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Populism and conflicts in the Italian politics. The analysis of the political rhetoric of Matteo Renzi as a case study

Federico Quadrelli *

Abstract

In this paper I discuss critically the concept of populism trying to operationalise it for an empirical analysis. I will present a case study, which is an analysis of the political rhetoric of Matteo Renzi based on the content analysis. Through two main categories and four subcategories, I will show that populism can be found also in leader which are not expression of the far-right movements or parties and that for the Italian case we can see a specific form of populism, institutionalized and “from above” using the definition of the Italian political scientists, Marco Revelli. The case study aims to provide some additional empirical finding for the study of populism in Italy.

Key Words

Populism; political communication; Euroscepticism; nationalism; post-democracy

Introduction

In this paper, I will discuss the concept of populism in the Italian experience analysing the political rhetoric of Matteo Renzi, former Prime Minister of the Italian Republic and former Chairman of the Italian Democratic Party (PD), as a case study.

Firstly, I will present a critical theoretical overview of populism. Secondly, I will present the analysis of the case study based on a qualitative approach using the content analysis as method (Kohlbacher, 2005; Mayring 1994; 2000, Titscher, 2000).

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The concept of Populism is often used in the political and journalistic discourse as a negative attribute and in an incoherent way (Revelli, 2015). But what is populism? Some authors spoke about it as an ideology (Mudde, 2004), others as a communication or political style (Taggart, 2000, 2004).

In this paper, I will present a critical overview of the theoretical background aiming to show that the concept is *per se* nor negative even positive. That populisms can be an ideology as well as a political and communication strategy. What I maintain is that there is a common issue, which is the existence of a permanent conflict between two distinct groups, or more, often described in moralistic terms, as observed by Müller (2016) and that a peculiarity of this style or ideology is the construction of the enemy.

Populism is considered generally an attribute to the far-right politicians. What I maintain is that is not completely true, as Diamanti and Lazar (2018) observed. For that reasons, I decided to analyze the political rhetoric of Matteo Renzi because he represents a politician who is not expression of the far-right and that is, despite the personal and political point of views that someone may have, together with the success of the Movements Five Stars (M5S), one of the most interesting events in the Italian politics since the victory of Silvio Berlusconi in 1994¹. According to Revelli (2015), Matteo Renzi represents a peculiar case of a form of populism, which is typically Italian.

I will also try to describe the political rhetoric of Matteo Renzi through an analysis of some of the content of his E-News, a *medium* characterized by direct contact between Renzi, the producer of the contents, and his followers. The period of analysis goes from the 30 November 2013, more precisely from his last message before his victory in the primary election of PD in 2013, to the 07 December 2016, when he wrote his last comment as Prime Minister, right after the failure of his Constitutional Referendum, the “mother of all battles”.

The “disintermediation” of the communication between politicians and the ordinary people, as defined by Berger and Luckmann (1966), is a distinctive element of so-called post-democracy (Crouch, 2004). The medium as well as the content is relevant

¹ See, among others, Allegranti (2011, 2014), Biorcio (2015), Ventura (2015).

to this analysis and defines the peculiarity of the Italian way to populism (Dal Lago, 2017).

1. Populism. A (still) contested concept

The concept of “populism” can be defined as a “catch-all word” (Revelli, 2017:4) used for referring to a wide range of issues, often in a confusing or incoherent way. Since decades, political scientists, sociologists, experts of political communication and philosophers, are debating on what populism is or should be (Deiwiks, 2009; Ionescu and Gellner, 1969; McKenna, 1974; Canovan, 1981; McMath, 1992; Mény and Surel, 2002; Albertazzi and McDonnel, 2008, 2016; Müller, 2013, 2016).

In 1967, for instance, Isaiah Berlin described Populism in those terms: “there exists a shoe – the word ‘populism’ – for which somewhere there must exist a foot. There are all kinds of feet which it nearly fits, but we must not be trapped by these nearly-fitting feet” (Berlin 1967).

According to Diamanti and Lazar (2018) and Revelli (2017) there are many different types of populisms. Taggart (2004), for instance, spoke about Populism as a demagogic approach and as an “*episodic, anti-political, empty-hearted, chameleon-like celebration of the hearthland in the face of crisis.*”

For Taguieff (2002) and Moffitt (2016) it is more a political-communication style, while for Laclau (1977) it is the way a political discourse is produced and re-produced. Other authors stressed the political positioning of parties and movements speaking about right-wing populism (Betz, 1994, 1996; Decker, 2004; Wodak, 2013; 2015) or left-wing populism (Laclau, 2005; Lazar, 1997; Mouffe, 2016, Solty and Werner, 2016). Frölich-Steffen and Rensmann (2005) proposed instead to speak about nationalistic populisms as a more inclusive concept, valid if speaking for movements or parties on the right or on the left side of the political spectrum.

The distinction between left and right-populism emerged as important, especially

for the Italian contests. While the right-populism is, according to Mouffe (2018) focused on the creation of forms of separation based on cultural or ethnical elements, with a strong anti-immigrant and nationalistic rhetoric, the left-populism stress the fight against inequalities. The target of the political fight is the neoliberal system, which has created a disproportion between those who have nothing and those who have too much. It is, in other word, the imagine of the fight of the 99% against the 1% of the rich. Mouffe suggests, for instance, that a left-populism should point on the creation of a “people” understood as a product of a bottom-up process, which is activate by a common recognition of the failure of the neoliberal ideology that was practiced by the middle-left and middle-right parties without exceptions.

