

MASTER IN PHILOSOPHY, POLITICS AND ECONOMICS

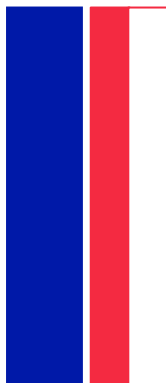
On Populism as the Rejection of Dialogue

Why does it resist confrontation with facts?

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Why does it resist confrontation with facts?

This dissertation was written as part of the Master's in Philosophy, Politics and Economics, under the supervision of Professor Mário Graça Moura

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Index

Declaration of Honour.....	5
Agradecimientos	6
Resumo.....	7
Abstract	8
Introduction	9
1.Populism: an Overview	13
2.Freedom of Expression and the General Will	19
3.The Road to Populism in the Post-Modern Era.....	24
4.Post-Truth Politics: Fake News, Media and Populism.....	28
Conclusion	35
References.....	37

Declaration of Honour

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I further declare that I have not used generative artificial intelligence tools (chatbots based on large language models) to carry out part(s) of this thesis.

Porto, April 2025

Hugo dos Santos

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Resumo

Esta dissertação propõe a concepção de que o populismo pode ser entendido como a rejeição do diálogo. Embora se apresente como uma força democrática que representa e dá voz ao povo, o populismo é, na verdade, o seu oposto.

Após uma primeira apresentação do conceito de populismo, desenvolve-se a primeira parte do argumento, partindo das reflexões de John Stuart Mill sobre a importância da liberdade de expressão, e estabelecendo uma oposição entre o populismo e os princípios de Mill.

A segunda parte explora o paralelo existente entre as tendências autoritárias do populismo e a crítica de Uskali Mäki à abordagem retórica da economia, relacionando a retórica populista com uma versão degenerada da noção de verdade como plausibilidade.

Por fim, estes elementos são contextualizados na era da “pós-verdade”, caracterizada pela disseminação de *fake news*, pelo sensacionalismo mediático, pelas bolhas de informação e pelas câmaras de eco, e é abordado o seu papel na fundamentação de crenças que não têm qualquer correspondência com a realidade – o que aumenta a dificuldade de combater eficazmente o populismo apenas com factos.

Palavras-chave: Liberdade de Expressão, Populismo, Pós-Verdade, Teorias da Verdade

Abstract

This dissertation proposes the conception that populism can be understood as the rejection of dialogue. Although it presents itself as a democratic force that gives voice to the people, it is, in fact, their inverted image.

Following an initial overview of the concept of populism, the first part of the argument is developed, starting from John Stuart Mill's seminal reflections on the importance of freedom of expression and establishing an opposition between populism and Mill's principles.

The second part explores the parallel between the authoritarian tendencies of populism and Uskali Mäki's critique of the rhetorical approach to economics, connecting populist rhetoric with a degenerate version of the notion of truth as plausibility.

Finally, these elements are contextualised within the 'post-truth' era, characterised by the dissemination of fake news, media sensationalism, filter bubbles, and echo chambers, and their role in supporting beliefs that have no correspondence with reality. This enhances the difficulty of effectively countering populism through facts alone.

Key words: Freedom of Expression, Populism, Post-Truth, Theories of Truth

Introduction

Over the last few years, populism has been on the rise in Western societies, as a political force capable of challenging democratic principles and reshaping public debate. Various factors have been identified to explain this rise, among them the mobilisation of disintegrated and disillusioned citizens who had previously given up on political participation. This phenomenon is explained by Habermas (2023, p. 20), who states that populist movements have succeeded in attracting abstentionists dissatisfied with the traditional parties:

Today, the success of populist movements in mobilizing the potential of these non-voters is leading, not to a reversal, but to an ironic inversion of this vicious circle [of abstentionism]. Then, of course, these radicalized groups of non-voters no longer participate in elections under the accepted presuppositions of a democratic election, but instead in the spirit of obstructionist ‘opposition to the system’.

In this sense, some scholars argue that there are both undemocratic and democratic sides of populism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). Its undemocratic side is related to its “monist nature”, which affects the rights and protections of minorities, and to its innate “dislike for pluralism and political tolerance” (Finchelstein, 2017, p. 104). Its democratic side, conversely, “relies on its capacity to give voice to groups that, objectively or subjectively, are being excluded from the collective decision-making process” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013, p. 506). Also Moffitt (2016, p. 141) writes about “those who see populism as a positive force for democracy” and concludes that the vision of populism as beneficial to democracy is based on the notion that “it emphasises the sovereignty of ‘the people’, appeals to majoritarianism, and offers a powerful critique of those who distort or disfigure democracy.”

However, one of the main points of this dissertation is to show that this allegedly democratic side does not exist in the terms and modes suggested. Actually, despite claiming to represent the voice of the people and its will, populism relies on a rhetoric

that simplifies political debate, polarises society, and discredits opponents (Guriev & Papaioannou, 2022; Karlson, 2024; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Zúquete, 2022).

Populism has been widely studied in academia from various perspectives, including historical, methodological, and ideological approaches.

The purpose of this dissertation is to contribute to this research by offering a complementary perspective: populism as the rejection of dialogue. Understanding populism in this sense means comprehending its resistance to facts and its rise in our societies – within a context shaped by post-truth, fake news, media sensationalism, filter bubbles, and echo chambers.

