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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Who Thinks, Feels: The Relationship Between Emotions, Politics And Populism

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ABSTRACT: There is a tendency both in academia and in popular understandings to posit emotions against rationality and to judge them as an expression of intellectual inferiority. This could not be more evident than in current accounts of populism, which often describe populist supporters as overtaken by passions rather than relying on rational deliberation. However these arguments hardly stand up to scientific scrutiny. As I will show by reviewing the state-of-the-art, advancements in disciplines such as political psychology have now provided systematic evidence of how, contrary to what is traditionally rooted in the public imaginary, emotions and cognition work in concert. If emotionality is an integral part of decision-making and is vital to any type of political engagement, the question we should rather ask is what is *peculiar* about the relationship between emotions and populism. In the second part of the article, I will explore how the emotional 'supply and demand' intersect in our contemporary societies, where capitalism, individualism and globalisation have created particular affective states that provide fertile ground for the populist appeal to resonate. By examining the emotions-populism relationship based on three broad dimensions - structural, subjective and communicative -, this article provides a multilevel analysis that unpacks the significance of emotions for the emergence, diffusion and success of populism.

KEYWORDS: Emotionality, Narratives, Political communication, Political psychology, Populism.

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1. Introduction

The ideal of the supremacy of reason is deeply rooted in our cultures. Since the Enlightenment Age, the public imaginary has perpetuated an eternal conflict between emotions and reason, prioritising the rational while condemning the passional. The glorification of science, research and rationality that started during that age, has gradually shaped our vision of what 'righteous decision-making' should look like: it should involve reason, conscious deliberation, attentive and scrupulous analysis; with experience, it will provide us with wisdom and the ability to distinguish right from wrong; and when we master it, we are finally able to put 'the mind' before 'the heart'. This century-old 'rationality *versus* emotionality' idea is now cemented in our common understanding of emotions. The 'heart' is considered a place of grand and overwhelming feelings that gifts us with some of the most profound and powerful experiences. It is however *only* a place for experience, not for decisions, and on the battle against the 'mind', it is on the losing side.

Emotions are considered the 'Other of rationality' (Demertzis 2014) and decisions that are said to be based on them, rather than careful thinking, are usually dismissed and downgraded (Jenkins 2018). This could not be more evident than in the study of politics. Phenomena such as totalitarianism, propaganda and populism have historically been examined by equating emotionality with demagogy, manipulation, and treating the 'masses' as slaves to irrational desires. For decades, emotions have been posited in a presumed antagonistic relationship with rationality and "believed to reflect intellectually inferior and often socially and morally irresponsible attitudes and forms of conduct" (Freeden 2013, 2). The renewed attention devoted to the populist phenomenon has only resurfaced this problematic approach.

The debate over emotions adds further complexity to populism research, a field of inquiry already characterized by widespread disagreement and a lack of full definitional consensus over the essence of the phenomenon and its main manifestations. When attempting to define what populism is, scholars focus on a recurrent set of characteristics that populist parties display, most notably the commendation of and appeal to a virtuous 'ordinary people' accompanied by a vilification of a corrupt establishment (Mudde 2004, Taggart 2000). Additional accounts highlight the charismatic personality of populist parties' leaders (Meny and Surel 2001), a straightforward and simplified political message similar to demagogy (Taguieff 2007), a particular mode of party organisation revolving around the leader (Weyland 2001) or a performance of crisis (Moffitt 2015). Such variety of aspects highlighted by the available scholarship is mirrored into a wide range of definitions that see populism as an ideology (Mudde 2004), style (Moffitt and Tormey 2014),

discourse (Panizza 2005), logic (Laclau 2005) or organisation mode (Weyland 2001). In this article, I regard populism 'to be first and foremost about ideas' (Mudde 2017), thus following an ideational approach that conceptualises the phenomenon as a thin ideology "that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people" (Mudde 2004, 543). It is however worth noting that some authors suggest tackling the definitional challenge by appraising populism as a matter of *degree*; as Caiani and Graziano (2016) argue, the various definitional attributes can be aggregated into a set of dimensions, namely rhetoric, ideology, organization and style of communication, that would allow scholars to proceed with a radial (rather than dichotomous) definition.

While the debate over populism as a discrete or continuous concept continues, authors concur on the need to adopt typological distinctions in order to shed light on its different manifestations (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). In Europe, a subfamily of right-wing populists is particularly common - the populist radical right – which combines populism with nativist and authoritarian ideological features (Mudde 2007). Because of the exclusionary nature of their discourse and their emphasis on law, order and authority, these parties have particularly influenced the way both academics and the public think about the relationship between emotions and populism. The term 'populism' has become a synonym to actually indicate the populist radical right and, as such, discourses filled with hate, anger, fear and nostalgia for a glorious past. Populist voters have been collectively accused of acting out of collective rage and cast their ballot based on gut-feelings rather than reasoning and deliberation. In many cases, they have been dismissed as bigots and a "basket of deplorable". Mainstream parties across Europe have widely denounced populist parties are irresponsible actors for fuelling emotions rather than fostering a rational debate, and thus causing political and civic turmoil.

