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Ancient Demagoguery and Contemporary Populism: Conceptual Analogies and Differences in Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The association between contemporary populism and demagoguery is frequent, both in academic literature and political debate. However, the scholarly attention devoted to the latter is considerably less than that given to the former. This is a peculiar situation considering that demagoguery has been a primary concern for political thinkers since classical Greece. Even when not explicitly discussed, the question of demagoguery was an underlying concern framing discussions on pivotal themes like political leadership, public rhetoric, tensions between oligarchic and popular factions, and the nature of the best regime. This raises the question of how historical conceptions of demagoguery align with contemporary theories of populism and whether relevant differences between them can deepen our understanding of both phenomena. The first part of the article reconstructs the classical conception of demagoguery focusing on its treatment by two of its most influential theorists, Plato and Aristotle. For them, demagoguery was a corrupted political form in which popular power turns into tyranny under unprincipled leaders exacerbating divisions between popular and oligarchic factions. Building on this historical analysis, the second part of the article compares the ancient conception of demagoguery and contemporary theories of populism focusing on the three primary aspects around which the current debate revolves: ideology, political style, and institutions and forms of organization.

Keywords

ancient democracy; demagoguery; history of political thought; modern democracy; populism

1. Introduction

The association between contemporary populism and demagoguery is frequent, both in academic literature and in political debate. It is common, especially from the liberal perspective, to discredit the former by

associating it with the latter. In effect, as an important scholar of populism has stressed, "liberal critics see authoritarian demagogy as the very essence of populist politics and construe it thus as the antithesis of pluralism and liberal democracy" (Stavrakakis et al., 2016, p. 63). On the other hand, those who defend, or at least have a less critical opinion of populism, usually reject this association arguing that populism and demagoguery are two different things, or that demagoguery is not a prerogative of populists in contemporary politics (e.g., Chollet, 2023; Tarragoni, 2024).

What is intriguing, however, is that in both cases the concept of demagoguery (and its related terms) is usually taken for granted, reduced to the ordinary meaning of manipulation of the people for political purposes. Now, similarly to the case of populism, demagoguery is a concept particularly prone to be used in the daily political battle. But compared to the former, it receives considerably less scholarly attention, despite having been discussed for centuries by political thinkers. And even though it is true that the loose meaning with which the term is often used today is not entirely unrelated to what this tradition of political thinking has bequeathed to us, it is also true that the subtleties and complexity of that debate are almost completely lost.

This article compares ancient conceptions of demagoguery and contemporary ones of populism to bring to the fore significant analogies and differences, and better understand the latter while at the same time inviting to make a more sensitive use of the former. I believe that a historical and conceptual comparison like this can be particularly useful for gaining a deeper understanding of populism, especially in its complex relationship with liberal democracy. It highlights what is specific about the relationship between populism and liberal democracy by comparing it with similar but, in many respects, different elements from the past (ancient democracy and ancient demagoguery). Furthermore, while it is true that the connections between populism and liberal democracy have been discussed extensively, seldom has this discussion taken on a historical dimension (e.g., Ballacci & Goodman, 2024; Finchelstein, 2014; Grattan, 2016; Jaffe & Graíño Ferrer, 2023a, 2023b; Patapan, 2019; Rosanvallon, 2020). This is quite surprising, given that the issue of populism is linked to themes—first and foremost, demagoguery—that have a long tradition in the history of ideas.

The structure of the article is as follows: In the next section, I will outline the main characteristics of the ancient conception of demagoguery, focusing on the views of its two principal theorists—Plato and Aristotle. After that, I will draw a comparison between that conception and the most prominent contemporary theories of populism. Finally, I will tease out some conclusions on how this sort of comparison can inform the current debate on populism.

Before proceeding, however, two premises are in order. Plato and Aristotle are two philosophers who (especially the former) expressed strong criticisms of democracy. Referring to them to outline an ancient theory of demagoguery runs the risk of conflating such a theory with a wholesale critique of democracy. However, it is also true that, being the greatest political philosophers of antiquity, their critique is particularly broad and incisive, and in fact, one that would prove particularly influential over the centuries. This connects to the second clarification. The comparison between the ancient theory of demagoguery and contemporary theories of populism will unfold along three axes: ideas, language and style, and institutions and organizational forms—corresponding to the three main approaches to populism available today. These three dimensions are found, roughly speaking, in the Platonic and Aristotelian critique of demagoguery, confirming the breadth of their approach.