Thus, it is necessary to analyse the characteristics of populism in some detail. First, by examining how it views dialogue, pluralism, and the principles of freedom of expression. Second, by analysing its authoritarian characteristics in the light of the theory of truth (as coherence or plausibility) that, in a generous interpretation, underlies it. Finally, the characteristics of contemporary society that facilitate the endurance of beliefs that lack correspondence with reality are presented.

To develop this argument, the chapters are organised as follows:

In Chapter 1, I give a global vision of the meaning of populism, beginning with a brief historical background. This exposition starts with the origins of populist movements and goes to their evolution into the contemporary right-wing populism, currently affecting Western democracies. Then, I present several analytical approaches to populism, such as the idea of populism as an ideology, defined by the antagonism between the people and the elite; as a discursive style, focusing on the characteristics of populist rhetoric; and as a political strategy aimed at mobilising the electorate and gaining and maintaining power. This framework is fundamental for characterizing the phenomenon of populism and establishing the elements that will be important in defining it as the rejection of dialogue.

This is followed, on Chapter 2, by the presentation and development of the first part of the argument: populism is the rejection of dialogue in the sense that it is the rejection of the principles of freedom of expression. To support this statement, I focus on the

fundamental contributions of John Stuart Mill (1859) on freedom of expression, whose seminal reflections are contrasted with key elements of populist rhetoric: the concept of general will, the conception of the people as a homogeneous entity, the rejection of pluralism, the discrediting of opponents, and the distrust of science. Through this confrontation, an opposition between populism and the conditions required for genuine dialogue, as understood within the liberal tradition, is established.

Chapter 3 shifts to the second part of the argument. Here, the focus is on the association of the populist argumentative structure and its authoritarian tendencies to a notion of truth as plausibility, drawing on Uskali Mäki's (1995) critique of Deirdre McCloskey's rhetorical approach to economics. This critique, focussed on science and specifically the methodology of economics, explains very clearly how an (apparently) 'anything goes' argument slides easily into authoritarianism – hence into the rejection of dialogue – violating the principles of *Sprachethik* and *Herrschaftsfreiheit* to which the rhetorical position is originally committed. I develop this argument to associate this degeneration into authoritarianism to a populist drift.

Chapter 4 analyses the characteristics of contemporary society that facility the endurance of beliefs lacking correspondence with reality. I explore how phenomena related to the post-truth media environment, such as fake news, media sensationalism, filter bubbles, and echo chambers, create conditions where populist narratives can prosper, even when contradicted by empirical evidence. This chapter reinforces the understanding of populism as the rejection of dialogue and explains the difficulties in countering it through facts alone.

In the concluding comments, a summary of the argument developed throughout the dissertation is presented and a reflection is made on the implications of understanding populism in these terms, particularly regarding its resistance to facts and its impact on democratic life.

To sum up, the aim of this research is to provide a new outlook on populism – particularly the right-wing one, because of its prominence in contemporary Western

societies – emphasising the rejection of dialogue as its constitutive mark, as well as explaining the underlying grounds of its resistance to facts.

1. Populism: an Overview

Populism is based on the division between the people and the elites, with political mobilisation built upon this dichotomy. Whilst it is widely discussed today, the criticism of emotional manipulation of the masses to gain power is not new; it has been recognised as a perversion of democracy since Classical Antiquity, where *demagogy* was criticised (Zúquete, 2022).

Since the concept of populism is subject to various kinds of controversies, a review of the literature is mandatory.

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) provide a historical overview of populism and argue that most scholars identify two original populist movements, which appeared independently in two different regions of the world at approximately the same time (the end of the 19th century) – the Russian *Narodniki*, and the US People's Party. The first was formed by a “small group of urban middle class intellectuals” who defended the peasantry as a model group and moved to the countryside to educate them on their important role. The second emerged as a “rural response to industrialization” from a mass of American people (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013, p. 495). This first wave of populism – agrarian populism – is almost extinct in contemporary post-industrial societies. It only serves as inspiration for a few rural movements.

According to the authors, a second wave of populism – socioeconomic populism – emerged in Latin America during the Great Depression. The movements associated with this wave are the first manifestations of what Finchelstein (2017, p. 101) calls the “modern populism”. In several countries, the mobilisation of the masses was achieved by appealing to the unity of the *people* against the *elites* of the establishment. The movements that emerged during this period shared a common characteristic: they advocated state intervention in the economy to promote domestic production of industrial goods as a substitute for imports. Once in power, their leaders adopted nationalist and redistributive policies and followed the Import Substituting Industrialisation (ISI) model, which resulted in high inflation rates and paradoxically reinforced many of their countries' external dependency (de la Torre, 2017; Mudde &

Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). These movements correspond to “classical populism”, whose main example is Peronism, led by Juan Domingo Perón, in Argentina (Finchelstein, 2017, p. 101).

In the same region, later in the century – particularly in its final decade – new populist figures emerged who retained a populist ideology while embracing a neoliberal economic stance. They blamed traditional politicians for the “economic chaos” (de la Torre, 2017, p. 198) and implemented policies to reduce the size of the state, such as the privatisation of previously nationalised services (de la Torre & Srisa-Nga, 2021). Modern populism entered a second phase here – “neoliberal populism” – with figures such as Brazil’s President Fernando Collor de Melo and Argentina’s President Carlos Menem (Finchelstein, 2017, p. 101).