Such an approach is problematic in that it dismisses populism as irrationality *en masse*, downplaying grievances and concerns of populist voters as irrelevant or wrongly placed. Moreover, the dichotomy emotions vs. reason hardly stands up to scientific scrutiny. As this article will show by reviewing the state-of-the-art, advancements in disciplines such as political psychology have now provided systematic evidence of the absence of any sharp distinction between cognition and emotions as traditionally rooted in the public imaginary. After clarifying what emotions are and showing their inherent relationship with decision-making, the article will discuss their relevance to the study of politics. If emotionality is an integral part of decision-making and is vital to any type of political engagement, the question we should rather ask is what is *peculiar* about the relationship between emotions *and populism*. In the second part of the article, I will thus explore

how the emotional 'supply and demand' intersect in our contemporary societies, where capitalism, individualism and globalisation have created particular affective states of grievances, resentment and ontological insecurities that provide fertile ground for the populist appeal to resonate. I propose examining the emotions-populism relationship by looking at three broad dimensions – the structural, subjective and communicative – as this allows us to develop an integrated understanding of how emotions are produced at the macro-level, perceived at the individual level and further reproduced through political narratives. Via this multi-level analysis, the article contributes to unpacking the significance of emotions for the emergence, diffusion and success of populism.

2. Absolving Emotions

What do we mean when we speak about emotions? Emotions have been theorised differently in the literature but it is now widely agreed that they are the result of neural processes in the brain (Brader and Marcus 2013) and, as further evidenced by neuroscience research, they display an intimate interconnection with cognition (Marcus *et al.* 2011).

One of the most prominent accounts in the literature, the theory of affective intelligence (Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen 2000) posits that emotions are the display of feelings generated by the interaction between our personal goals and the surrounding environment. When our goals are met, we experience emotions of positive valence along the dimension of enthusiasm, such as happiness, hope or pride. These emotions tell the brain that a goal has been accomplished and the brain responds promptly by reinforcing existing attitudes and encouraging the establishment of routinized behaviour, as these have been found successful in securing the initial accomplishment (Marcus and MacKuen 1993). On the contrary, when our goals are threatened, we experience feelings of negative valence, along the dimension of anxiety; our brain, in response, suspends routines and rather than relying on existing knowledge and attitudes, examines all information more accurately, in order to reduce threat and uncertainty (ibid.). Finally, when our goals are not met, we experience aversion, which taps into feelings of anger, contempt, frustration or disgust. Unlike what happens with anxiety, aversion is brought about by events which challenge us but that are not entirely unknown or uncertain; as a consequence, our brain does not scan the environment for new information but rather reacts by clinging to previously held opinions (Marcus *et al.* 2000). According to this theory, these three systems – enthusiasm, anxiety and aversion – generate a set of emotions that in turn

affect the way we think and behave in the social world. Emotions thus precede cognition but also work in concert with it in determining the different ways we navigate reality.

This theory represents a 'dimensional approach' to emotions, because it conceptualises them along the valence dimension (negative-positive) in each system and clusters them accordingly. Another approach, the so-called appraisal theory, differentiates more finely among emotions based on the way the individual appraises the surrounding environment. The central tenant of this approach is that emotions do not arise from a situation per se, but from the individual's own interpretations of it, both at the conscious and preconscious levels (Lazarus 1991). As an evolutionary survival function, the individual continuously scans the surrounding environment and appraises all its characteristics, leading to the arousal of certain emotions that relate closely to those evaluations. This means that, unlike the theory of affective intelligence, appraisals theory does not conceptualise emotions along a set of dimensions, but rather as *discrete*, that is, distinguishable from one another. Fear can be a fruitful example to this regard: whereas in the theory of affective intelligence, this emotion is but one possible along the anxiety dimension, for appraisal theorists fear and anxiety can be clearly separated because the first results from the appraisal of a specific and identifiable threat whereas the latter is an appraisal of uncertainty and a diffuse, non identifiable danger (Smith and Ellsworth 1985). In this theoretical account, each emotion is therefore the product of specific combinations of cognitive appraisals; appraisals are automatic but nonetheless cognitive, because they result from how the individual elaborates and makes sense of the surroundings in relation to his or her own needs. Scholars within this approach have identified several 'antecedents' of emotions, that is, the "core relational themes" (Lazarus 1991) that characterise a certain feeling and can therefore predict its arousal. Although there is no consensus on a definite list of these dimensions, academics at least concur on a recurring set, such as goal-relevance, responsibility, certainty and control (Smith and Ellsworth 1985; Lazarus 1991; Roseman, Antoniou and Jose 1996).