2. Demagoguery: The Ancient Conception

As is well-known, despite the negative connotation that has consolidated over the centuries, the term "demagogue" originated with a neutral, descriptive meaning. It emerged in the 5th century B.C. in Athens, a period marked by significant social-political divisions between the aristocracy and the people in the contest of a process of democratization. "Demagogue" derives from the Greek words *dēmagōgós*—where *dēmos* means people and *agō* means "to lead"—and *dēmēgoros*—composed by *dēmos* and *agoreuo*, which means to speak in public assembly (Ober, 1989, p. 106, footnote 7; Zoepffel, 1974, pp. 80–84). However, the term was not commonly used and, when used, it was simply to refer to politicians as "leaders of the people" (e.g., Canfora, 1994, pp. 9–20; Hansen, 1991, p. 268; Lane, 2012; Ober, 1989, pp. 106–107; cf. Rhodes, 2016).

Following Finley, it could also be argued that in democratic Athens all politicians should to an extent be "demagogues" since, without the support of organized political parties, their power inevitably depended on their capacity to win the consent of the *demos* in the public assemblies, mainly through rhetoric (Finley, 1985b, Chapter 2; see also Hansen, 1991, pp. 277–278, 342; Harris, 2024; Ober, 1989, p. 110). Prominent figures like Themistocles, Pericles, and Cleon were all referred to as "demagogues," regardless of the evaluation of their political actions, and authors who were later known as critics of demagoguery, such as Aristophanes, Thucydides, Isocrates, and Aristotle, used the term also in a neutral sense. However, the meaning of the term gradually shifted from neutral to pejorative; and, according to Lane (2012), two philosophers and critics of democracy—Plato and Aristotle—played a pivotal role in such a transformation. Lane has argued that the consolidation of demagogue in its negative sense was due to Plutarch who established "the statesman–demagogue distinction as a staple of both republican and democratic currents of thought" (Lane, 2012, p. 193). But according to her, Plutarch accomplished this mainly by adopting Plato's account of the statesman–demagogue distinction and Aristotle's term for the negative concept of the demagogue.

The role of Plato is particularly relevant, since for Lane, he made a key contribution to crystallizing the negative notion of the "demagogue" by forging it as a "shadow-type" of his ideal of the "statesman" (*politikos*). It is in characterizing the "newly invented concept of the statesman which in Plato furnishes the template for defining its antithesis" (Lane, 2012, pp. 181, 190). Apart from the dispute over the chronology of the consolidation of the negative meaning of the term demagogue (cf. Harris, 2024, p. 33; Saldutti, 2015; Urso, 2019), Lane's focus on Plato and Aristotle is useful from our perspective, as it reconnects the issue of demagoguery to an ancient debate on political regimes, and particularly on democracy, in which these two authors play a crucial role.

As a radical critic of democracy, Plato tends to conflate it with demagoguery. The flaws of demagoguery are clearly connected to those he imputes to democracy, rooted in the very principle of this regime: the idea that people—whom he considered as driven by irrational desires and fundamentally ignorant—are called upon to decide on issues crucial to collective life, without having the sufficient discernment for it. Nonetheless, I believe it is possible to identify the criticisms he made of this regime that specifically relate to what would later be recognized as characteristic of demagoguery.

Plato constructs the opposition between the good and the bad statesman around three pillars: morality, knowledge, and rhetoric. *Gorgias* is one of the key texts to locate such opposition, even though Plato doesn't use the term demagogue in it. His target however is the leaders of the people in democratic Athens,

particularly their main political tool: rhetoric. And if, as Finley argues, demagogues were a structural part of Athenian democracy, and if rhetoric was their main tool, then the relevance of rhetoric for demagoguery becomes immediately clear (cf. Pacheco Bethencourt, 2021).

The opposition between the good and the bad statesman roughly corresponds to that between philosophers and rhetoric, which Plato constructs in *Gorgias* through a *mise en scène* of a debate between the philosopher Socrates and some rhetors. Socrates argues that philosophers love and pursue wisdom and in so doing can improve the virtues of their fellow citizens and thus contribute to making the city more just, which are the most authentic aims of the statesman. On the other hand, he says, there are the rhetors, lovers of the *demos* (Plato, 1979, 481d–481e), and specialists in the capacity to guess the tastes, desires, and opinions of the people and to manipulate and flatter them through rhetoric (Plato, 1979, 449a–449d, 452d–453a, 502e–503a). This sort of politicians can only rely on rhetorical ability and thus are unable to educate the people and lead them toward the good (Plato, 1979, e.g., 462c, 463d, 464c–465d). Theirs is a powerful ability, but devoid of any moral concerns and substantive knowledge. The rhetors, in Socrates' words, "don't speak with an eye on what is best and aim to make the citizens as good as possible by their speeches." They only "concentrate on gratifying the citizens, despising the common interest for the sake of their own private interest," using "flattery and shameful public oratory [*aischra dēmēgoria*]" (Plato, 1979, p. 80, 502e–503a).