In conclusion, left and right-populism differ deeply in the way they image the society and in the way they want to achieve their goals. Between those two pure ideas of populism, we can find a wide variety of intersections.

2. The core elements for the definition of populism

In the general discourse, the concept “populism” expresses something negative. If we consider the origin of the word, we have some additional elements for the analysis. “Populism” derives from the Latin word “populus”, which means “the people”. Around this concept was founded strong rhetoric, often negative. Everything that came from “the people” sounds in a way dangerous because uncontrollable, and for that reason, a risk for the democratic system. An interesting thing is that the word “democracy” derives its meaning from another old word, the greek “*demos*”, which means “people” as well as the word “*populus*”.

What has changed, according to Revelli (2017:8), is the meaning of what we intend to convey by “government of the people”. We should speak about the aristotelian *ochlocracy*, which is the “*government of the mass of people*”, instead of the “government of the [generic] people”².

2 The shift is based on the idea of our contemporary conception of democracy, which is “representative”. The Idea is that an efficient and sustainable system can be accomplished only through a system of representation instead through a sort of “direct democracy”, as the

In this work, I refer to the concept of “populism” neither as a “positive” nor as a “negative” one. Populism is intended here as just an analytical category, which is neutral in respect of the political or the personal point of view.

Deiwiks (2009) found two core characteristics of “populism”. The first one is the idealisation of “the people”, understood as a homogeneous entity, which is pure, innocent and the object of injustice. The opposition is between “the people” and something that can be “above it”, such as an élite, or something that can be “under it”, such as the immigrants or the “general other”. The second characteristic is the existence of a kind of treason operated by someone, which is against the “good citizens”, “the people”. This kind of conflict is not only political or social, it is especially ethical, based on a “moral contraposition” between the groups.

This conclusion rises from one of the most used and important definition of “populism”, which puts together those two elements: “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous 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).

The core element of this definition is the existence of a conflict, which is permanent, between two categories: the élites and the people. This definition suggests the existence of a populist ideology, which is according to Müller (2016:19) “a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified – but, (...) fictional – people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other words morally inferior.”

Populists aim to represent all the people, or as Grillo said in an interview, the 100% (Faris 2013). No one less than the totality. At this point at least two paradox emerged.

The first is that populists aim to cancel the conflict in the society representing the totality of the people, but to justify their own existence they need conflicts who

M5S for instance claim.

allow the creation of enemies, such as the corrupted elites, the global finance, the international organisation or the immigrants.

The second is that populists need a strong charismatic leader, which is seen as the only one who can protect the people, who can speak for the people and who represents the people. The people, in the populist discourse as described by this definition, for instance, is completely absorbed by the figure of the leader. The leader who is speaking for the people become the only one who can really represent the people or, with the words of Nadia Urbinati (2015), the only one who can directly represent them.

In conclusion, core elements of the populist approach are: 1) the contraposition of the people to someone else who is generally seen as bad and corrupt, 2) the existence of a strong charismatic leader who presents themselves as the only legitimate representative of the people, 3) the aim to eliminate conflict in the society, or the plurality as Müller pointed out, in order to have an homogeneous entity, the people, but using conflict in order to justify its own existence.

3. Questions and methodology of the research

As explained, the concept of Populism is ambiguous and strongly contested because authors tried to use it as a catch-all-word (Revelli, 2017) who cannot be easily operationalized in the empirical research, due to his fluidity and uncertainty.

According to Pappas (2016) “the study of populism has been plagued by 10 drawbacks: (1) unspecified empirical universe, (2) lack of historical and cultural context specificity, (3) essentialism, (4) conceptual stretching, (5) unclear negative pole, (6) degreeism, (7) defective observable-measurable indicators, (8) a neglect of micromechanisms, (9) poor data and inattention to crucial cases, and (10) normative indeterminacy.”

In this paper, I will not try to present an empirical work who fit all the element requested by Pappas, but I will try to realize an analysis of a specific case, which

I consider crucial in order to better define the idea of Populism and to avoid easy classification, such as the idea that populists are only on the right side of the political spectrum or that they promote just a destructive strategy.

As observed by many authors, there are many different types of populism. In this analysis I try to answer to the following general question: what are the distinguish elements of the Italian (left)populism? To answer to this very general question proceed with the analysis of a specific case study, focusing on the following questions: *what are the peculiar elements of the political rhetoric of Matteo Renzi? In what way can we understand the political rhetoric of Renzi as a peculiar form of (Italian) populism?*

According to the three characteristics of populism described previously, I will try to define the type of populism who better describe the experience of Matteo Renzi in the Italian political panorama as a political style. Then, I will present some categories of analysis focusing on certain specific dimensions that I assume to be the central element of the rhetoric of Matteo Renzi, such as nationalism and Euro-scepticisms.

I defined also some subcategories, such as the construction of the enemy – using the words of Renzi himself “those who play against” – and the Italian pride or heroism, in refer to the category “nationalism” and “bad” versus “good” Europe in refer to the category “Euro-criticisms”.