Regardless of whether we agree with conceptualising emotions according to valence (the dimensional approach) or we try to differentiate among them more precisely (the discrete approach), what emerges from the literature is that emotions appear inevitably, as we navigate the world around us. They have a diagnostic power, in that they communicate to the brain what is going on around us and whether or how to attend to it. Research has provided extensive evidence of this inherent connection between emotions and cognition. Overall, emotions affect *the way* we think by influencing three important areas.

First, emotions have an impact on the level of attention to the surrounding environment. Attention is a foundational step for any consequent evaluation and decision-

making activity, in that it determines whether the individual is going to attend to a stimulus, avoid it or ignore it altogether (Scherer 1982). Defensive emotions have been found to increase attention levels, as they affect the individual's motivation to be vigilant (Marcus *et al.* 2000). Fear, for example, results in higher levels of attention, as the brain becomes interested in collecting more information to reduce uncertainty (Huddy, Feldman and Cassese 2007; Valentino, Hutchings, Banks and Davis 2008). Anger has the opposite effect, as experiencing this emotion has been found to reduce interest and attention to new information and opposite views (MacKuen, Marcus, Neuman and Keele 2007; Redlawsk, Civettini, and Lau 2007). This is because, as an 'approach emotion' (Carver 2004), anger is activated by the system that manages rewards, signaling an obstacle to their pursuit (Marcus *et al.* 2000). As the path to reward is blocked, this emotion communicates to the brain that all attention and interest be diverted to focus exclusively on the goal.

Second, emotions affect our motivation to act. The behavioral component of emotions has long been emphasized, as one of their core effects is to provoke a change in behavioral intentions prompting the individual to act or behave in certain ways (Oatley and Jenkins 1996; Scherer 2001). Emotions have what has been labeled 'action tendencies' (Frijda 1986), in that they signal the brain that a certain course of action is advisable in order to meets situational needs. Returning to our previous example on the divergent effects of defensive and approach emotions, experiencing anger has been found to motivate individuals to engage in risk-taking and confrontational behaviour (Lerner, Gonzalez, Small and Fischhoff 2003; Brader, Groenendyk and Valentino 2010) whereas the opposite effect has been registered for defensive emotions, with fear prompting individuals to reconsider their course of action and thus to engage in risk-averse behaviour (Lerner *et al*. 2003; Druckman and McDermott, 2008).

Finally, emotions impact the way we form a judgment. As Brader and Marcus (2013) argue, the dual-process model of decision-making, holding that individuals process information based on a 'fast' and on a 'slow' system, is now widely accepted in the literature. Interestingly, and opposite to conventional popular understandings, both systems are influenced by emotions. The fast system is labelled as such as it relies predominantly on more automatic processes and draws heavily on already-formed opinions; this judgement formation route is mostly shaped by approach emotions, which as we have seen decrease attention and push towards confrontational action, hence prompting the individual towards a less deliberative decision-making (Brader 2006; MacKuen *et al*. 2007). The slow system, on the contrary, is more thoughtful and introspective and is shaped by defensive emotions, which foster the brain to examine all collected information

carefully, in a widely deliberative mode of information processing (Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse and Stevens 2005; MacKuen *et al*., 2007; Brader, Valentino and Suhay 2008).

The implications are therefore two-fold. First, the idea that our decision-making is based on two systems, one exclusively emotional and one predominantly rational, is only part of the public imaginary; the picture emerging from academic work is rather one of conjunction between emotions and cognition, which work together in guiding our understanding of the social world. Even the most 'thoughtful and deliberate' decisions are partly submerged in processes that are prominently affective. Second, emotions do not only affect the way we think and make sense of the world, but also the way we act about it. As we have seen, emotions have 'action tendencies' that prompt individual towards one behavior rather than another, based on the information that the emotion itself has passed along to the brain.

As we will see in the following section, this becomes of utmost importance when unpacking how citizens make sense and act in the political world.

3. The Emotional Side of Politics

Rather than 'the Other to reason', emotions are an integral part of our decision-making process and, as such, of any form of political engagement. Research in political psychology has indeed provided systematic evidence that a substantial part of our political life is remarkably affective. Although an exhaustive review of this body of work would be impossible here, we can highlight several prominent examples to show that the reach of emotions in politics goes well beyond populism.

