

Nadia Urbinati, *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*, Harvard University Press, 2019, 272 pp., \$47, ISBN 9780674240889.

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Nadia Urbinati wrote *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* between 2016 and 2018, when populist movements experienced a surge in support culminating in the election of two populist leaders in Italy and the United States. Background and residence guide the Italian-born Urbinati, who holds a chair in political philosophy at Columbia, to focus on these two elections specifically. However, hers is an analytical study of populism that treats it as involving the transformation of the three main strands of modern democracy: the people, the principle of majority and representation. Questions discussed in the text include: How do legal and social conditions relate in a populist regime? Do populist democratic constitutions maintain civil liberties and the separation of powers? The main argument of the book is that populist democracy is a new form of representative democracy, but its difference lies in the direct relationship between the leader and the people. Although the leader is still seen as the voice and incarnation of the people, they define a specific group as the “right” or “good” people and this results in the superior authority of these “chosen” people over the rest of the population. Concerning the current rise of populism, the book makes an important contribution to “maximalist theory,” which the author defines as a “theory of populism as representative construction that has more than a merely analytical function.”²¹ This contrasts with “minimalist theories” that try to grasp the phenomenon via case-based studies. Urbinati has explicated this diarchic theory of representative democracy previously and this new text extends this treatment. Ideas, such as the “will,” for example in voting, and “opinion,” both of which rise above institutions, help us to understand the support for populism and what it

²¹ Nadia Urbinati, *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2019), 28.

disfigures or transforms.

The book begins the exposition of populism by offering examples of phenomena that have altered our constitutional democracy. Once established, these are replicated by populists all around the world with the aim of replacing party democracy with a populist democracy. Urbinati also offers a synthetic and critical overview of rival contemporary interpretations of populism. For Urbinati, a populist transformation is based on two factors within our democracy, present in all these theories. The transformation or disfigurement of representative democracy by populism depends on circumstances such as “the growth of social and economic inequality” alongside “the growth of a rampant and rapacious global oligarchy.”²²

Urbinati clarifies the distinction between populism as a movement and populism as a ruling power or a system in terms of rhetorical power and legitimate power. Correspondingly, although their contours are ambiguous, the nature of populism springs from a new and distinct relation between these characteristics of fascism and democracy; and this makes the conceptualization of populism as a new form of democracy clear. For example, populism’s participation in elections, whose legitimate role it accepts, is one reason why Urbinati claims that populism constitutes a new form of democracy. As she states: “democracy and populism live and die together.”²³ It is true that in comparison to democracy, populism and fascism have distinct features. However, at this point in the book, Urbinati asserts that if a theory regarding a given issue is not fascist, then it is automatically democratic.

In Chapter 1, Urbinati asserts that all populist movements are influenced by democracy in their claim to abide by the majority of the people and in their opposition to “the establishment.” Populist movements claim that “the establishment” connects political elites from various political parties who pursue their own interests, which therefore undermines political equality. In particular, the thesis of populism is based on “the assumption that political power is a machinery of corruption.”²⁴ But, as Urbinati makes clear, it is “not a revolutionary call; nor is it a call for constituting sovereignty”; instead, it is simply “a call for a

²² Ibid., 4.

²³ Ibid., 15.

²⁴ Ibid., 59.

change of the elite in power.”²⁵

Populist anti-establishmentarianism aims to replace the “wrong people” (the “inauthentic few”) with the “right people” (who are, in fact, the only “authentic” people).²⁶ To be more precise, Urbinati distinguishes between two different kinds of populism. First, what she calls “thin” or “minimalist” populism is based on moral assumptions, and this forms the moral basis for this movement. Two opposing camps result from this position: the moral “people” and the corrupt “establishment.”²⁷ This works with a simple binary logic: populist or not, inside or outside. On the other hand, “thick” or “maximalist” populism stresses the role of discourse in the construction of “the people.” Despite their differences, they both aim to undermine political parties in constitutional power and to establish a direct representation between a leader and that leader’s “good” or “true” people. Anti-establishmentarianism operates according to two logics: enhancing inclusiveness (of supporters) and engaging in dynamic party competition for power.