Plato in a sense was radicalizing an opinion generally held in democratic Athens. The skillful use of rhetoric by politicians was much appreciated. However, at the same time, it was seen with skepticism and distrust to the extent that it could be used also for immoral purposes. In fact, criticizing a politician for being a flatterer and manipulator of the crowd was rather common. Thus, an exclusive education in this art was viewed with suspicion due to its inherently double-edged nature (Hansen, 1991, pp. 144–145; Ober, 1989, pp. 321–322). And it was generally held that, while eloquence was necessary for political leadership, it should always be accompanied by good judgment, virtue, and *paideia*—a broader kind of education of which rhetoric was only a part (Ober, 1989, pp. 183–188).

It could be argued that in drawing this contrast between philosophers and rhetors, Plato shaped most of the main traits of the discussion on demagoguery for the following centuries. He locates the question of demagoguery at the ethical, epistemic, and political levels. Demagoguery is explained by pointing to the deficient moral character of the demagogue, his willingness to pursue only personal interests, his lack of substantive knowledge that prevents him from developing an idea of what is just and good for the city, and his purely instrumental relation with the people. Such conception is reflected, for instance, in the contrasting portrayals of Pericles and Cleon in Aristophanes' *Knights* and Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War* (as well as in Aristotle and Cicero), where Pericles represents the ideal statesman and Cleon the quintessential demagogue. Pericles is an authentic statesman, because he has the capacity to lead the people towards justice and the common good using good arguments and understanding. Cleon is a demagogue because, even though he can manipulate the people, he is ultimately a slave to them (e.g., Aristophanes, 2022, 732–734; Thucydides, 1986, 2.65–68).

Aristotle developed Plato's account of demagoguery in some significant respects, most notably by emphasizing the role of social and political polarization in its emergence and providing key insights into political rhetoric. While preserving a certain semantic ambiguity of the term—oscillating between neutral and negative connotations—Aristotle's *Politics* is among the earliest works where the term is explicitly

employed in a distinctly negative sense. First of all, Aristotle clearly associated it with democracy: Demagogues operate primarily by exploiting the democratic principle of seeking majority consent within the assembly, leveraging it to foster polarization in pursuit of power. Unlike Plato, however, Aristotle did not equate democracy with demagoguery. Instead, he associated demagoguery with a specific form of democracy: the worst manifestation of this regime—a radicalized, unruly, and unjust version of democracy. He argued that demagogues flourish in democracies that have degenerated into despotic regimes, where all decisions are submitted to the people and made through decrees rather than established laws (Aristotle, 1998, 1292a). At the same time, Aristotle considered that demagogues can exist also in a constitutional and just form of democracy—what he called a *politeia*, a popular regime in which democratic rule is combined with oligarchic elements—and could lead it in a transformation not only into a demagogic regime, but also into a tyranny. They do so because, in their attempt to please the people at all costs, they excessively hurt the wealthy, causing their reaction against the democratic regime itself (Aristotle, 1998, 1304b–1305a). For Aristotle, thus, demagoguery is always a possibility in a regime founded on liberty and equality as democracy. However, in its radicalized and degenerated form, demagoguery becomes one of the essential elements of this regime, as the people, led by demagogues, become the sole sovereign outside the law.

Significantly, Aristotle also identifies a social dimension in the transformation of a constitutional democracy into a demagogic one: the increasing polarization between the poor and wealthy classes and the reduction of the middle class. A consistent middle class is essential for a just form of democracy, as those who belong to it, being neither too poor nor excessively rich, are more inclined to follow reason, act justly, and avoid dividing citizens into warring factions (Aristotle, 1998, 1295b–1296a). On the other hand, the impoverishment of the lower class calls for more interventionist policies, which in turn pushes the well-off to band together and put democracy at risk (Aristotle, 1998, 1304b). In this sense, demagoguery is also a strategy adopted by a minority within the upper class, which understands that it can take advantage of the social distress in order to acquire power, and sometimes even become tyrants, with the support of the poor.