The dimensions were selected after a preliminary work based on extensive reading sessions of Matteo Renzi's texts and after many long hours listening to some important speeches on television, on Facebook-Live, and during the PD Conventions as a participant observation, thanks to my role as members of the national assembly³.

3 I heard, collected and analysed interviews on television during the time of his Presidency as well as the so-called “Matteo Risponde” that is a public question time where Matteo Renzi uses to answer directly to people in FB or Twitter, with a live session. I heard also the opening speeches of the General Assembly of the Democratic Party in Italy in Rome (2014), Milan (2015) and Rome again (2016). At those meetings, I was present as national delegate of the democratic party. It can be understood as a primary source, which supported me on the creation of this project.

3.1. The first category of analysis: nationalism

Nationalism is another concept that everyone knows and that everyone can connect to a wide range of historical, social and political experiences (Smith, 2013), mostly to negative ones.

The concept “nationalisms”, as well as “populism”, has a political and ideological connotation, because of those specific historical experiences, for instance the dictatorships in Europe in the 20th century, and the Second World War (Greenfeld, 1993). At a theoretical level, nationalism is a phenomenon like the others that can be analysed and interpreted. Smith (2013) proposed a general set of characteristics of the phenomenon.

According to the British sociologist, the use of the concept of “nationalism” focused in the last century on:

- a. a process of formation, or growth, of nations;
- b. a sentiment of consciousness of belonging to the nation;
- c. a language and symbolism of the nation;
- d. a social and political movement on behalf of the nation;
- e. a doctrine and/or ideology of the nation, both general and particular.

Those dimensions are connected and they cannot be separated (ibid.). Nationalism is a rhetoric, which supports the creation of meaning around specific issues, for instance: the national identity, (imagined) community, moral duties and shared values (Anderson, 1983; Gellner at all, 1995; Grosby, 2005; Smith, 2013)

According to Spencer and Wollman (2002:3), Nationalism can be defined as “an ideology which imagines the community in a particular way (as national), asserts the primacy of this collective identity over others, and seeks political power in its name, ideally (if not exclusively or everywhere) in the form of a state for the nation (or a nation state)”.

In this work, nationalisms are understood as an element of a specific communication strategy, which is used in order to achieve other goals.

The two subcategories that I elaborated underline this specificity: the first one is about the “Italian heroism and pride” and the second one is about those “who play-against”.

This type of nationalism expresses, using the words of Anderson (1983), an “imaginary community” that is resilient and capable of reacting to injustices and oppressions⁴. The narrative using this kind of nationalism has two goals, firstly the reconstruction of a positive national identity through the restoration of a sentiment of proudness (pride) or “romantic nationalism” (Smith, 2013), *despite* those “who play against”.

3.2. The second category of the analysis: Euro-criticism vs Euro-scepticism

“Europe” is a word that stands for much more than the continent where we all live. It represents, for someone, the European Union (EU) as a whole, but can also be referred to many other specific EU-Institutions, such as the European Commission, the European Court of Justice, the European Council and so on. It represents a set of values and rules, such as the European Convention of Human Rights, the Constitution of the EU, the complexity of the rules and duties everyone has to accomplish. “Europe” represents much more than a geographical entity. In other words, in the political rhetoric of many leaders, without distinction between left or right, “Europe” emerges as a word who is used in order to stimulate positive feeling as well as destructive ones.

It is the “mixed blessing” concept of the European political discourse. A scope, a target, an achievement for someone; a structure of power, bureaucracy or even oppression for some others (Quadrelli, 2014). The concept seems to be central also in the political rhetoric of Matteo Renzi. However, “Europe” as label can not be a category, due to its usage, which is in too many different ways, often incoherent, ambiguous, as we see. Usually, the populists movement, from the left or the right, express a sort of critic or opposition to the European Union, as political and administrative entity. In the recent academic discussion, Aguilera de Prat (2013:22) pointed out that the most used concept, used in order to

4 In this case, the conflict is between the Italian, as imagined community, and those who play against it, internally or externally.

synthesize all those feelings is *Euro-scepticism*, which is “often used synonymously to define some kind of opposition, as a practical response to the development of the EU.”

That present a great “conceptual and operational difficulties” which is the possibility “to draw the boundary which permits certain types of criticism of the EU by Euro-sceptics, but not by others. This means that Euroscepticism implies a continuum that ranges from serious doubts to clear rejections.” But to be “sceptic” doesn’t mean to be automatically “against” or “anti” Europe. Eurosceptics cannot be applied uncritically to those who are waiting for the collapse and destruction of the European Union and those who are asking for a change of it.

According to Bertocini and Koenig (2014): “Eurosceptics are the more moderate political forces expressing vocal criticism against the Union and its policies and calling for reforms. The term Europhobe refers to those that reject European belonging and call for an exit from the EU, the Euro, and/or the Schengen area”.

From this perspective, euro-scepticism emerges here in a very specific form, as well as Nationalism. Both those concepts are strongly bounded with the main concept of “populism” (Chopin, 2015; Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008). But, in order to understand the political rhetoric of Matteo Renzi, and in a broader way the new form of contemporary and European populism, those concepts cannot be separated, despite the theoretical distinction that exists between them (Ricolfi, 2017).