It is therefore not possible to associate populism with a particular economic vision, as it can take on different economic approaches – with both socialist and neoliberal populist leaders. This is evident in contemporary Latin America, where personalities such as Nicolás Maduro, the socialist president of Venezuela, and Javier Milei, the libertarian president of Argentina, adopt populist styles despite their opposing economic agendas. For this reason, “it makes little sense to define populism on the basis of a specific set of economic and/or social policies” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013, p. 496).

Finchelstein (2017, pp. 101-102) also identifies two neoclassical styles of populism. The first is the “neoclassical populism of the left”, associated with presidents as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia, as well as with leftist parties in Europe, including *Podemos* in Spain and *Syriza* in Greece. The second is the “neoclassical populism of the right and extreme right”, which is constituted by contemporary right-wing movements and parties.

The neoclassical populism of the right and extreme right coincides with the last populist wave identified by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013): the xenophobic populism. This wave is predominantly associated with Western societies, particularly with populist radical right parties, that prioritise sociocultural issues and promote authoritarian and nativist views. Their main concerns are corruption, crime and immigration, and they

present themselves as “the voice of the people” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013, p. 497).

When defining right-wing populism, Wodak (2024) identifies four key dimensions: 1) nationalism/nativism/anti-pluralism, derived from a view of the people as a culturally and ethnically homogeneous group; 2) anti-establishment/anti-elitism, often accompanied by strong anti-intellectualism; 3) authoritarianism, centred on a charismatic leader who promises to restore justice, security and order; 4) conservatism/historical revisionism, reflected in the defence of traditional values and the nation, whose past is portrayed as heroic through a constructed narrative that glorifies the people.

Wodak (2015) also highlights two recurrent characteristics of right-wing populist parties. First, the scapegoating of minorities, seen as threats to society – a phenomenon she terms the “politics of fear”. Second, an appeal to common sense and anti-intellectualism, referred to as the “arrogance of ignorance”.

There are multiple approaches to the study of populism. Gidron and Bonikowski (2013) synthesise three main perspectives found in the literature: populism as a *political ideology*, a *discursive style*, and a *political strategy*. These interpretations of populism are not mutually exclusive and can often coexist in both theory and practice.

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) conceptualise populism as a *political ideology* and develop what they call an *ideational approach*. They define populism as a “thin-centred ideology” – one that is adaptable to different political contexts and can be combined with other ideologies, as long as it follows a simple principle: the opposition between the pure people and the corrupt elites.

According to the authors, three core concepts are central to defining populism. The first is the *people*, constructed as a deliberately vague group. This vagueness allows for flexibility, making it easier to mobilise broader segments of society. The people are seen as sovereign and composed of common citizens, who are considered the true members of the nation. Populists “believe that they are the only ones who really represent ‘the

people;’ the rest of the parties are ‘immoral’ or ‘corrupt’ or ‘illegitimate’ and therefore cannot protect and stand for ‘the people’” (Lastres-López & Íñigo-Mora, 2024, p. 2).

The second concept is the *elite*, who differs from the people in economic, moral and ethnic terms, and is accused of pursuing their own interests in spite of the general interest of population.

The third is the *general will*, which must be respected. According to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017, p. 18):

Rather than a rational process constructed via the public sphere, the populist notion of the general will is based on the notion of “common sense.” This means that it is framed in a particular way, which is useful for both aggregating different demands and identifying a common enemy.

In terms of *discursive style*, Karlson (2024) highlights that populist rhetoric is structured around an "us vs. them" conflict, often involving the demonisation of opponents, attacks on the media and science, and intolerant behaviour. Additionally, populist discourse tends to dismiss rational arguments in favour of emotional appeals and conspiracy theories, further fuelling political and societal polarisation. The author also identifies several key elements that define populist rhetoric: the promotion of simplistic solutions to complex problems, the defence of their movements as the true representatives of the people, and the rejection of rational argumentation, which is replaced by emotional appeals and conspiratorial narratives.

Guriev and Papaioannou (2022) describe populist rhetoric as relying on the simplicity of its message, transmitted through an aggressive style and amplified via social media as a primary tool for dissemination. The content is often characterised by anti-pluralist, authoritarian, anti-globalisation, and anti-elitist narratives. Similarly, Kyle and Gultchin (2018) argue that, while populism can take various forms, it consistently exhibits two essential features: the construction of a "true people" in opposition to outsiders, and a claim to represent the will of this people. They categorise populism into three types: cultural (where the "true people" are the native population), socio-economic (where the

"true people" are the working class), and anti-establishment (where the "true people" are victims of the system or of the political elites).

de Vreese *et al.* (2018) also conceptualise populism as a discursive style, in which different degrees of populism are determined depending on the use of specific contents or communication strategies. According to the authors, "complete populism includes reference and appeals to the people, anti-elitism, and exclusion of out-groups" (de Vreese *et al.*, 2018, p. 426). Equally, Ernst *et al.* (2018) identify "anti-elitism" as a core message of populism, alongside a "people-centred" discourse and the idea of a "restoration of sovereignty." This content is typically associated with a negative, emotional, and colloquial communication style.