In Aristotle's account, there is a correspondence between the social situation, the political regime, and the kind of political speech. As Urbinati notes, for Aristotle, in a constitutional democracy, "until the equilibrium among classes persists, the weapon of words seems to be enough strategy," since the laws are still in force (Urbinati, 2014, p. 142). Here, demagogic speech is still "consonant with assembly politics" where "proposals must gain the majority of the votes to become law" (Urbinati, 2014, p. 141). But demagoguery can become a negative force: It can corrupt constitutional democracy to the point of making it tyrannical, as it contributes to breaking the social and political equilibrium, suspending the rule of the law, and undermining the possibility of compromise. In this situation, democracy becomes similar to tyranny in terms of public rhetoric as well: In both cases, language is completely instrumentalized, by flatterers in the case of democracy and sycophants in that of tyranny (Aristotle, 1998, 1313b–1314a5), with the aim of gaining the trust of those in the hands of whom power is concentrated, respectively, the people and the tyrant.

A second major aspect in which Aristotle contributed to the analysis of demagoguery is his analysis of rhetoric. Properly understood, for him rhetoric can be a central element of a well-ordered and just political community. But Aristotle also acknowledges that rhetoric is a primary resource for demagogues. His differentiation between demagogic rhetoric and positive rhetoric, however, is not straightforward. The complexity arises because, although Aristotle believed that rhetoric can be partially systematized, it is also an art that requires the use of practical reason, making it ultimately irreducible to a closed system of rules.

Schematically, we could say that Aristotle's primary way for differentiating a positive version of political rhetoric from a demagogic one is to characterize it as a deliberative form of argumentation and to explain its main features as depending on the proper realm in which it operates: the political domain characterized by contingency and uncertainty about principles (see Garsten, 2006, Chapter 4; Garver, 1994). Aristotle amplified the deliberative dimension of rhetoric by emphasizing the importance of the proofs of persuasion (*pistis*) and centering rhetoric on the *enthymeme*, the rhetorical form of a syllogism that he defines as the "body of persuasion" (Aristotle, 1991, 1355a). Unlike Plato who condemned rhetoric as epistemologically deficient, Aristotle recognized its unique role in navigating the realm of public affairs, characterized by contingency and verisimilitude. He argued that rhetoric is not a specialized art because it is based on *endoxa*, generally accepted opinions, and is addressed to an audience of ordinary citizens (Aristotle, 1991, 1354a, 1357a, 1404a; cf. Aristotle, 1980, 1179b). Nevertheless, for Aristotle, opinion and knowledge, as well as verisimilitude and truth, do not constitute dichotomies. Consequently, the dependence of rhetoric on generally accepted opinions is not as problematic as it is in Plato, as it doesn't imply that its arguments are necessarily far from the truth.

An additional way to differentiate a positive from a negative version of political rhetoric is through Aristotle's understanding of the role of extra-rational means of persuasion, specifically *pathos* and *ethos*, which, along with *logos*, form the three modes of persuasion (e.g., Aristotle, 1991, 1377b, 1391b). Aristotle acknowledges the key role of emotions, of *pathos*, in persuasion, especially in linking general rules to particular cases. However, for him, emotions can only enhance judgment and contribute to the deliberative process when they are relevant to the subject under discussion. Conversely, a demagogic and manipulative use of emotions in rhetoric occurs when they are used instrumentally, without any connection to the subject matter (Aristotle, 1991, 1354b-1356a; cf. Aristotle, 2002, 35.3). The *ethos* as well is fundamental for persuasion, to the point that Aristotle defines it as the most important source of persuasion (Aristotle, 1991, 1378a). The speaker in effect should be able to put the audience into the proper emotional state in order to be persuaded, displaying a benevolent attitude toward them to manifest a concern with their situation.

But the *ethos* is essential for good rhetoric also in another sense: Learning to argue well on public affairs requires also an extensive process of practical experience whereby the tenets of rhetoric become deeply ingrained in the practical reasoning of the speaker, ultimately integrating into his own *ethos*. According to Aristotle, this gradual assimilation of rhetorical principles forms the basis for rhetoric to evolve into a civic virtue. The orator's selection of persuasive methods is intricately tied to his *ethos*, as rhetorical deliberation, manifesting as an expression of *phronesis*, is concerned with the means rather than the ends. This, however, always occurs within the teleological framework of the pursuit of the good life—which is only possible in a just form of regime and thus not in a demagogic one. Indeed, the last and probably main element Aristotle identifies to make rhetoric a civic art, rather than an instrument of demagoguery, is submitting it to the moral philosophy and the science of politics (Aristotle, 1991, 1356a; cf. Aristotle, 1980, 1094b).