In order to avoid the negative perception, due to the journalistic use made of the presented term, I will use the concept of “euro-criticism” which help also to specify the peculiarity of the political rhetoric of Renzi, when referring to his critic, also strong, against the European Institutions or leaders. The two subcategories that I proposed aim to underline the specificity of the “Euro-criticism” of Matteo Renzi are: the good and the bad Europe, or better, the good or bad narrative of Europe.

4. The results of the analysis

4.1. A populism from above

Matteo Renzi's populism can be described as a peculiar strategy of political communication that combines traditional characteristics of "populism" as it is defined by Cas Mudde (2004) with new elements. This *mix* defines his singularity in the Italian political panorama.

As explained, the traditional form of populism is based on: 1) the positive idealisation of what "the people" is and 2) the idea of a treason over the people committed by a bad or corrupt élite. The subcategories chosen in order to analyse Matteo Renzi's populism are "the protagonists" and "the antagonists" of the change. Therefore, the main questions are "who is the people?" and "who makes up the corrupt élite?"

In analysing the content of Matteo Renzi's E-News it emerges how the former Prime Minister repeatedly uses the term "people" sometimes to refer to the Italian citizens as a whole – perhaps because of his institutional role, and sometimes to the closer circle of his "followers". For instance, "the people of the E-News"⁵ as well as the democrats, who are the members of his "party"⁶.

As common sense suggests, one of the most efficient ways to ensure cohesion in a political group is to identify a common enemy. Matteo Renzi focused his energy against the "Past". Represented almost entirely by the former political class of Italy.

His rhetoric is based on the idea of the so-called "*rottamazione*", which literally means "scrapping (of old vehicles)". It shows the intention to make a break with the past, which he describes as a time of failures, oppression and exploitation,

5 Matteo Renzi, E-News , 13 sep. 2015, original text: "... il popolo delle E-News ricorda bene tutti i passaggi". Translation: "... the people of the E-News well remember all the steps (...)"

6 Matteo Renzi, E-News, 20.06.2015, original text: "... Siamo il partito più votato non solo in Italia ma anche in Europa." Translation: "... We are the most voted party not only in Italy but also in Europe (...)"

and the necessity to change everything, with rapidity⁷:

“I wish to be clear: I didn’t support the idea of *demolishing* because I wanted to do something new in respect to *those before*. I supported the idea of *demolishing* because I wanted to do something better in respect to *those before*” (E-News, 02.09.2014)⁸.

This is in a way the characteristic described by Benjamin as the destructive character, which “knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away. His need for fresh air and open space is stronger than any hatred”⁹.

The target of his rhetoric is a general “élite” situated in an unspecified past. Those who ruled before him represent the main target. Who includes those who ruled before?

This élite includes people from the right parties, such as Silvio Berlusconi, the former Italian prime minister, as well as the people of his own party, such as Massimo D’Alema, former Italian prime minister too or Pierluigi Bersani, former Minister of D’Alema’s and Prodi’s governments, and former leader of the Democratic Party (2009-2013).

The first target of Matteo Renzi’s rhetoric is represented by a part of his own Party, by Renzi himself defined with disregard as “i gufi”¹⁰, those who “play-against the change”:

7 Cf. Revelli, (2015:62) “(...) il personaggio [Renzi] non ha né le competenze. Né l’autorevolezza. Né la forza politica per fare un miracolo del genere (...) aveva fin dall’inizio un’unica risorsa su cui puntare: il mito della velocità”. Translation: “[Renzi] hasn’t the competences. He hasn’t the prestige. He hasn’t the political strength to realise such a miracle [to save Italy and its institutions]. He had, since the very beginning, just one asset: the myth of the rapidity”.

8 Original Text: “Vorrei essere chiaro: io non ho fatto il tifo per la rottamazione perché volevo fare qualcosa di nuovo rispetto a quelli di prima. Io ho fatto il tifo per la rottamazione perché volevo fare qualche cosa di meglio rispetto a quelli di prima”.

9 In Leslie E., (2007) *Walter Benjamin* (critical lives). Reaction Books, London. The essay on the “destructive character” appears for the first time in 1931, in the “Frankfurter Zeitung”.

10 In the Italian tradition, an “Owl” or “Jinx” (Gufo) represents the “misfortune”. Referring to the people, the “Gufi” are those who express malevolence and who are hoping for disasters and calamities. People who are “against” something or someone.

“the Jinx, which so many interests have produced: if the media dedicated to the results of the Government, just the half of the time that they use for a sociological analysis of the usage that I make in the communication of the terms Jinx: it will be fantastic!” (E-News, 09.01.2016)¹¹.

The second target is in a way an extension of the first one. He criticizes not only politicians, from the right and left, who were unable to solve the problem of the Italians, but also all the people who had a role in the public administration (public sectors) as well as the intellectual élites¹².

The (other) populists represent the third target of Matteo Renzi’s rhetoric. The M5S is a new movement which is not only innovative in the way it gains consensus, but also (or especially) for its unconventional communication strategy: its people have proved indeed to be masters of the so called new-media (Biorcio and Natali, 2015; Revelli, 2015; 2017). This has made them the privileged target of Renzi’s political counter-propaganda¹³.

M5S represents the “new” much as Matteo Renzi. The *leitmotiv* for both parts is that “we need to change, those who were there before made everything wrong”. For that reason, the first question is: why not an alliance between those who are basically saying the same things?