In terms of *political strategy*, Jansen (2011) conceptualises populism as *populist mobilisation*. Weyland (2017, p. 55) claims that populism "constitutes a coherent set of approaches and mechanisms for structuring relations of political participation, support building, and governmental authority" and Engesser *et al.* (2017) identify three main political objectives that populist strategies seek to achieve: power, legitimacy and mobilisation. In this sense, populism is employed to mobilise "ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action" (Jansen, 2011, p. 83).

Expanding on this, Karlson (2024) outlines three defining characteristics of populist strategies: the promotion of unserious and ill-founded policy solutions to complex social and economic problems; a rhetorical and discursive style designed to polarise society; and an autocratic institutional orientation. These strategies aim to reinforce the "us vs. them" narrative, using rhetoric to manipulate public perception and undermine established institutions.

Other approaches exist, such as the popular agency approach, which defines populism as a "democratic way of life built through popular engagement in politics", or the perspective of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who understand populism "not only as the essence of politics, but also as an emancipatory force", capable of mobilising marginalised segments of society and reintroducing conflict into the political arena (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 3).

In the following chapters, a complementary view of populism will be developed: populism as the rejection of dialogue, starting from the comparison between populism and the principles of freedom of expression.

2. Freedom of Expression and the General Will

In *On Liberty*, Mill (1859, p. 7) reflects on “the nature and the limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual.” His line of thought is particularly relevant to an analysis of populism, as will be apparent in the second part of this chapter, following an initial reflection on Mill’s understanding of liberty.

For Mill, liberty originally meant “protection against the tyranny of the political rulers” (p. 8), who were seen as adversaries of the people. However, once political leaders began to be elected and rules limited their power, this notion of tyranny became less relevant. Since rulers were now chosen by the people, their interests and will were expected to be aligned with those of the nation. As the author writes, “the nation did not need to be protected against its own will”; the ruler’s power became “the nation’s own power, concentrated and in a form convenient for exercise” (pp. 10-11).

But, as Mill warns, “the ‘people’ who exercise the power are not always the same people with those over whom it is exercised; and the ‘self-government’ spoken of, is not the government of each by himself, but of each by all the rest” (p. 12). In other words, democratic mechanisms do not eliminate the risk of tyranny. They merely shift its potential source from the rulers to the majority:

The will of the people, moreover, practically means, the will of the most numerous or the most active part of the people; the majority, or those who succeed in making themselves accepted as the majority: the people, consequently, may desire to oppress a part of their number; and precautions are as much needed against this, as against any other abuse of power. (p. 12)

Mill concludes that “‘the tyranny of the majority’ is now generally included among the evils against which society requires to be on its guard” (p. 13). Therefore, society must also guard against a different, though equally dangerous, form of oppression. This kind of social coercion stems from a “tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them” (p. 13). Individuals may be pressured to conform to dominant views not by the

state but by society itself, through social norms and expectations, which may stigmatise or attempt to silence dissenting voices.

The safeguard Mill defends to prevent this *tyranny of prevailing opinion and feeling* is the principle that interference with individual liberty is justifiable *only when its aim is to prevent harm to others*. There is no other legitimate reason for constraining individuals. They should be free to think, speak, and act according to their own convictions, even if in so doing they should cause damage to themselves, provided their actions do not injure others.

Liberty only exists when it offers mankind the possibility of improvement through “free and equal discussion”(p. 23). Mill develops several dimensions of liberty: liberty of conscience; liberty of thought and feeling; freedom of opinion and sentiment; liberty of expressing and publishing opinions; liberty of tastes and pursuits; and freedom to unite. A society, he states, can only be considered free when these liberties are entirely respected, with due regard to the ‘harm principle’.

Mill’s reflections on liberty of thought and discussion are particularly remarkable. The government must respect press freedom and abstain from interfering in public opinion, not attempt to “prescribe opinions to them [the people], and determine what doctrines or what arguments they shall be allowed to hear” (p. 31). Mill goes on to engage in a theoretical exercise to scrutinise the possible consequences of state interference in public opinion, even when that interference aligns with popular will, and maintains that it would still be a mistake:

Let us suppose, therefore, that the government is entirely at one with the people, and never thinks of exerting any power of coercion unless in agreement with what it conceives to be their voice. But I deny the right of the people to exercise such coercion, either by themselves or by their government. The power itself is illegitimate. The best government has no more title to it than the worst. It is as noxious, or more noxious, when exerted in accordance with public opinion, than when in opposition to it. (pp. 32-33)

And he concludes:

If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind. (p. 33)

Mill adds that forbidding the expression of an opinion is equivalent to “robbing the human race” (p. 33), regardless of whether the suppressed opinion is right or wrong.

He justifies this view by arguing that, on the one hand, if the opinion is correct, we “are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth” (p. 33). Those who seek to silence dissenting voices must assume they already possess the truth and are infallible, which must be firmly rejected. To deny that alternative perspectives may contain truth is, he claims, “to assume our own infallibility” (p. 95), thereby depriving society of access to that portion of truth.

On the other hand, even if the opinion is mistaken, suppressing it still harms society. Those who disagree with it “lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error” (p. 33).