While a thorough discussion of ancient demagoguery would naturally require a much more extensive examination, these elements provide a broad picture of how the ancients conceptualized this phenomenon. In the next section, I will outline the main points of contemporary populist theories and compare them with this broad picture.

3. Contemporary Theories of Populism and Ancient Conceptions of Demagoguery: A Comparison

Populism is a phenomenon whose historical roots can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in the radical agrarian populist movements of the *narodnichestvo* in Russia and the People's Party in the United States. Over time, populism has taken on very different forms, including the important cases of the national-popular authoritarian regimes of Latin America between the 1930s and 1960s, with emblematic examples such as *Peronismo* in Argentina and *Varguismo* in Brazil. Few scholars, however, attempt to reconstruct the concept of populism by looking at its earliest political experiences (e.g., Canovan, 1981; Finchelstein, 2014; Grattan, 2016; Tarragoni, 2024). Most research focuses on contemporary cases, and when conceptualizing the phenomenon, scholars tend to favor a more abstract approach, one that can encompass a variety of contexts and reflect the flexibility and malleability of populism. The main theoretical approaches that can be identified in the literature indeed confirm this tendency.

3.1. Contemporary Approaches to Populism

In the contemporary debate about populism, it is possible to identify three main theoretical approaches. They are the ideational, the stylistic or also discursive-performative, and the strategic or also institutional-organizational approaches (Ballacci & Goodman, 2023; Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017). The first approach includes scholars such as Canovan (2002), Mudde (2004, 2017), Müller (2016), Stanley (2008), and others. These scholars are unified by the attempt to define populism through its ideological outlook, particularly the core idea of a Manichean divide between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite." The second approach shifts focus from content to form: how populists speak, act, and present themselves. This includes their language, symbols, aesthetics, as well as their performative style. Scholars in this tradition, tracing back to the work of Laclau (2005), argue that populism's political significance lies chiefly in the forms it employs to mobilize the people and construct a populist political subject (e.g., Aslanidis, 2016; Moffitt, 2016; Ostiguy et al., 2021; Stavrakakis, 2017). The third approach focuses on the way populist movements and parties structure themselves and on the way they mobilize and represent their constituencies in their pursuit of power. Scholars ascribable to this approach, such as Barr (2009), Urbinati (2019), and Weyland (2017), stress the centrality in populism of the unmediated link between leaders and their followers, through which populist leaders challenge traditional parties to seize and maintain power.

These three approaches and levels of analysis can be juxtaposed with the main elements identified in the reconstruction of the ancient conception of demagoguery, revealing both shared features and differences. Such comparative analysis, however, should be undertaken with an awareness of how deeply interconnected these levels of analysis are—an understanding that is evident in the ancient conception of demagoguery and that has also been recently emphasized in contemporary debates on populism (e.g., Ballacci & Goodman, 2023; Diehl & Bargetz, 2023). Relatedly, it is also important to underscore that, in the same way contemporary approaches to populism can be seen as complementary rather than alternative, the different works on Athenian democracy that I rely on—such as Ober's *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* (Ober, 1989), which focuses on its ideology and rhetoric, and Hansen's *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes* (Hansen, 1991), which examines its institutions and foundational principles—can be seen as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

3.2. Ideational Level

Starting with the realm of ideas, a notable commonality between the two conceptions is that according in both cases, ancient demagogues and contemporary populists prioritize the principle of popular power over anything else, for instance, over the respect of the laws. In the ancient conception, this is clearly evident in Aristotle, who considers this feature a defining characteristic of demagoguery. In contemporary theories, most of the scholars who focus on the ideational dimension put "people-centrism" at the very core of populism, underlying how this could undermine the respect of the liberal principles of modern democracy. Both ancient demagogues and contemporary populists are seen as politicians who portray themselves as champions of the people and who make the struggle against the elites the core of their politics.

Moreover, in the ancient account, demagogues are criticized for pursuing their own personal or factional interests rather than the common good. This critique is echoed in contemporary analyses of populism, particularly from more critical perspectives. For example, Urbinati argues that, lacking a coherent ideology and normative framework, populism tends to devolve into a "hyperrealistic" and "voluntarist attempt to seize power," promoting a "*pars pro parte*" rather than a "*pars pro toto*" politics (Urbinati, 2019, pp. 33–34; see also Johnson, 2017).

