O populismo como fenómeno de comunicação - Entrevista com Gianpietro Mazzoleni

Populism as a communication phenomenon - Interview with Gianpietro Mazzoleni

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O Professor Gianpietro Mazzoleni, do Dipartimento di Scienze Sociali e Politiche da Università degli Studi di Milano, é um dos mais importantes *scholars* da área Comunicação Política. Com análises pioneiras sobre a mediatização da política, as relações entre comunicação e populismo e a política e o entretenimento, esta última denominada por ele de "política pop", suas obras tornaram-se referência para inúmeras pesquisas dentro e fora de Itália. Ex-presidente da Associazione Italiana di Comunicazione Politica (que presidiu entre os anos de 2013 e 2019), o professor italiano foi editor-geral da *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication* publicada em 2016. Também é autor ou co-autor de livros de destaque, como *La comunicazione politica (2012), The Media and Neo-populist Movements in a Comparative Perspective* (2003) e *La politica pop online. I meme e le sfide della comunicazione politica* (2019). Nesta entrevista, Gianpietro Mazzoleni discute o lugar dos *media*, especialmente da televisão, e dos *media* sociais na emergência de figuras

populistas, especialmente associadas ao espectro da extrema-direita, em diferentes países, nos últimos anos. Em vez de uma leitura puramente política do fenómeno, o autor desloca a discussão para a área da Comunicação Política, convidando leitores e leitoras a pensarem o populismo como uma questão comunicacional. A entrevista foi concedida a **Mediapolis** por e-mail, em novembro de 2020.

Mediapolis: We know that social media are a fertile field in the proliferation of populist discourses. Despite the evident centrality of the Internet in the emergence of neopopulism, television also played an important role in building the image of populist leaders like Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, even before they reached the presidency of their countries. How do you evaluate the role of television in the popularization of new populist and authoritarian figures?

Gianpietro Mazzoleni: There is no doubt that the social media are the considered a powerful factor in the spread of populist creeds and

propaganda. There exists no populist leader in democratic countries that does not use intensively the social platforms that are 'popular' by themselves, that is are cherished, and played with by millions of people. These people are vast potential targets, easily and cheaply reachable by the communication machines of populists (and of non-populist, to be fair). There is a huge amount of empirical evidence that populist movements are rallied and mobilized through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other channels that the Web (including the 'dark' one) makes available. That said, the question whether television is also to be included in the populist weaponry, needs some distinctions that are basically linked with the features of media ecosystems in different national contexts. In many countries where independent public broadcasting is still important the attempts of political players to use television for propaganda are fairly contained. However, where commercial channels have a large share of the national audiences one witnesses a shrewd use of those channels by populist leaders.

In the last three decades the process of commercialization of media outlets has increased significantly around the globe. That has made easier for power seekers to establish personal relations with the media owners and secure their patronage. It was the case of Mediaset-Berlusconi in the 1990s, if a special case as the media mogul himself geared his TV empire towards his own political ambitions, it was certainly the case of the Fox-Trump alliance, where the cable network helped the tycoon to become the leader of American staunch conservatism and accompanying him up to winning the presidency, and beyond. Trump could also capitalize on his being a TV celebrity, who gained popularity hosting for more than a decade the reality show "The Apprentice". He certainly owns a great deal of his success to the 'old medium'. These and other perhaps minor examples of political leaders who used cunningly the TV screens to build their careers (and at times to experience sudden declines) show that popular media and TV in particular are crucial tools to emerge as leaders and to conserve their influence on electorates. Today's populist leaders are only the last comers on the stage of popularization of political leadership. In my opinion scholarly research, perhaps too concentrated on the web dynamics, is underestimating the big role that television still holds in shaping contemporary politics.

Mediapolis: Some recent studies have found that individuals who are too exposed to TV entertainment programs are more likely to vote for populist candidates (Tesei, Durante & Pinotti, 2019). As a scholar of "politica-pop", a concept you adopt to qualify the relationship between politics and entertainment, what are the aspects, formats, languages, or news values of the media that explain this phenomenon?

Gianpietro Mazzoleni: Popular culture – of which television is one of the most powerful engines – is the food for mind enjoyed on a daily basis by all people. The long-term effects of such 'consumption' on the people's mindsets, knowledge, emotions, and conducts are difficult to measure over time on large scales. However, no scholar doubts that entertainment is a key factor in shaping our Lebenswelt, our life-worlds, that is our sentiments, tastes, individual and collective identity, sociability and so on. Speaking of entertainment in relation to politics, in my and Anna Sfardini's book *Political Pop* (2009) we distinguish between "political infotainment" and "politainment". In the former case, we have to do with the tendency of commercial media (but the public media have it too) to present the political news – even the serious and dramatic ones – with narrative patterns and visual features that cater first to the needs of the audiences (benefitting the ratings of the channel!) and then to the institutional duty to tell the news. This entertainment priority is thought to be an influential factor in the construction of views of political reality. Whether it is negative or positive it depends from which normative perspective one chooses. The fact is that politics, also the hard one, is often framed with elements that belong to the world of diversion rather than of engagement. "Politainment" is the other format of pop politics, that has to do directly with the entertainment