Moreover, even a false opinion may contain a portion of truth. Since the dominant or prevailing view on any given subject is “rarely or never the whole truth,” Mill states that “it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied” (p. 95). So, to silence an opinion, even if it is a false one, is not a good option according to Mill. The confrontation of opposing ideas benefits society, including those views commonly considered erroneous.

These reflections developed by Mill are particularly pertinent for analysing populist discourse. To explore this connection, it is useful to revisit the notion of general will, introduced in the first chapter as a core element of the ideational approach to populism, and to consider how the concept is used in populist rhetoric.

According to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017, p. 18), there is a “specific logic of articulation” that is enacted by populists when appealing to the general will, “which enables the formation of a popular subject with a strong identity (“the people”), which is able to challenge the status quo (“the elite”).”

It is also important to consider what this mobilisation of the people, based in the idea of the general will, serves to legitimise. As Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017, p. 18) explain:

Whatever its manifestation, the monist core of populism, and especially its notion of a “general will,” may well lead to the support of authoritarian tendencies. ... [T]he general will is based on the unity of the people and on a clear demarcation of those who do not belong to the demos and, consequently, are not treated as equals. In short, because populism implies that the general will is not only transparent but also absolute, it can legitimize authoritarianism and illiberal attacks on anyone who (allegedly) threatens the homogeneity of the people.

In this sense, the concept of the will of the people functions as a means to legitimise the imposition of a single narrative, exemplifying the form of social tyranny that Mill warned against.

In practical terms, as populists claim to represent the true will of the people, they tend to reject any form of criticism from political opponents, academics, or the media, arguing that such critique lacks the legitimacy of the real people (Müller, 2016). By dismissing opposing views and promoting a single narrative, populism threatens fundamental principles of dialogue and freedom of expression – which justifies its characterisation as the rejection of dialogue.

Within populist rhetoric, disagreement is understood as a betrayal and pluralism is a danger to the supposed unity of the people. Populists seek to impose their own narrative, justified as the will of the *pure* and *true* people – who, in Mill’s writings, represent only its most numerous or active faction.

Mill’s reasoning helps to deconstruct this anti-pluralist narrative inherent in populism, as he argues that the free exchange of all opinions benefits the whole of society. It is precisely this exchange that strengthens, reinforces and sustains democratic dialogue.

Through the confrontation between the principles of dialogue and freedom of expression defended by Mill and the rhetoric of populism – particularly its notion of the

general will, its conception of the people as a homogeneous entity, its rejection of pluralism, its treatment of opponents, and its attitude towards science – the first approach to populism as the rejection of dialogue has been established.

3. The Road to Populism in the Post-Modern Era

Having established the first dimension of populism as the rejection of dialogue, we can now turn to the second part of the argument.

This next step establishes a conceptual parallel with the methodology of science, based on Uskali Mäki's critique of D. N. McCloskey's rhetorical approach to economics. At the centre of the latter approach is the notion of truth as plausibility, which is most relevant to understanding how populist movements conceive their relationship with reality. The conception of reality as a construct, a notion that follows from the identification of truth and plausibility, is likely to culminate in the suppression of dialogue, degenerating into an authoritarianism with populist overtones.

In economics, and more generally throughout society, post-modernism already has a long history, of which McCloskey's conception of economics as rhetorical persuasion is a milestone. Against McCloskey's classical liberal beliefs, paradoxically, her view of economics as rhetoric (and the theory of truth with which it is associated) favours authoritarianism and populism, standing in sharp contrast to Mill's arguments. McCloskey's position and its implications are thoroughly analysed in Mäki (1995).

Mäki argues, against McCloskey's confusing, frequently contradictory statements, that the category of truth cannot be conflated with plausibility and hence coherence. Plausibility, Mäki writes, "is a property of statements in their relation to human beings: statements are plausible if people believe in them. Plausibility is a concept that can be used to create a link between belief and argument" (p. 1304). Coherence, in turn, is understood as a relation between a set of premisses and a given conclusion. A connection can thus be established between these two concepts:

A rhetorical argument connects a conclusion to a set of premises so that the conclusion coheres with the premises. The relationship between coherence and plausibility in a rhetorical argument is simple: the increase in the plausibility of the conclusion is brought about by the coherence between the conclusion and the premises. (p. 1304)

As Mäki (1995, p. 1307) affirms, a coherence theory of truth “makes truth dependent on beliefs and arguments in a conversation rather than on a relationship between a statement and reality”, since “the truth of a statement consists in its coherence with a system or set of beliefs” (p. 1308).

The ultimate identification of truth, plausibility and coherence is untenable, because it entails that truth is what one believes to be true. As Mäki exemplifies:

[T]here would be an arbitrary number of truths about any single matter. If construed as coherent systems, both creationism and evolutionary theory would be true, not just believed by some groups of people, not just plausible, but true. So would be both Marxian and Austrian economic theories. This is not what McCloskey would like to accept. (p. 1308)

Clearly, this multiplicity of incompatible truths renders any meaningful dialogue impossible. How can it even start if a proposition is true (rather than merely plausible for some and implausible for others) and the same holds for the converse proposition?