A further important common element, at the ideational level, is the fact that in both the ancient and contemporary conceptions, demagoguery and populism's respective ideologies can be described as "thin," minimally articulated (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Stanley, 2008). In the case of ancient demagoguery, this feature is somewhat implicit. In democratic Athens, critics accused demagogues not only of lacking the knowledge necessary for effective political leadership, but also of uncritically aligning their views with those of the general populace—what Ober (1989) refers to as the "popular ideology" of democratic Athens. Ober also points out that this ideology was largely unarticulated in theoretical terms, even contradictory at times, and more practical, embedded in communicative strategies and symbols used by demagogues in their public speeches. It was after all an ideology that appealed to and was endorsed by the *demos*—one of the reasons why oligarchic and anti-democratic thinkers such as Plato opposed it, as they equated the *demos* with the common people, or the poor, whom they viewed as fundamentally ignorant and lacking in judgment (Ober, 1989, pp. 42, 337; see also Hansen, 1991, p. 334). Likewise, in republican Rome, the ideological outlook of the *populares* has been described by a scholar as "submerged," a "style of political reasoning," rather than a full-fledged ideology (Arena, 2012, pp. 80, 116–117).

On the other hand, at the ideational level, there are also significant differences between ancient and contemporary conceptions. One key distinction is that, while the ancient view focuses on the immorality of demagogues and their alleged inability to pursue the common good, contemporary theories adopt a more systemic, impersonal approach (cf. Ceaser, 2007; Patapan, 2019). For instance, when a scholar like Urbinati criticizes the purely strategic and instrumental behavior of contemporary populists, her critique is not moral, but political and ideological, highlighting how populism distorts democracy. Similarly, Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser, or Müller, who share the view of populism as based on a Manichean opposition between elites and the people, criticize it on political rather than moral terms: for the threat it poses to the rule of the law, the mechanisms of checks and balances, or pluralism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Müller, 2016).

The key difference between the ancient and contemporary contexts in this regard concerns what is generally referred to as the "fact of pluralism." Indeed, although the pursuit of consensus and a certain skepticism

toward factions are characteristics found in modern democracy as well (see Rosenblum, 2008), it is evident that the ancient era was characterized by a significantly lower degree of ideological pluralism compared to the modern era. In democratic Athens, ideological pluralism was far less prominent than it is today. *Homonoia* (or likemindedness) was a central feature of its political and cultural landscape, with the expectation that politicians would adhere to the common worldview and avoid deepening ideological polarization (e.g., Canevaro, 2018; Ober, 1989, pp. 168–170). Similarly, republican Rome was characterized by what one scholar termed "ideological monotony," with both popular and aristocratic leaders aligning their public speeches with this shared ideology (Morstein-Marx, 2004, p. 230). This difference at the ideational level is reflected at the institutional level in the absence of a structured system of political parties, which, as Finley (1985b) explained, had significant implications for the role of the demagogue in democratic Athens. As seen before, the demagogue's prominence in this regime also stemmed from the necessity of maintaining a direct, personal relationship with the *demos*, rather than one based on ideological affiliation.

This ideological difference is significant for several reasons. For instance, it suggests that the ideological repertoire available for criticism against the elites was much more constrained in the ancient context than in modern societies. Indeed, contemporary populists have access to a wider range of ideologies and principles to legitimize themselves and attack the elites. These include modern ideologies such as socialism and nationalism, as well as principles like popular sovereignty, the consent of the governed, and freedom of speech. While such principles existed in a looser form in democratic Athens (and to some extent in republican Rome), they were only fully codified and consolidated in modern democracy. As a result, contemporary populists have not only a broader ideational scope, but also more rhetorical tools for contestation than ancient demagogues (cf. Patapan, 2019).

3.3. Stylistic Level

The reference to rhetoric allows us to move to the level of styles, or forms. In the ancient conception of demagoguery, rhetoric and more in general political style were central. As it has been argued, "Greeks of this period, both mass and elite, understood *dēmagōgia* to entail a specific set of characteristics, or a coherent 'political style' " (Simonton, 2024, p. 36). The concern with rhetoric, in particular, reflected the relevance of direct speech to popular assemblies, not only in democratic Athens but also in republican Rome (on the style associated with *populares* in republican Rome, see for instance Goodman, 2024). Critics of demagogues, such as Plato, accused them of not enlightening the *demos* and not serving its interests, but manipulating and exploiting it essentially through the cunning use of flattering and manipulative rhetoric.