Traditional ideologies, usually embodied by mainstream parties, are anchored in emotionality as much as populism may be. Research has shown how conservative thinking can be a response to a need to reduce fear and uncertainty (Jost, Kruglanski, Glaser and Sulloway 2003), with experimental evidence that priming mortality threats (via terrorism) results in post-manipulation conservative identification (Thorisdottir and Jost 2010). Liberals, on the other hand, are less concerned with fear and rather characterized by a higher propensity for empathy (Hsu, Anen, and Quartz 2008; Taber and Young 2013). This emotion emerges as a distinctive trait of liberal ideology in a number of studies, highlighting its centrality in underpinning attitudes toward social spending and the welfare state (Smith 2006).

The relevance of emotions in politics can also be seen through the lenses of intergroup dynamics. In-group identification is one of the most important factors that influence our

social and political life. Individuals have an innate tendency to self-categorize into one or multiple groups, as part of a general cognitive function that helps organize and navigate the social world (Higgins 2000). These dynamics are underpinned by affectivity in several ways. First, individuals have a need to maintain a positive sense of Self and, for this reason, they tend to perceive their in-group more positively than the out-groups (Sindic and Condor 2014). Furthermore, identification with the in-group can grow so strongly that membership culminates in feelings of psychological attachment (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, 1960); membership is thus internalized as part of the Self, in what becomes a 'social identity' (Tajfel and Turner 1979). The boundaries marking in-group belonging also separate members from 'Others' and hostility towards out-groups can increase exponentially whenever challenges or threat to its cohesiveness are perceived (Brewer 2007). Emotions amplify these dynamics by reinforcing internal cohesion and increasing motivation to stand up against challenges to the group (Huddy 2013).

This is evident in the affective polarisation that often circumscribes political parties competition (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra and Westwood 2019). Rather than simply divided over issues and policies, citizens are increasingly hostile to members of the opposite party in a way that fuels prejudiced thinking and the development of biased judgement (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012). This is because, for many, partisanship is an identity with often deep and stable affective attachment and not simply an efficient way of getting their interests represented (Groenendyk 2018). Distrust or dislike toward the opposite camp can escalate to hatred and even reach the point to affect interpersonal relations within one's family or social circle (Iyengar and Krupenkin 2018).

Beyond political and social psychology, sociological research on political and social movements has demonstrated the critical role of emotions in generating, motivating and sustaining collective action (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001). For long time, social movement research dismissed emotions as irrational and primitive and later stripped protestors of emotions in an attempt to support scholars' over-rationalistic assumptions about citizens' behavior (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2000 for a review). On the contrary, the mechanisms that catalyze action and drive participation in social movements are underpinned by emotions originating from both moral outrage (Jasper 1998) and the pleasure to construct a positive sense of Self (Stein 2001). Emotions are also crucial to the day-to-day experience of activism, as the values, symbols and narratives that constitute a movement's culture reflect affective attachments and sustain participation (Goodwin and Pfaff 2001). The decline of a movement is also linked to emotional dynamics: if anger and enthusiasm are pivotal for triggering a desire for activism, disappointment and frustration, as well as intra-group rivalry, very often cause groups to fall apart. And

even after a movement ceases to exist, emotions help reshape the emotional cultures and repertoires for future activism (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001).

These are only *some* examples of how emotions shape different aspects of politics, from ideological thinking to group identification, partisan attachment or collective action. The crucial take-away point from these strands of research is that emotionality is an integral part of the way individuals navigate the surrounding environment and make relevant decisions; as such it is also vital to *any* type of political engagement. Affective reactions are automatic and inevitable and there is no 'rational' thinking that it is entirely independent from emotions.

4. Emotions and Populism

While there is a tendency to ascribe a significant part of populist success to the role of emotions, all forms of politics must comprise affective dimensions that engage citizens (Alvares and Dahlgren 2016). Building upon the research findings explored in earlier sections, I suggest that the question we should rather ask is what is *peculiar* about the relationship between emotions *and populism*.

I propose analysing this relationship by looking at three broad dimensions - the structural, subjective and communicative dimensions. Examining these different levels of analysis allows us to unpack the significance of emotions for the emergence, diffusion and success of populism. The 'Structural Dimension' looks at those studies that have identified a series of macro processes and long-term trends that link the role of emotions to support for populism, by pointing out the development of an affective fertile ground; the 'Subjective Dimension' draws on the political psychology literature documenting, more specifically, what those affective states are, how they are perceived at the individual level and why they make citizens more prone to populist appeals; finally, the 'Communicative Dimension' section discusses studies from different traditions that are brought together by their interest in how emotionality intertwines with populist discourse to address the publics' affective requests.