Nor will invoking Jürgen Habermas and the revered notions of *Sprachethik* and *Herrschaftsfreiheit* – “to exclude ... badly educated participants from the conversation and so delimit the set of coherent beliefs” (p. 1310) – succeed in saving a coherence theory of truth in a modified form. Even within the domain of science, the ethics of speech and the absence of an authority with the power to end conversations are ideals, often far removed from *actual* scientific practice, where power positions always matter. As Mäki writes, it is the case that “[o]nly some persuasive ideas are right, ... [depending on] the set of people whose beliefs matter” (pp. 1309-1310). And at this stage we are already beginning to slide into an authoritarianism, which can easily be of a populist variety.

Before returning to this point, however, let us observe that, within science, the reasonable stance to take, as Mäki and others explain, is a ‘correspondence’, rather than coherence, theory of truth. A statement is true or false depending on how the world is, independently of whether anyone believes it or not. This is the proper *criterion* of truth. *Judgements* of truth are of course provisional and fallible. The task of science, as Mäki

observes, is precisely to render true statements plausible and false statements implausible: not to mistakenly identify truth and plausibility.

This point is directly relevant to the present analysis, in as much as populism frequently relies on rhetorical strategies to validate beliefs that lack any correspondence with reality, no ontological reflection whatsoever, resorting to fake news and emotional manipulation. False claims may be coherent with a pre-existing belief system and will therefore be accepted. Likewise, propositions that are ontologically grounded, albeit fallibly, will be rejected by populists if they are not aligned with their belief system.

For example, when a populist is confronted with empirical data showing no correlation between immigration and crime, such evidence may be dismissed for contradicting the prior, unfounded presupposition that immigrants pose a threat to security. In this case, the perception of insecurity outweighs objective facts, and emotional appeal prevails over reality.

But, as noted above, we want to explain how the authoritarianism that somewhat paradoxically tends to emerge out of an 'anything goes' scenario that the rhetorical approach stimulates easily slides into populist authoritarianism.

If, in the scientific domain, under a coherence notion of truth and in the absence of external criteria, it is ultimately a community of scientists that exercises the authority to determine what is accepted as true, then in populism, this authoritarian role is concentrated in the figure of the leader, who assumes the power to define what is true for the collective.

In populism, this adherence to what the leader says and thinks is almost instinctive because, as Finchelstein (2017, p. 103) states, the populist leader is "a messianic and charismatic leader of the people", who establishes a kind of "political theology". The leader becomes a divine figure whose statements are not contested or subject to scrutiny. He or she is a "transcendental ... figure whose legitimacy goes beyond electoral representation" (Finchelstein, 2017, p. 230).

The leader holds absolute legitimacy, not merely by representing the people, but by being "the personification of the popular will" (Finchelstein, 2017, pp. 231-232). This

image of the leader results from a process of political and emotional persuasion aimed at reinforce their exceptional status (Zúquete, 2022, p. 44).

In fact, the logic of populism does not empower the people in the way it claims to. It just centralises authority in the voice of the populist leader.

Therefore, only their narrative is plausible to believers and, in this sense, true. Despite the rhetoric of representation and mobilisation, populism imposes a logic that is fundamentally impermissive. It suppresses open and ethical dialogue, despising Mill's wisdom.

4. Post-Truth Politics: Fake News, Media and Populism

The contrast between Mill's writings on freedom of expression and the populist practice allowed us to frame, in a first perspective, populism as the rejection of dialogue. Then, the second approach demonstrated how dialogue can be restricted or suppressed, based on a notion of truth as plausibility, and explains how it can lead to authoritarianism, that can be of populist type.

Building on this understanding, it becomes necessary to reflect on the contemporary characteristics of society and politics that facilitate the spread and reinforcement of populist narratives. To achieve that, it is mandatory to situate society within the context of post-truth, define fake news, examine the role of traditional and digital media, and demonstrate how these phenomena collectively favour populism.

Contemporary society operates within the paradigm of post-truth, a tendency that emerged alongside post-modernity. Hence we have here an obvious connection to the argument of Section 3. McIntyre (2018, p. 174) defines post-truth as the assertion that "feelings are more accurate than facts, for the purpose of the political subordination of reality." The relevance of this concept was recognised in 2016, when the Oxford Dictionaries chose "post-truth" as the Word of the Year, strongly influenced by events such the US presidential election and the Brexit referendum.

In post-truth politics, objective facts are often subordinated to emotions and personal beliefs, thereby rendering political discourse increasingly resistant to evidence-based argumentation (Zimmer & Reich, 2018). Scholars such as Tallis (2016) have identified post-truth politics as an anti-democratic and anti-progressive tendency.

This environment has enabled the spread of fake news, predominantly through social media, fuelling misinformation and reinforcing populist narratives by confining users in echo chambers by the algorithmic filter bubbles. Similarly, "alternative facts" serve to justify beliefs that lack any correspondence with reality, further eroding public trust in traditional sources of information.

The critical role of news in democratic societies and decision-making processes must be emphasised. As Bernecker *et al.* (2021, p. 1) state:

Democracies need independent, fact-based news to provide a voice for a diverse range of people, to watchdog the powerful, and to keep members of a society informed. News is the basis for the public to make informed decisions in elections and referenda and for public officials to act on behalf of the public. By letting the public monitor government performance, the news serves as a mechanism for democratic accountability and socializes citizens into democratic attitudes and values.