In contemporary theories, such a straightforwardly normative critique of populism's forms is less common, partly because the kind of demagogic rhetoric condemned by ancient philosophers is considered an inevitable feature of partisan, democratic politics. But, as we have seen, the importance in populism of specific forms is emphasized by many scholars of populism—especially, though not exclusively, those aligned with the stylistic approach. This has been explained most clearly by Laclau (2005). Rejecting clear-cut normative judgments, Laclau has proposed an essentially instrumental understanding of populism as a form of articulation. For him, populism's most distinctive traits—those related precisely to its forms, such as its vague, simplistic discourse, the appeal to emotions, and a strong, extra-rational identification with a charismatic leader—are essential to its goal of splitting society into two opposing blocs. Other scholars have highlighted additional formal features of contemporary populism. For example, Moffitt (2016, p. 38) notes the use by populists of "bad manners,"

a transgressive style that flouts the traditional norms of public behavior to emphasize their distance from the establishment. Similarly, Ostiguy (2017) foregrounds the tendency of populists to "flaunt the low," that is, to display an attitude of approving familiarity with popular culture in order to demonstrate their closeness to the people and win their trust.

A similar set of rhetorical tactics was frequently highlighted in ancient critiques of demagoguery. Figures like Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, and Cicero associated demagogues with a manipulative and flattering rhetoric that relied heavily on emotional appeals, clouding reason and sound judgment with simplistic but captivating arguments. Their style frequently included deliberately scandalous, aggressive behavior, intended to disrupt traditional norms of decorum (e.g., Morstein-Marx, 2004, pp. 271–272). Thucydides, for example, in his depiction of Cleon, emphasizes his inflammatory rhetoric, which appealed directly to the emotions of the common people and showcased his intimate familiarity with their customs and concerns (Thucydides, 1986, 3.35–40). Moreover, demagogues were often accused of resorting to theatrical, exaggerated tactics that violated the standards of rational discourse.

However, in terms of style, there is also a significant difference, which is related to the point mentioned earlier on the greater level of ideological consensus in ancient Greece (and Rome). One important consequence of this consensus is that, while Laclau points out that populist forms function to divide society, this role was likely more moderate among ancient demagogues. And this means, for instance, the rhetorical disruptiveness used by them could not have been as pronounced as that employed by contemporary populists. Additionally, the rhetorical capacity to challenge ruling elites was less pronounced in ancient demagoguery also due to the fact that political regimes in those times had far less institutional complexity and weight compared to modern democracies. As a result, what we now call "the establishment" was less of a target than it is for contemporary populists. In other words, ancient demagogues had fewer opportunities for rhetorical contestation of elites compared to contemporary populists, who can target more complex institutions and power structures.

Some relevant considerations can also be developed regarding the question of political charisma. Elements of charisma can certainly be identified in ancient accounts of demagoguery, for instance in the portraits of Pericles found both in Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian Wars* (1986, 2.65.68–13) and in Cicero's *The Republic* (1977, 1.25). Weber himself, who canonized the concept in political theory, regarded the Greek *polis* as a form of charismatic rule and drew on the role of the demagogue to develop his theory of plebiscitary democracy (Weber, 2019; cf. Finley, 1985a, pp. 38–75, 177–179; Ober, 1989, pp. 123–125; Roisman, 2021).

Nonetheless, it is evident that charisma did not hold the same centrality in ancient demagoguery as it does in contemporary populism (e.g., Pappas, 2020). This difference stems from the profound transformations that have shaped modern democracy—foremost, the institution of representation, the advent of ideological pluralism, and, related to that, what Lefort (1988) famously described as the "dissolution of the markers of certainty" (p. 19). Indeed, if we consider charisma, as Weber explained, to involve the potential to radically transform and challenge established institutional orders (e.g., Weber, 1946, p. 250), it becomes clear that the ideological rigidity of ancient regimes meant that demagogues in those systems had little incentive to question the legitimacy of the political order and advocate for radical change. This ideological rigidity rendered charisma less significant in ancient contexts. Conversely, those transformations in modern democracy have paved the way for a new form of representation as embodiment. With power becoming, symbolically, an empty space (Lefort, 1988), there emerges a drive to fill it through ideological narratives that

seek to reconstruct social unity and bring to life an image of the people. Charismatic leadership plays a pivotal role in this process by claiming to incarnate this collective image.