The Structural Dimension

The relationship between emotions and populism originates first and foremost at the macro, structural level. Several works interested in unpacking the populist appeal and success have highlighted how our contemporary societies provide a particular *affective* breeding ground for populist discourse to resonate. As I will show below, it is several

processes that, in particular, have been identified as contributors and facilitators of populist success.

Political scientists have principally focused on the role played by globalisation processes. The scholarship that addresses the root causes of support for populist parties identifies globalisation as an important cause of those complex affective reactions that citizens of post-industrial societies are experiencing. For Inglehart and Norris (2016), the progress and advancements associated with globalisation have created a new social cleavage between those who embrace post-materialist values and those who fear the rapid erosion of previously predominant views. Such cleavage has a significant affective underpinning: it divides citizens whose preferences have increasingly shifted towards 'progressive issues', such as cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, from those who reject these developments, which they perceive as a form of displacement. Seen through these lenses, the success of the populist radical right (which is what the authors are focusing on, despite their use of the general 'populism' label) has a lot to do with the profoundly emotional issues of identity, attachment and belonging. Affect is deeply embroiled in citizens' responses as well: in fact, supporters of traditional values, such as the older generations or the less educated, resent and blame the 'cosmopolitan' elites for the erosion of their previously predominant views and polarise towards the anti-establishment and conservative appeal of the populist radical right.

Whereas Inglehart and Norris' theory places emphasis on the *cultural backlash* that has given rise to populist success, the *losers of globalisation* thesis (Grande and Kriesi 2012) has been largely linked to the issue of economic decline and has become as shortcut to imply that conditions of economic crisis and unemployment favour the success of populist parties. However, Grande and Kriesi's argument is broader and again provides a useful picture of how globalisation has affected subjective feelings of grievances and threat perception. As the authors argue, globalisation has created new forms of conflict, not only economic but also cultural and political, that have disproportionately affected certain sectors of society. By increasing economic competition, cultural diversity and political integration, globalisation has produced 'winners and losers'. The latter, in particular, experience economic insecurity, feelings of cultural threat from people with different ethnic or religious backgrounds, and feelings of loss over weakened national autonomy. The appeal of supporting populist parties is therefore inherently about the emotional need to address such grievances.

Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) have highlighted how complex and deeply rooted these grievances are, providing a comprehensive picture of populist success that involves feelings of *distrust* and *deprivation*, alongside processes that have caused *destruction* and *dealignment* (they label these, "the four Ds"). In this account as well, populism (or what

the authors call national populism to clarify the rightist connotation of their empirical focus) is profoundly emotional; it is successful precisely because it speaks to people that have long distrusted political elites, that have felt increasingly economically deprived and sceptical about the ability of their community to survive the fast-pace changes that immigration was bringing in; all of this while citizens are increasingly detached from political parties and apathetic towards politics. The role of insecurities is pivotal here, as these broad feelings of 'distrust', 'destruction' and 'deprivation' can be identified in a series of strong fears and concerns that citizens have developed, respectively, about lack of voice, ethnic change and economic loss. A further crucial takeaway point in this analysis is that these processes and grievances are long-term and now deeply rooted and that we should be wary of those analyses that try to pinpoint one single and recent cause for populist success.

As these studies show, a complex range of structural processes has created particular affective states of grievances and insecurities, providing fertile ground for the populist appeal to resonate. This research is therefore highly relevant because it documents the structural dimension of the link between populism and emotions, and lays the theoretical ground for investigating how these macro insecurities are perceived and internalized by individuals and how they are translated into narratives by political actors, which is the focus of the next sections.

The Subjective Dimension

The structural dimension has highlighted how a particular affective state, the sense of *insecurity*, dominates post-industrial societies and creates a fertile ground for the populist message to resonate. The question that this section aims to answer is how do citizens perceive and make sense of such changes in the structure, and more importantly how this is connected to support for populism.

Political scientists Grande and Kriesi (2012) have anticipated that globalisation plays a crucial role, because by increasing competition in economic, cultural and political domains it has indeed brought about competition over jobs, cultural and political identities. For political theorists Salmela and von Scheve (2017, 2018), such emphasis on competition - typical of contemporary capitalist and highly individualist advanced societies - produces a sense of *anticipated shame* in those individuals who fail (or fear of failing) to maintain their status. Shame is 'anticipated' in that it signals a potential or expected loss for which individuals blame themselves; it resembles a sense of failure and incapacity, so painful that the individual diverts it from the Self and directs it as anger to others. The authors call this process of emotional repression and transmutation, *ressentiment*. Salmela and von Scheve thus provide a significant theoretical contribution, which

unpacks the *mechanisms* that explain how changes in the 'structure' may have affected the 'subjective' level, in turn providing ground for populist success. Their theory has yet to be tested empirically, but it points out how understanding the role and impact of insecurities for populism success is becoming increasingly relevant.