The M5S’s answer may be that Matteo Renzi represents the establishment, or as they say “la Casta” and for that, the “Past”. At the same time, Matteo Renzi thinks about himself as the “new”, but with competence and experience due to the time spent in the local administration¹⁴. They contend with each other for the sceptre of the “newest” in the Italian politics¹⁵.

It is probably for that reason that Matteo Renzi adopted the same type of

11 Original Text: “(...) i gufi che tanta attenzione hanno suscitato: se i media dedicassero ai risultati ottenuti dal Governo anche solo la metà dello spazio che impiegano per analizzare sociologicamente l’utilizzo dei gufi nella mia comunicazione sarebbe fantastico!”

12 For instance, during the discussion of the Constitutional Reform (2015-2016), Matteo Renzi often refer to the experts of Constitutional Law, Constitutional Judges as “professoroni”. Translation: “the big professors”. A way to de-legitimize those (the expert) against his plan. Cf. Battista (2016) and Fiammeri (2016).

13 Cf. Matteo Renzi, Press Declarations (ANSA) on 02.10.2016 and 23.11.2016.

14 Matteo Renzi began his political career in 2002 in the party “La Margherita”, which was a centre party with a catholic inspiration, in a middle-left coalition. In 2004 he became President of the province of Florence, and in 2009 Major of the city of Florence, until 2014.

communication style as the M5S (Revelli, 2015; 2017) during the time of his premiership. From this perspective, Revelli (2017) speaks about “populism 2.0.” Matteo Renzi diffusely uses the social media (Facebook or Twitter) and claims to use a new and different public language in contraposition with the “past” and the “old” élites¹⁶.

He started to adopt this communication style in institutional contexts and institutional symbolism was also influenced by that. Due to Renzi's role as a Prime Minister, Revelli (2015; 2017) spoke about “a populism from above”.

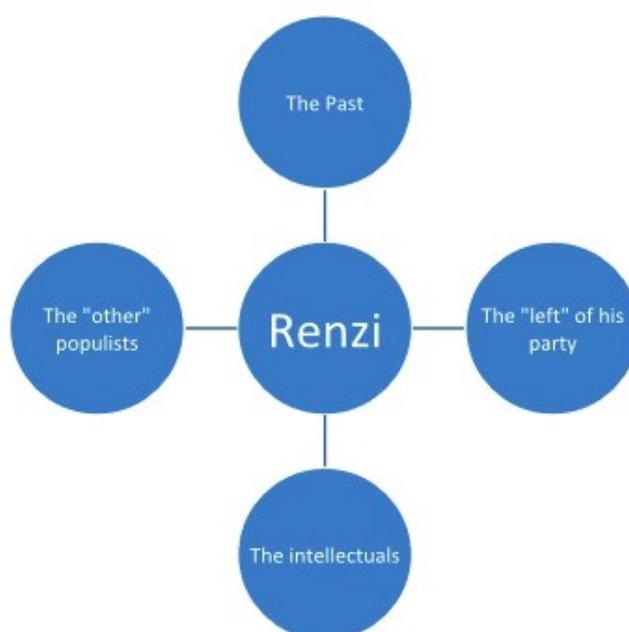


Figure 1. The construction of the enemies

4.2. The romantic nationalism of Matteo Renzi

Matteo Renzi's rhetoric about “Italy” is interesting, too. The art of his populism is

15 According to certain socio-statistical analysis of Demos & Pi. (one of the most important political observatories in Italy), the M5S has the youngest and best educated electoral body. PD is mostly voted by old people, with medium-high education level. Cf. Demos & Pi., 2017.

16 Cf. Matteo Renzi, E-News, 29.02.2016 “ho parlato fuori di politichese”. Translation: “I spoke not with the language of politician”. The concept “politichese” is used in Italian to describe the unclear, standard and “old style” way of speaking of the politicians. A language used in order not to be understood.

strongly intertwined with the narrative of a sort of Italian myth as well as with his euro-criticism. All the political rhetoric of Renzi, according to the analysis of the content of his E-News, is based on a mix of those elements.

The category of nationalism emerges as the most ambiguous one. In order to sustain the traditional populist narrative characterised by a tension between the good people and the bad élites of the past, Renzi often used an expedient: he speaks about the “place where Italy should be”¹⁷. He speaks about the many sacrifices that the Italian people had to make because of the bad administration of the previous élites as well as because of the wrong economic policies of the European Union.

In the rhetoric of Matteo Renzi, nationalism appears as a double narrative: the heroism of the Italians as a people who has resisted against so many hardships during the past and the pride of being Italian. The common element is the resilience of the Italian people. He is the right person, in his discourse, to bring them out of what he defines as the “*palude*” (swamp, in English). The contraposition is with those “who are against”. In his narrative, it is not important to discuss the reasons of this disagreement. It is important to underline that someone is “against”¹⁸.

As the texts show (cf. Table 1.), the positive and romantic narrative of the Italian people is there to support the creation of a new national identity. The recognition of the sacrifices that Italian people have made through the time of the economic and financial crisis has been at the core of Renzi’s rhetoric in the European elections in 2014, as the Democratic Party for the first time in its history triumphed with 40.1% of the total votes.

