none ever rose to a position of prominence which would have allowed him or her to have an overwhelming influence upon the movement.

## Conclusion

The five cases presented in this paper show that populist mobilizations follow a distinct logic, which seems to hold true across time and space. In general, populist mobilizations are triggered by a crisis of political representation, i.e., the inability, or lack of will, of the political establishment to respond to the anxiety and grievances of ordinary people during times of profound socioeconomic transformation. Crises of political representation, particularly if exacerbated by perceptions of entrenched, endemic corruption and fraud, are likely to engender diffuse sentiments of resentment and indignation. It depends on the availability of a populist actor and his or her ability to convert these sentiments into an internally consistent and coherent, yet emotionally charged discourse, whether or not a crisis of representation will eventually touch off a populist mobilization. Charisma certainly helps; but, as the American case clearly shows, it is not essential. What appears to be much more of essential importance, instead, is the ability of populist actors to translate vague emotions of disenchantment and resentment into a discourse that evokes notions of social justice, equity, ethics and genuine participatory democracy into a coherent political doctrine promoting profound change.

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<sup>91</sup> Green, “Vibrations of the Collective,” p. 308.

<sup>92</sup> Lynda Dematteo, *L’idiota in politica: Andropologia della Lega Nord*, Milan: Feltrinelli 2011, p. 57.

<sup>93</sup> Some analysts, noting the growing personalization of Podemos, reflected in the fact that Iglesias has increasingly become “the identity of the party,” have argued that the party is well on its way to become a “charismatic party.” Guadalupe Talavera Ortega and Gregorio Marañón, *El Candidato en los sistemas parlamentarios: Los Partidos carismáticos en España*, Asociación latinoamericana de investigadores en campañas electorales, no date, available online at <http://www.alice-comunicacionpolitica.com/abrir-ponencia.php?f=603-F5416a5466031410770246-ponencia-1.pdf> (accessed August 31, 2015).