Political psychologists label these feelings as ontological insecurities because they concern individuals' own 'being' and refer to their need to have a stable, safe and secure sense of Self (Giddens 1991). Ontological insecurities may be less visible or latent, but studying them allows taking into account the role of contemporary anxieties about a wide range of issues - from culture, to the economy or the welfare state - which are currently fuelling political change but that institutional, legal and policy analyses fail to grasp (Kinnvall, Manners and Mitzen 2018). Ontological insecurities are complex affective states that intertwine in the web of past, present and future, as certain individuals long for the past and a reassuring present, while others fear what is to come (Kinnvall 2018). Taking an ontological security perspective enriches the scholarly understanding of populist success because it gives centre stage to the *subjective meaning* that individuals construct and attribute to their life experience, both in the present and as projected to the future, rather than to the objective *conditions* that are said to leave some people 'behind'. Indeed, political psychology research has found evidence that subjective perceptions are key and that citizens not only support populists when feeling deprived, but also in times of economic prosperity that they do not want to lose *in the future* (Mols and Jetten 2016).

The relevance of insecurity for understanding the populist appeal at the individual-level of analysis is also evident when examined through the lenses of emotionality, as almost all emotions linked to populism have an important insecurity dimension. *Fear and anxiety* are predominantly linked to populism precisely because of the insecurity that is said to emerge from macro-level processes (Grande and Kriesi 2012; Inglehart and Norris 2016). *Nostalgia*, typically linked to right-wing populism, has an insecurity dimension in that it addresses the anxiety of the present about a world that has become increasingly corrupted and distorted, by providing the comfort and security of the past imaginary (Kenny 2017). The nostalgic sentiment is thus as a symptom of a broader call for stability and continuity, in a world that for many is becoming unrecognizable. Also anger has an insecurity dimension, in that it may be the explicit reaction to more intimate vulnerabilities (Salmela and von Scheve 2017, 2018), emerging from the inability to keep up with the world's complexity (Capelos and Demertzis 2018).

Understanding insecurity and the emotions of insecurity is pivotal for developing a comprehensive account of populist success, one that takes into account the fact the audiences are not mere spectators, but appraise and interpret political developments

differently and may feel divergently about them. It therefore becomes crucial to take this complexity with us when analysing how people's feelings interact with populist communication.

The Communicative Dimension

After examining the conditions that have provoked a stoking sense of insecurity in post-industrial societies and how citizens are emotionally affected by such changes, we now turn to how populist actors communicate with their publics. I will focus in particular on how they address contemporary affective requests by constructing meaning and providing interpretations through the use of narratives and emotions.

Research on populist political communication has been a prolific field of enquiry and significant attention has been devoted to identifying the main discursive strategies that populist parties rely upon. As Wirz (2018) notes, the findings in this literature can be systematised into two broad strategies. On the one hand, populists use *advocative messages* to refer to 'the people', narrating its monolithic and uniform character, stressing its virtues and achievement, presenting populist actors as intimately belonging to the category of the ordinary men. Advocative messages help construct a homogeneous in-group and serve as a justification platform for demanding that power be back to the people. On the other hand, they use *conflictive messages* to exclude, discredit and blame elites and the so-called 'dangerous Others' (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008, 2015). All those that do not belong to the people are most commonly denigrated through the attribution of bad characteristics and blamed for the difficulties that the people have to face. Conflictive messages therefore serve as a base to reject that power continues lying in the hand of elites.

Both these communication strategies are prominently affective. Conflictive messages convey negative emotionality towards out-groups, building hostility towards all of those who simply do not belong. Research has focused in particular on the enemification practises of the populist radical right. For instance, Kinnvall (2014) has highlighted that the discursive delineation of enemies both outside and inside the nation is a recurrent characteristics of these parties. Similarly, Wodak (2015) has shown how, by instrumentalising certain actors as scapegoats and constructing them as threatening, populists produce a 'politics of fear'. However, as I will show below, the inherent confrontation constructed by populist communication should be seen as extending beyond a monolithic experience of *fear*.