However, this democratic function is compromised when fake news fulfils the role of informing the public. Jaster and Lanius (2021, p. 20) define fake news as

news that lacks truthful and truthfulness. It lacks truth in the sense that it is either literally false or communicates something false. It lacks truthfulness in the sense that it is propagated with the intention to deceive or without concern for the truth.

Similarly, McIntyre (2018, p. 173) characterises fake news as “disinformation that is deliberately created to look like actual news in order to have a political effect.”

In this sense, it is relevant to remember the notion of truth as plausibility developed earlier, in chapter 3. Fake news supports narratives that, although not corresponding to reality, align with the belief systems fostered by populists and their discourse. It thus becomes a powerful instrument for them, enabling the dissemination of narratives that reinforce their ideological framework, particularly via social media.

Populist supporters not only consume fake news – considering true whatever aligns with their pre-existing beliefs – but also contribute to their dissemination. Unlike non-populist political actors, who tend to lose credibility when exposed disseminating disinformation, populists are unaffected, as *truth* is defined by them, or in any event their leaders.

Bernecker *et al.* (2021, p. 2) list six factors that intensify the threat associated with unreliable news: 1) the democratization of news production, allowing any individual to publish content without filters of control or accuracy; 2) the absence of effective quality control, incentivising accounts to prioritise appealing yet false content to maximise reach; 3) the *novelty* character of fake news, which “spreads significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than genuine news” on social media; 4) the role of platform algorithms in the formation of filter bubbles and echo chambers, which result in ideological polarisation; 5) the limited diversity of digital news, since the majority rely on the same news agencies – even in different news publishers; 6) the decline of professional journalism, partly due to the collaboration between journalists and public relations practitioners.

Following this contextualisation of post-truth dynamics and the proliferation of fake news, it is essential to examine the role of the media – both traditional and digital – in facilitating these processes.

Traditional media has been crucial in shaping post-truth dynamics and the rise of populism. With the pressure to maintain 24-hour news cycles and secure advertising revenue, media outlets often prioritise sensationalism over accuracy.

The relationship between populism and the media is particularly complex. Zúquete (2022) argues that mainstream media often serve as key platforms for disseminating populist messages, ultimately benefiting populist leaders – even when the coverage is negative. By framing them as controversial or disruptive figures, the media reinforce the idea that these figures represent genuine resistance against the elite. Besides, while social media plays a crucial role in direct communication with supporters, traditional media remains essential for reaching broader audiences and elevating populist leaders’ public visibility.

Moffitt (2016, p. 76) further analyses the interplay between populist style and media logic, identifying three key intersections. The first one is the *appeal to the people* present in populism, that is associated with the *us vs. them* rhetoric, the *anti-elite* position and the denial of expert knowledge, which have parallel in what the author calls the “sports

based” polarisation and dramatisation that exists in media logic. Secondly, the “bad manners” of the populists and their political incorrectness are attractive to the media, who seek personalisation and emotion. Finally, the rhetoric of constant crisis and threat that populists adopt is also attractive to the media that focuses on scandals and seeks simplification and intensification.

Also, the tendency of the media to exaggerate or dramatise events is also important in this context. It amplifies fear and insecurity, creating an atmosphere where populist rhetoric prospers. Media sensationalism diminishes, in this sense, the role of rational debate and further corrodes democratic discourse, contributing to the construction of a political landscape in which emotional appeal outweighs rational debate.

However, while traditional media assume a significant role, the exponential growth of digital platforms has proven to be even more influential. Social media, in particular, provides an ideal environment for populism to grow. Populists rely on social networks to disseminate their messages rapidly to vast audiences, but also social networks benefit financially from the viral, polarising and emotionally charged content populists produce, which prolongs audience interaction.

Revenue models based on advertising incentivise social media platforms to maximise user interactions, with little motivation to limit polarising or misleading content. Engesser *et al.* (2017) focus on three characteristics of populist style – the simplification, emotionalisation and negativity – and compare them with the *attention economy* of the internet, concluding that “populism is particularly well-suited to be communicated online” (Engesser *et al.*, p.1286). As “the concept of attention economy implies that attention is a scarce resource over which information providers have to compete”, the internet tends to be beneficial to the content that can get users’ attention during long periods of time, and the characteristics of populist style increase “our attention by addressing fundamental perceptual patterns and news values” (Engesser *et al.*, p. 1285-1286).

Moreover, a fundamental distinction exists between traditional and social media: the absence of the *gatekeeper*, the editorial mediator, on digital platforms. In this sense, it

may be argued that social media are not even *media*, because they do not have a mediator.

This lack of a regulator appears revested in an apparently democratic form, but the effects are far from democratic, as Habermas (2023, p. 27) states, in a small book abording the *structural transformation* of the public sphere:

Its content is unregulated because professional filters are lacking. The egalitarian and unregulated character of the relationships between participants and the equal authorization of users to make their own spontaneous contributions constitute the communicative pattern that was originally supposed to be the hallmark of the new media. Today, this great emancipatory promise is being drowned out, at least in part, by the desolate cacophony in fragmented, self-enclosed echo chambers.