This identity is not constructed on the basis of some traditional nationalistic element, it is not built in a *negative way* or through a separation between “us” and “them” on the basis of some racial or cultural characteristics. This is the distinctive element of Matteo Renzi’s nationalism, which is not comparable with

17 Cf. Matteo Renzi, E-News, 30.07.2014; 25.07.2015; 02.11.2015. For the translated texts cf. Table 2.

18 Often, there is not a specific target. He speaks, as already shown, about the “Jinx”. A peculiar category that includes everyone who is not supporting him and his political agenda.

the nationalism of the Lega Nord or in a way with the nationalism of the M5S (Biorcio, 2012, 2015; Biorcio and Natali, 2015; Revelli, 2015; 2017).

The Italian heroism	The Italian proudness
30.07.2014 “we, with calm and determination, will put this country back in the place where it should be“	30.07.2014 “We think that Italy is ready to lead Europe”
30.07.2014 “Junker’s announcement about much flexibility and the announcement of new investments for 300 billion Euros are great first steps and an indisputable victory of the Italian proposals”	02.09.2014 “On August 18th I was in Baghdad and Erbil (...) I have had a feeling of pride for representing Italy. They see us as hope-bringers. They are grateful with our volunteers and our organisations that contribute a lot with their help. Sometimes they are alive due to our doctors. For that, when they say Italy they say hope and gratitude.”
20.06.2015 “(...) differently from the past, now, Italy does not represent a problem anymore”	25.07.2015 “But all that has a meaning only if we remember our goal: we do not just want to bring Italy out of the crisis. We want to bring Italy back in the place it deserves: at Europe’s lead. And whatever the cost, we will make it. Because Italy deserves much more”
13.09.2015 “Italy is finally changing trajectory. We are not the problem of the Europe, we are not a global financial threat anymore (...) Italy believes (in itself again?). Italy knows that it is the right time”	02.11.2015 “the dream we have been working for twenty months, that it to say to make our country the driving force of Europe and not the last wagon, will be not a dream anymore. It will became a concrete and feasible project”

Table 1. The Italian heroism and proudness in Matteo Renzi’s rhetoric

4.3. The mixed blessing Europe

Europe is the mixed blessing concept in the political rhetoric of Matteo Renzi. Europe is used in so many ways that it becomes quite complicated to process and analyse all that information using a coherent and linear structure.

Matteo Renzi repeatedly refers to “Europe” in his speeches and in a way plays with its categorization: it is at times bad, at times good. As already explained with the former two categories, this is pretty much a distinctive characteristic of his general political rhetoric. The bad and the good Europe emerged at once in his last E-News as the Major of Florence, before his victory at the party’s primary elections in December 2013:

“(…) who will vote for me, will vote for a Europe that will not just be the one of *bureaucrats*, but [for a Europe] with a soul. For a Europe where the Erasmus program will be extended to the schools and the civil-service will be made mandatory. Where Lampedusa will become a general issue and not only an issue for its habitants or for his Major, where the foreign politics will be not fragmentised as much as the Member States are. Where the stability pact will not block the municipality of Olbia and where the European funds will be used properly and not wasted in bribes” (E-News, 30.11.2013)¹⁹.

Europe constituted from the very beginning a key element of Matteo Renzi’s rhetoric, in an ambivalent way. From a positive perspective it is a Europe *with a soul* (Renzi does not provide us with a more precise explanation of what this might mean), whereas from a negative one it is the Europe of the bureaucrats, the technocrats, the economical parameters (such as the fiscal and stability pacts). This is the Europe *without a soul*. This is what exists and ought to be contrasted:

“(…) The problem of Europe today is that we have too many rules and not so many ideals. This is the problem. We don’t beat the fists on the table just because we won’t to respect the rules. We make concrete proposals for a stronger Europe and for a more aware Italy. The world needs a Europe that takes care of serious things” (E-News, 29.02.2016)²⁰.

19 Original Text: “(…) Chi vota per me vota per un’Europa che non sia solo dei burocrati, ma abbia un’anima. Dove ci sia l’Erasmus anche per le scuole e il servizio civile obbligatorio. Dove Lampedusa sia un problema di tutti e non solo dei suoi abitanti o del suo sindaco e dove la politica estera non sia spezzettata tanto quanti sono gli stati membri. E dove il patto di stabilità non blocchi il Comune di Olbia e dove i fondi europei si utilizzino bene e non in marchette (…)” E-News, 30.11.2013.

20 Original Text: “(…) Il problema dell’Europa oggi è che abbiamo molte regole e pochi ideali. Questo è il problema. Noi non battiamo i pugni sul tavolo per non rispettare le regole. Noi facciamo proposte concrete perché l’Europa sia più forte e l’Italia più consapevole. Il mondo ha bisogno di un’Europa che si occupi di cose serie.”

“Europe without growth will vanish, Europe without values will die (...) Europe should regain a vision and Italy – finally recovered after the crises and saved from the time of useless promises can play a very important stimulating role” (E-News, 29.02.2016)²¹.