Populists are in fact more prone to discursive blame attributions than other political actors (Vasilopoulou, Halikiopoulou and Exadaktylos 2014) and this has consistently been found to elicit *anger* (Wagner 2014). Anger is a crucial emotion in populist politics

because, by engaging heavily with discourses of morality and injustice, populism taps into the core relational themes of this emotion (Rico, Guinjoan and Anduiza 2017). Furthermore, anger may also be the explicit reaction to more intimate vulnerabilities (Salmela and von Scheve 2017, 2018). In particular, right-wing populist rhetoric promotes anger with a discourse that is crafted to "deflect shame-induced anger and hatred away from the self and instead toward the political and cultural establishment and various Others" (Salmela and von Scheve 2018, 443). The populist left, on the other hand, acknowledges rather than represses shame, as both its discourse and networked structure foster solidarity and the sharing of grievances. Their social movement culture, based on the ideal of participation, encourages a collaborative sentiment and allows for the transformation of shame "into high-energy, active emotions such as frustration, indignation and anger" (ibid, 446).

Another integral feature of populist communication, especially on the Right, is *nostalgia*. For Kenny (2017) nostalgic appeals in populist discourse respond to visions of the contemporary world as disrupted by fast-pace socio-economic change. The populist narrative portrays the inability of the governing elites to attend, manage or halt such changes, as the principle cause that makes the present a moment of severe danger. The past, on the other hand, has already been lived and so shown to be feasible (Taggart 2004). Nostalgia, therefore, "offers an important route back to the past, and taps into an established emotional repertoire, while simultaneously marshaling arguments aimed at justifying new pathways in the present" (Kenny 2017, 260). With these appeals, populists address that sentiment of anxiety about the present that is prominent in contemporary societies, as many feel that the world surrounding them has become increasingly corrupted and distorted and has turned them into 'strangers in their own land' (Hochschild 2016). Populist nostalgic appeals tame these feelings by providing the comfort and security of the past imaginary.

The bittersweet element of nostalgic emotionality helps us transition to the role of positive affect in populist discourse, which is often sidelined in the literature. The narration infused of negative emotions is in fact complemented by a positive self-construction that harnesses the positive power of values such as honesty, hard work and ordinariness, which bring the people together (Bonansinga 2019). Here political narratives intersect with popular culture and help construct the notion of 'belonging to the people'. After all, as Canovan (1984) noted, the people is an idealised and hyper-vague audience, an inclusive and exclusive, integrative and divisive conceptualization, that eventually means different things to different populists. Therefore, what does it means to be part of the ordinary people? Populists foster a sense of belonging by drawing on two main narratives: the commonality of values and the commonality of experiences (Bonansinga

2019). With the first narrative, they focus on the virtues of authenticity and genuinity that bring the people together, thus building a strong and positive sense of cohesion. By promoting the virtues of the 'ordinary men' while also focusing on the populist actor's commitment to defend people's sovereignty against the out-groups, populist advocative communication reflects the core relational themes of, respectively, pride and hope. These emotions have indeed been linked to populist communication (Marquart and Matthes 2016). Identities, however, are constructed both internally *and externally (*Jones and Krzyzanowski 2008). Populists build cohesion also by highlighting that the people share the common experience of deception and exploitation by self-serving and corrupt elites. There is thus a flow of both positive and negative affect that is directed both inwards and outwards, toward the people and its enemies (Bonansinga 2019).

There is therefore a profound emotional complexity in populist communication that is important to keep in mind; we should refrain from simplifying populist rhetoric as a single-emotion politics (e.g. the politics of fear, the politics of anger) and rather take into account that different emotional appeals coexist at the same time and within the same narrative.

This point has been strongly reiterated by sociological research on political mobilization. Visual research, in particular, has provided a pivotal contribution in evidencing both the complexity and variety of emotions invoked by populists (especially on the Right). The strategic use of images, such as the controversial electoral posters frequently circulated by these parties, allows conveying highly charged messages in a simplified and instant way (Richardson and Colombo 2014). Posters build boundaries between in-groups and out-groups by mobilising, on the one hand, symbols of pride and belonging and appealing to the positive affect generated by one's identity (Flam and Doerr 2015). On the other hand, they construct imaginaries of threat and insecurity, by invoking otherness (Richardson and Wodak 2009). They also portray an immediate, shared and common sense solution to the presumed threat (ibid.), that can certainly appeal to both the relief of safety and the thrill of payback, as well as extending an authoritarian appeal to those who long for tough responses. This strand of research shows rather powerfully the heterogeneity of populist emotional mobilization and its reach well beyond text and narratives.