This emphasizes the urgent necessity to analyse the phenomenon of echo chambers, in conjunction with the formation of information bubbles and the role of algorithms.

As Bruns (2019, p. 15) explains:

Echo chambers and filter bubbles come into being when there are significant disconnects in the network: when specific groups and communities separate from the rest of the network (by their own choice or through the actions of others) and can therefore no longer be reached by new information from the outside.

Social media algorithms, by tracking user behaviour (likes, shares and comments, for example), personalise content delivery to match individual preferences, thereby creating information bubbles.

This concept differs from that of echo chambers in that, although both result in a visible bias in the feed of the platform in question, the nature of their personalisation is different. Unlike echo chambers, which users actively construct by selectively engaging with like-minded groups and pages, information bubbles emerge passively: even users attempting to maintain diverse informational diets are nonetheless fed content that

reinforces their preferences. While echo chambers can exist offline – through the choice of newspapers, television channels or cultural activities – social media vastly amplifies their scale and impact, given their constant presence on mobile devices and daily life.

The algorithms' personalisation mechanisms inherently limit the diversity of information users receive. Consequently, the populist message circulates within an environment optimised for emotional engagement and ideological isolation.

Whereas traditional newspapers and broadcasting media, despite their flaws, provided a shared informational basis for public debate, social media platforms have fragmented the public sphere. Different individuals now encounter radically different sets of information, many of which are false or misleading.

As McIntyre (2018) refers, in the three months following the 2016 United States' election, the top twenty fake news stories outperformed the top twenty real news stories in terms of shares. The social media *virality* triumphs over *truth*.

The result is the construction of distorted perceptions of reality. Narratives that are plausible – but false – circulate widely, reinforcing the populist framework where truth no longer corresponds to reality but merely coheres with pre-existing beliefs. *Alternative facts*, in this environment, justify beliefs detached from any external verification.

A comparison can be made with what was exposed in both Sections 2 and 3, to further understand how the characteristics developed above are related to the conception of populism as the rejection of dialogue.

On the one hand, these characteristics are not aligned with Mill's reflections on freedom of expression. Algorithms close the users in filter bubbles, where the dialogue with other views do not exist and people do not benefit from the contact with different opinions. As Engesser (2017, p. 1286) resume, "the homophile filter bubbles and echo chambers of the Internet are fertile grounds for the idea of excluding 'others'."

On the other hand, fake news, media sensationalism, filter bubbles and echo chambers contribute to reinforce existing biases, making it difficult to challenge the spread of disinformation. In this context, populist leaders find new opportunities to communicate

directly with their audience, since “the Internet provides populist leaders with personalized communication channels that allow them to exert their charisma and suggestive power,” reinforcing their emotional connection with followers and reducing the space for critical debate (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1286). Their authority is then reinforced, through the dissemination of statements that, even when do not correspond to reality, are coherent with their set of beliefs.

Conclusion

In order to study populist resistance to facts, a vision of populism as the rejection of dialogue was developed.

To achieve this, a review of the literature was conducted, considering how academia has treated the concept of populism. From the historical overview and the various approaches to the concept of populism, it was possible to identify the most relevant characteristics of the phenomenon, which provided the framework to develop the dissertation's central argument.

The understanding of populism as the rejection of dialogue was then presented, stemming from two essential ideas. First, populism rejects dialogue because it does not adhere to the principles of freedom of expression as articulated by Mill. This is evident in several aspects, such as the invocation of the general will, the conception of the people as a homogeneous entity, the hostile attitude towards pluralism, the treatment of opponents and the scepticism towards science and expertise.

Second, populism rejects dialogue because it tends towards authoritarianism. Its notion of truth as plausibility – employed to legitimise beliefs and opinions even when they lack correspondence with reality – results in a structure where truth is defined exclusively by the leader. At this point, Mäki's work on truth and science was particularly influential, offering the conceptual foundation to infer the populist relationship to truth.

For populists, statements are not true because they accurately reflect reality, but because they align with what is already predefined as true within their framework. Consequently, challenging populist narratives with factual evidence becomes nearly impossible, as only information that conforms to their internal belief system is recognised as valid. This dynamic reinforces the loyalty of the electorate to the leader, further entrenching the system.

Furthermore, the characteristics of contemporary society, particularly the conditions of the post-truth era and the transformations in media landscape, contribute to the rise of

populism. These conditions not only help explain its growing presence, but also its marked resistance to facts.

In this sense, having examined how key characteristics of populism stand in opposition to the principles of freedom of expression as defended by Mill, and how its argumentative structure is based on a notion of truth as plausibility, where the leader takes a central position, populism can ultimately be understood as the rejection of dialogue. When truth is defined by an authoritarian figure, dialogue becomes unnecessary and unfeasible.

According to this view, it is not accurate to claim that populism is a democratic force in the sense that it brings previously excluded voices into political representation. That is not the case. The only voice populists truly represent is that of their leader – and this is clear.

This understanding helps explain, on the one hand, that populism resists facts due to the notion of truth that underlies it; and, on the other, that it has gained ground in today's world because the current context favours the spread of ideas that are coherent with one's worldview, even when they lack correspondence with reality.

To sum up: populism is not democratic. It is the rejection of dialogue.

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