In his rhetoric, he is the only one who wants (and is able to) change the state of arts. This implies, as shown, to rethink the place of Italy as a community in the European project. Nationalisms and Euroscepticism are here deeply connected to each other:

“we, with calm and determination, will put this country back in the place where it should stay. Welcoming women who are imprisoned due to their faith, playing a delicate role in a very complex equilibrium (or imbalances) of forces in the international politics, wiping off the dust from a Europe that cannot base its political action on boredom and bureaucracy (...)” (E-News, 30.07.2014)²².

The ambivalent usage of the term “Europe” can be understood as also taking into account the target of his communication. Renzi, with a rhetoric as ambivalent as the nationalist one, speaks at the same time to those who are *inside* and those who are *outside* his “imagined community”.

In fact, Europe is also used as a pretext to recall some core values of the Democratic Party’s tradition as well as of the Italian tradition in general (Altiero Spinelli’s legacy, for instance) in order to keep the political community cohesive. The greater part of the PD’s electors is supportive of the European project. Since its foundation under the inspiration of the former Prime Minister and President of the European Commission Romano Prodi, the PD is known as the most pro-European party in Italy²³. For that reason, Matteo Renzi often mentions the

21 Original Text: “ (...) L’Europa senza crescita è destinata a svanire, l’Europa senza valori è destinata a morire (...) L’Europa deve recuperare una visione e l’Italia – finalmente uscita dalla crisi e dal tempo delle promesse vane può giocare un ruolo di stimolo molto importante (...)”

22 Original Text: “Noi con calma e determinazione riporteremo questo Paese là dove deve stare. Ad accogliere le donne che vengono incarcerate per la loro fede religiosa, a giocare un ruolo nei complicatissimi equilibri (o squilibri) di politica internazionale, a togliere polvere da un’Europa che non può andare avanti nella noia e nella burocrazia (...)”

23 Cf. According to the survey of Demos & Pi. After the financial crisis and the “trust” (fiducia) into the EU drop in Italy from 56.8% in 2000 to 36% at the end of the year 2012. The lowest level of trust among the Italian parties, at the end of 2012, is for Fratelli d’Italia (Brothers of Italy, the nationalistic far-right party) with 16.5%. M5S shows a trust of 33.5% and PD 54.7%.

importance of the European project and the key role played by Italy since the time of Altiero Spinnelli until Prodi's presidency of the EU-Commission. However, it is during the last years that strong critics rose in Italy and among the PD electors as well, especially after the Government of Mario Monti and Enrico Letta, both supported by the PD. The strong critics of the European Institutions, to economic and immigration policies gained momentum during the Italian Presidency of the European Council and during all the time of Renzi's Premiership (2014-2016). In conclusion, according to the analysis (cf. Table 3.), Matteo Renzi follows two different types of narrative about Europe.

The first narrative aims to draw a different kind of approach to "Europe". After Enrico Letta, Matteo Renzi wanted to prove that *his* PD was something different, that "he did not necessarily have to comply with Brussels's regulations"²⁴. Within this narrative framework, Matteo Renzi does not simply speak to the sceptics inside the PD, but also to those who are "outside" of it. Particularly significant was the decision, taken after a dispute with Junker, to remove all the European flags from his office during an official speech as a Prime Minister²⁵.

It had been, as he said after, a protest against the EU-Commission stance on immigration. This provocative act produced a strong negative reaction inside his own Party, in the media, as well as among Eurosceptical parties. M5S and Lega Nord saw in this action a mere attempt to "copy" their policies in order to achieve a bunch of few more electors to gain support at the referendum for the Constitutional Reform in December 2016, backed by its government. Only Marie Le Pen, from the Front National, reacted in a positive way²⁶.

Those data are confirmed in the last survey made in 2017. Link: <http://www.demos.it/a01368.php>, Sept. 2012, "la fiducia nell'Unione Europea", Link: <http://www.demos.it/a00759.php> [accessed on 15.08.2017]

24 Cf. Matteo Renzi, E-News, 15.01.2016.

25 During the question time "Matteo risponde", no European flags are to be seen. Cf. Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UH3xwmj0wnI>; [accessed on 15.08.2017] For the critics see Quadrelli, "Europa sì, Europa no: Renzi, deciditi!", in Formiche.net, 11.11.2016, Link: <http://fomiche.net/blog/2016/11/11/europa-si-europa-no-renzi-deciditi/> [accessed on 15.08.2017]; Romano Prodi, former Prime Minister of Italy and former President of the EU-Commission said: "We have this double identity. We are Italian and European. We cannot forget it. Leaving the EU-Flags was like a shot in the heart". Original Text: "Noi siamo italiani ed europei. Non possiamo dimenticarcelo. Aver tolto le bandiere europee è stato un colpo al cuore." Link: http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2016/11/11/news/prodi_renzi_bandiera_ue-151827934/ [accessed on 15.08.2017].