In Chapter 2, Urbinati analyzes how populism in power tends to transform two of the three fundamentals of democracy: the people and the majority. The populist desire is to merge the principle of authority with a socio-ethnic reality. This allows us to see that the structure of populism tends to unification rather than pluralism. Populism and democracy mean very different things by “majority.” Contrary to the democratic understanding, which is represented by the voters who conferred victory on one of the competing parties in an election, populism takes the majority to mean the voice of the “right people” and the humiliation of “others.” Populism has developed in such a way as to homogenize the principle of the majority “and inaugurate a majoritarianist government.”²⁸ This destroys the rights of minorities, who might be described as the “wrong” people and aren’t included in the populist’s majority of the “true” people. A populist society does not signify a “partyless” regime; rather, it is factional.

This chapter also explains how diarchy has changed from ancient times to the present. Specifically, from the clash between “mixed gov-

²⁵ Ibid., 64.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 49.

²⁸ Ibid., 9.

ernments” to the clash between “the domain of procedures and norms, on the one hand, and the domain of opinion, on the other.”²⁹ Urbinati’s distinguishing of the democracy found in ancient times, as mixed governments benefiting from *dêmos*, *populus*, from modern democracy suggests that fundamental values (autonomy, freedom of speech, transparency, impartial judgment) of democracy have not reached the modern interpretation. The disappearance of these original features of democracy results in the importance of representative power by which populism abides.

Chapter 3 begins by considering how such representation is practiced and thus delves further into the implications of the previous chapter. It investigates how populist systems disfigure constitutional democracy through a leader who, instead of unifying multiple groups to achieve a consensus, practices fragmentation. Urbinati aims to show that representation, as incarnation or embodiment, is the populist model and the locus of its main difference from representative democracy. Representative democracy is founded on parties and partisanship, both of which respect pluralism. On the contrary, populism “lies in its proclamation of representation as embodiment over mandate representation.”³⁰ It provokes radical majoritarianism and this leads Urbinati to conclude that “populist parties are holistic movements with loose organization.”³¹

Moreover, Urbinati points out the differences between the anti-party animus found in populism and that which characterized fascism. She believes the latter entailed a commitment to construct a fascist society, something which has no place in the constitutional democracy to which populism adheres. Indeed, the paradigms of authoritarian or symbolic representation, even party structures, fail to explain the direct communication between leaders and the people that abandons reliance on traditional media. Such communication, on the other hand, reveals why leadership is an essential element of populism. A populist leader must possess charisma to advance a mission of social redemption and unification, in this way gathering authority by employing propaganda against political enemies, which then serves as a tonic to inspire and sustain people’s faith. Rather than resorting to notions of an uprising or

²⁹ Ibid., 86.

³⁰ Ibid., 115.

³¹ Ibid., 25.

contestation, a populist movement can only be elucidated by its organizing narrative, whose main characters are the aspiration to win institutional power, and a leader who is the true expression of the people.

In Chapter 4, direct representation is clearly elaborated. Through direct representation, populism changes the structure of constitutional democracy by going beyond partisan opposition and reaffirming a unitary representation of the people. This chapter explores two contemporary populist movements to test the practical applications of its theory: the Five Star Movement and Podemos. Crucially, the exploratory question of this chapter concerns how representation can occur directly, given that it is endogenously structured as an indirect and mediated form of political presence. The difference between direct democracy and direct representation is necessary to answer this. Urbinati gives the examples of the plebiscite and the referendum as “forms of direct democracy that resort to the people, but do not institute direct representation.”³² Populism is a development of direct representation, not direct democracy. At the institutional level, especially after gaining power, it suggests a process in which opinion-making and decision-making work together. The machinery of populist representation is trust through faith instead of the free debate and deliberation that is the foundation of any kind of democracy. The transformation of representative democracy goes hand in hand with populism. Where there is mistrust of parties, loose partisanship, or corrupt political elites, we find signs of rising populism.

To conclude, with *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*, Urbinati has made an important contribution to the literature on populism. Our understanding of populism needs to align with her in-depth analysis rather than the common understanding found in popular opinion and the media. By emphasizing the broad history of democracy, she conceptualizes populism in relation to the forms of representative democracy: party democracy and populist democracy. Moreover, she draws a valuable distinction between autocracy and its tools, like plebiscites or referenda, and populism’s representation and its direct channels. Throughout the work, Urbinati reveals that this new form of democracy includes several novel elements: factionalism, majoritarian-

³² Ibid., 161.

ism, embodiment as representation, and anti-partyism, all of which serve as the driving force of unification. In summary, populism as a theory is infused by the spirit of anti-establishmentarianism, making it appropriate to label direct representation as its nature. This book allows us to understand important distinctions and fundamentals and takes populism seriously, as deeply connected to social and actual conditions.