Although the majority of scholarship produced, and examined so far, tends to focus on right-wing populism, it is crucial to remark that populists address and articulate their emotional appeals differently, depending on the 'exclusionary' versus 'inclusionary' nature of their populist ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). Mudde and Kaltwasser's distinction builds on Margaret Canovan (1984) insights that the 'content' of the term 'the people' has several connotations. First, the people may be intended with a

'democratic' connotation to indicate the ultimate source of power in a democratic regime; hence, the people as the sovereign, the ruler. Second, the term can be used to refer to an average socioeconomic status, which usually brings together the majority of citizens in a given country; thus the people as 'the common' and 'ordinary' people. Finally, the ethno-nationalist connotation gives the term a more nativist dimension and appeals to those who are natives of a specific place. For Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013), it is these latter two - socio-economic vs nativist connotations - that constitute an important distinction between what they call inclusionary and exclusionary populists: whereas the latter define the people strictly as natives and thus construct a large number of out-groups, inclusionary populists understand the people more broadly, as those who have been aggrieved by neoliberal elites, regardless of ethnicity, religion or culture. As Salmela and von Scheve (2018, 440) put it:

> "Right-wing populist rhetoric and discourse promote anger and resentment directed at those who have a "good life" without hard work, such as politicians and top managers on high and secure income, welfare recipients and refugees "looked after by the state," and the long-term unemployed who "avoid work," but also at groups perceived to be different from "us": ethnic, cultural, political, and sexual minorities. By contrast, left-wing discourse and rhetoric instill anger and resentment at those responsible for enforcing politics perceived to increase injustice, inequality, and precariousness, such as national governments and supranational institutions".

Therefore, different populists direct their narratives to different affective 'recipients', which reflect dissimilar constructions of 'the people' and 'the elite' and the meanings ascribed to them.

5. Conclusion

Social and political sciences suffer from a significant normative bias against emotionality that is only being redressed by the recent affective turn (Demertizis 2014). Populism has long been labelled an 'emotional' phenomenon, with the adjective used predominantly in negative terms to indicate an opportunistic discourse that manipulates citizens' passions. Such normative bias is not only an academic or journalistic matter; it is widely rooted in the idea of a clear-cut divide between emotions and reason, which makes decision-making based on the former too 'fast' and 'unreliable'.

By exploring the world of emotions from a psychological perspective, this article has shown that the dichotomy heart versus mind hardly stands up to scientific inquiry. Systematic and compelling evidence now sustains an idea of decision-making as a function

that relies conjunctly on emotions and cognition. Rather than marked by a divide, emotionality and rationality are intimately related and interdependent from each other. This does not certainly exclude the political domain: although with different degrees, functions and effects, all aspects of our engagement with politics are characterized by important affective underpinnings.

Building upon such evidence, we can argue that the role of emotions is a significant factor that helps disentangling the puzzle of the populist appeal, but not because populism is an 'emotional' phenomenon in an 'unemotional and entirely rational' political world; rather, populism is *peculiarly* emotional, as *specific* affective states contribute to its rise, development and success. As the have seen, their role features prominently in the scholarship interested in identifying the structural opportunities for populist success: indeed, populism finds a fertile emotional ground in contemporary post-industrial societies where a series of processes of at the macro-level have brought about increasing insecurities. The scholarship in political psychology is complementing these accounts with a fast developing research agenda looking at the individual-level factors that contribute to populist success, as the public perceives and internalises these structural changes differently. In this discipline as well, in particular in recent years, there has been an increase of attention to the role of affects and analyses have shown how citizens have developed a variety of ontological insecurities that differ in their referent object, as this can span from perceived cultural dilution to economic distress; ontological insecurities are also extremely complex affective states because they intertwine in the web of past, present and future, and can be manifested through divergent expressions of grievances. At the intersection between the structural and subjective levels, populist communication becomes pivotal in the construction, interpretation and reproduction of insecurity narratives. Even though the structural and subjective level may create a favourable affective space, it is the narratives provided at the political level that construct particular interpretations in turn affecting the way citizens make sense of unfolding political events. Political leaders' judgments are therefore central in guiding the deconstruction of information and the creation of meaning and this marks the clearest point of departure from mainstream parties. The focus on the agency of populist actors, manifested through the use of narratives, serves as an analytical bridge to understand why certain interpretations are favored and become dominant in some contexts but not in others. Populists, on the left and on the right, have built their deeply affective accounts of who is *the danger*, who is *in danger* and who is *to blame*, that are crafted to respond to contemporary affective requests. Populist narratives become the lenses through which meaning is constructed, attributed and transferred; interestingly, they attend to affective requests

through the further mobilisation of emotionality, creating the affective glue that can potentially translate grievances into support.

Analyzing the emotions-populism relationship by looking in conjunction at the structural, subjective and communicative levels is thus useful to develop a *comprehensive* understanding of emotions as a significant contributor to populist success. This analytical framework captures the vital interconnections between how emotions are produced at the macro-level, perceived at the individual level but also guided, shaped and reproduced through political narratives. Rather than focusing exclusively on a single dimension, a multi-level analysis has the advantage to unpack the significance of emotions for the entire process of populism emergence, diffusion and success.

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