The “Bad Europe”	The “Good Europe”
30.07.2014 cleaning the dust from an Europe that cannot go forward in boredom and bureaucracy (...)	02.09.2014 “Europe is not just spread or budget constrains, parameters or money, but it is more values and dignity”
02.09.2014 “for years Italy was described in Europe as a country where the well-known persons <i>make and destroy</i> and in some case they tried [<i>people in Brussels</i>] to give a ridiculous representation of the political class of our country”	22.10.2015 “On immigration it has been said for months that we were the problem (...) That Europe will have to leave us alone. Today the music has changed. We needed six months, but now it is clear to everyone: we are in front of a global problem (...). And the fact that Europe finally accepted to take part in the resolution of the problem is a great victory not of our government, but of the idea itself of a European identity”
20.06.2015 “the European rules (Dublin III) seem to be written against the interests of our country”	11.11.2015 “[about Spinelli] “And we think that it is the only way to give a soul to Europe. [Europe] is not just a parameter.”
13.09.2015 [about the migrants’ deaths on the Mediterranean Sea] “we are tired of the minutes of silence in Brussels every time a boat sinks or many children die on a beach, in the holds of some ships, inside a truck. Crying, it is not enough, it is time to act (...)”	09.12.2015 “Personally, I consider Europe as the most extraordinary political news of the last century. We will not be enough grateful to the founders for the foresight and the desire of peace that brought them to cultivate the European dream. Today who takes care of Europe has to defend it from a certain myopia”
15.01.2016 [about a conflict with Junker] “if someone thinks that we can be controlled from Brussels, is wrong. The European Institutions need to be supported from genuine Europeans, not to open unproductive polemics [with Italy]”	01.02.2016 “(…) we will not save Europe with the experts advocating not to exceed the limit of zero comma [0,..%], but instead with the conscience of a new generation of European citizens”

Table 2. Between a bad and a good Europe

26 Cf. Marine Le Pen, “Bravo!” in Huffington Post Italy, 14.11.2016. link: http://www.huffingtonpost.it/2016/11/14/referendum-renzi-bandiera-ue_n_12958238.html [accessed on 15.08.2017].

The second narrative aims to reinforce the relationship between PD-members and PD-electors. As already mentioned before, Matteo Renzi is trying to play a double game in all those different dimensions (the categories): he is speaking at the same time to those who are outside, and those who are (still) inside his party²⁷. He is trying to reach the wider part of the Italian electors, from the (middle) left to the (middle) right, in order to create the so-called “partito della nazione”²⁸.

Conclusion

The political rhetoric of Matteo Renzi that emerges from the empirical material analysed and presented in this paper can be described as a multidimensional rhetoric.

Matteo Renzi can be labelled as a “new populist” (Revelli, 2017). He aims to produce and re-produce identities and images through a mix of different kind of political communication strategies. He uses populist strategies of communication, for instance, in order to reach as far as possible, the greatest number of people because he aims to win using in a way the same strategies as his political rivals. He is a sort of political constructivists.

Whether the goal was successfully achieved or not, remain an open question. For some it may be a losing strategy, for some others an efficient one. However, to answer this question is not the aim of this paper but still opens a possible path of research. What it is important to underline is that despite what each of us thinks, this approach show an original and special way to maintain control over

27 Since 2013, the PD experienced two splits. The first one in 2014 as one of the challengers at the primary elections, Pippo Civati, decided to leave the party and to create the Italian “Podemos” (Possibile). The second one in 2017, when the former chairman of PD, Pierluigi Bersani and the former Prime Minister, Massimo D’Alema decided to leave the party and to create a new left movement called “MDP”. According to the recent surveys, PD lost around 6% of electoral support in one year. Cf. Demos & Pi, 01.06.2017, In June 2016, PD lied around 32% and in June 2017 around 26%. Link: <http://www.demos.it/a01406.php> [accessed on 15.08.2017].

28 Translation: The Party of the Nation. Cf. <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/12/13/leopolda-renzi-dal-palco-chi-voleva-il-simbolo-qui-ora-ha-lasciato-il-pd/2300044/> [accessed on 15.08.2017].

the “Government” and an interesting and original attempt, as Revelli affirmed, to transform the “populism” from a “bottom-up” strategy of communication into a “top-down” one. Moreover, Matteo Renzi aims to use it as a strategy of *governing*.

According to the analysis of the content, this strategy is basically focused on the construction of a specific form of “community” and of a *new* identity, which skirts round a double-narrative based on the concept of “Europe” as well as the concept of “being Italian”.

What is fascinating is that in order to create a “national” identity, Matteo Renzi uses sporadically the European dimension. Indeed, Europe plays a key role in his rhetoric. He presents a genuine pro-Europe approach, based on the memory of the greatest personality of the past, for instance Altiero Spinelli; bounded with his nationalistic narrative of the Italians: The idea is that the Italian contributed to the creation of Europe, intended as European Union, but what we have today is not what we wanted. Italy should take the control back, should lead the EU, Italy should “come back” to his place that in Matteo Renzi’s narrative is the political and ethical (in a way) leading role.

Europe is described in Matteo Renzi’s rhetoric as an achievement, obtained also thanks to the Italians, and at the same time, it emerges as a political target. The core issue is the representation of a contraposition between a *Europe with a soul* and a *Europe without a soul*.

In order to “have a soul”, Europe should pay more attention to the Italian proposals. According to this rhetoric, Italy is like a “hero” who has to save the “princess” (the lost Europe). Italy (if leads by Matteo Renzi), is the Country who can save the European project. It is through this kind of narrative that emerge also his romantic nationalism: the re-affirmation of a sort of Italian *grandeur* where he represents the “saviour”, those who are “with him” are the “good people” and those who “play-against” are the enemies of Europe and of Italy. This is the complexity of Matteo Renzi’s political rhetoric and his special characteristics.

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