imagery. It presents two sub-formats. On the one side politics is a much sought-after matter by fiction, comedy, satire, drama. Cinema, television, pop art and the like have produced numberless of works of political entertainment, and audiences seem to enjoy it a great deal. On the other hand, we observe often politicians and leaders making appearance on TV shows not so much for the sake of exposing their views as for enjoying moments of popularity. It is not infrequent that some politicians perform themselves in a show or in company of pop celebrities. A more recent form of pop politics has to do with the Web, that is the "meme". Political figures, ideas, statements, events are remixed – usually in ironic and sarcastic tones - with contents of pop culture and spread through the social media with the purpose either to support a cause or to damage political adversaries. With Roberta Bracciale, I have just published a book on the phenomenon of political memetics (*La politica pop online*, 2019), where we give account of how politics and political leadership are changing thanks to this digital form of political communication. In all instances, populist candidates gain benefit from all this forms of pop politics, at times engaging themselves in fabricating it. Research on the 'effects' of pop politics on people's voting, is still at the early stages and new findings are welcome. However, I prefer to think that the most interesting effects are those on the levels of participation, on its new forms, on the ways "connective activism" is implemented in various political contexts and so on. Pop politics off- and on-line can be a compelling arena for political battles.

Mediapolis: In many countries, the coverage of politics has been very marked by high visibility to the subject of corruption. Generally, this type of coverage has a strong personalization and pressure on institutions, often with a media's punitive perspective. Would this attitude be related to a kind of media populism? How could we think of the relationship between media populism and the mediatization of corruption scandals in contemporary democracies?

Gianpietro Mazzoleni: Whether television and other traditional media bear responsibility on diffusing populist sentiments, research has underlined that their contribution can be both unintended and intentional. Fictional programs (films or series) portraying political classes as corrupt and cynical can in the long run diffuse anti-political beliefs, eventually exploited by populist leaders. That is a form of "media populism", built-in the entertainment nature of the media industry, worldwide. In addition to this, there is a media populism of the adversarial kind. When independent (news)media hammer for months and years the ruling political parties and governments on their alleged wrongdoings, on their contradictions, scandals and corruption, they trigger in the populace negative sentiments towards the political castes, what have been called "anti-politic" attitudes. This criticism of the (usually mainstream) media is seen populist in substance and tones, and is easily picked up by political figures and movements who are populist in their programs. It is clearly a media populism of unintentional kind that goes hand in hand with political populism of players outside the world

of information. I have spoken of a sort of concrete "complicity". It has been certainly the case of recent Italian populism, where the Five Star Movement and the Salvini's Lega have prospered on a largely diffused anti-caste, anti-politics nurtured by the mainstream media, newspapers, and TV news. On the other hand it is undoubted that some media openly endorse populist agendas. The deliberate support is better seen in tabloid-kind news programs that rally for populist stances, either by granting more air time to news of interests of populists or also promoting the diffusion of disinformation. A clear case here is again Fox News.

Mediapolis: Recently, you published with Cristian Vaccari (University of Loughborough) an overall on the last 20 years of Political Communication in the Italian Journal "Comunicazione Politica". Looking at the previous two decades of Political Communication studies, it seems impossible to understand political communication research without studies on media and populism. What has changed in the understanding of media populism and populist communication during this period? Do you consider that recent years' academic production has helped to give a more precise meaning to populism, or this concept remains markedly ambiguous?

Gianpietro Mazzoleni: Twenty years seems a very short time from a historian's perspective, but the last two decades in scholarly research marked an extraordinary surge in research on several aspects of political communication. As mentioned, the diffusion of the social media is the most significant phenomenon that has attracted most attention. The rise of populisms can well be listed as a phenomenon that has also attracted huge attention on part of academic research. The communication dimension is of course dear to our scholarship but has been long overlooked by political scientists, traditionally more focused on party and institutional processes. However, the communicative behavior of Trump, his flamboyant narcissism staged on all media, his accusations and personal insults, his compulsive twitting – to be nicknamed "twitter-in-chief" – has made clear that much populism is in fact a communication phenomenon, and as such must be taken into account when explaining political extremism. That said, the scholarly literature on populism has come up with excellent studies on defining and investigating populism, by authors as Cas Mudde, Benjamin Moffit, Duncan McDonnell, just to name a few of the several authors. On the political communication front there are too copious journal articles to quote, but a book in my opinion deserves a special mention: *Populist Political Communication in Europe* (2016) by T. Aalberg, F. Esser, C. Reinemann et al. It sets the basic criteria to identify and grasp the articulated nature of populist discourse that go beyond the European context. More research is soon to see the light, especially trying to explain Trumpism and its impact on democracy in America.

Mediapolis: After the well-success experiences of political leaders like Trump, Bolsonaro, and Salvini on social media to gain popularity, engagement, and votes, what can we expect of next-generation political

leaders in terms of logics of uses of digital in democracies under social and political pressures?

Gianpietro Mazzoleni: Social media are here to stay, for long. Television has been in the political domains for seven decades, and one does not see its decline. Its technology has widely changed, but its function in politics is being recreated every day. I think that social media will continue to be a powerful tool in the hands of all users. Political leaders of all colors, as well as challengers of all colors will rely on them to conduct their political battles. I do not see an unbalance in favor of any party, provided that all players enjoy the same access. Of course Trump, Bolsonaro, Salvini command extraordinary resources in financial terms and organizational power. However, as the phenomenon of independent political memes demonstrates, one needs very little to troll a big propaganda machine. Without falling into the overoptimistic views, it is undeniable that the Internet is a double-edged sword for democracy, it can represent a threat by autocrats but also a powerful asset for the citizens defending civil liberties and democratic institutions.

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