But beyond the question of charisma, we can say that certain structural elements of democratic Athens (which we already mentioned) favored a personalistic kind of politics. Among them are the direct nature of democracy and the absence of organized parties, which made the direct relationship between the politician and the mass central to political activity. This relationship was essentially mediated through rhetoric, which also explains the ambivalence Athenians had toward this art—at the same time "both fearful of the power of the orator…and eager to be entertained and instructed by a master" of it (Ober, 1989, p. 178). A central problem in democratic Athens indeed was precisely how to distinguish a true leader from a demagogue, the one who uses rhetoric for the common good and the one who uses it to manipulate. And among the ways to tell the difference was precisely the personal qualities or the *ethos* of the politician, such as his credibility and reputation, which Aristotle regarded as the most powerful of the three modes of persuasion (*logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*; Aristotle, 1991, 1378a).

Political personalism and charisma are also central features in contemporary accounts of populism. This intersection offers fertile ground for the comparative analysis undertaken here. However, I will focus on a particularly intriguing dynamic that emerges in both ancient demagoguery and modern populism: the complex interplay among two opposing tendencies—proximity and distinction—arising from the interaction of personalism and charisma with a democratic and egalitarian ideology. On one hand, the ancient demagogue needed to demonstrate closeness and identification with the people; on the other, he had to establish himself as a *primus inter pares*, showcasing exceptional abilities that enabled him to fulfill his role as a leader. Scholars of contemporary populism, such as Casullo (2020) and Diehl (2019), have identified this same dynamic of horizontal and vertical identification as a defining characteristic of contemporary populist leaders. However, as seen before, a key distinction lies in how the personalistic aspect of leadership is framed: While the ancient account tended to view it essentially through a moralistic lens, contemporary analyses approach it from a predominantly political perspective, focusing for instance on how this combination contributes to making populism a form of plebiscitary, Caesaristic democracy (e.g., Urbinati, 2019).

3.4. Strategic and Institutional/Organizational Levels

The aspects discussed in relation to charismatic leadership and personalism are, of course, also significant from an institutional/organizational and strategic perspective, to which corresponds the third approach to contemporary populism.

As previously mentioned, the strategic or institutional/organizational approach to populism identifies the direct relationship between leader and people aimed at acquiring power as its defining characteristic. In this regard, the parallels with ancient critiques of demagoguery are evident. Ancient critics held that demagogues were culpable for acting as leaders of the people as a means to serve personal or factional interests. However, the differences at the institutional levels are enormous, particularly with regard to the representative systems and free elections that define modern democracies. A number of scholars have emphasized that modern populism cannot be conceived outside this institutional framework (e.g., Müller, 2016, p. 20; Taggart, 2002; Urbinati, 2014, p. 134). Its origins are accordingly traced back to the crucial moment when modern revolutions introduced the principle that government must be republican and

popular, but delegated through elections and representation. This, in the words of Canovan (2005), is what set "the stage for populism in the sense of movements to give government back to the people" (p. 29). The very nature of representative democracy creates the potential for recurring crises of legitimacy, because of the tension—inscribed at its core—between the ideal of popular sovereignty and the fact that the people only exercise power in an indirect, mediated way. Indeed, since its inception, representative democracy has faced different waves of crisis (see Rosanvallon, 2020) and contemporary populism can be seen as one such episode. Many of populism's defining features—such as anti-establishment rhetoric, hostility toward intermediating institutions, or the demand for a more direct link between the people and political leaders—can be understood as reactions to the representative nature of modern democracy.

Just like contemporary populism is inherently tied to modern representative democracy, for Aristotle demagoguery was a corruption of direct democratic rule, not a fundamentally different regime. As previously noted, Aristotle viewed demagoguery as a possibility rather than an inevitability in democracies, given their foundation on freedom of speech. A similar argument can be made for contemporary populism. Both ancient demagoguery and contemporary populism operate within constitutional regimes where conflicts of interests and values unfold primarily at the symbolic, ideological level. In this respect, there is a significant point of convergence: In both cases, the demagogic or populist distortion of democracy (representative in the case of contemporary populism, direct in the case of ancient demagoguery) is understood to depend as well on sociological and economic factors (on the economic causes of contemporary populism, see for instance Margalit, 2019). These include growing social and economic polarization and the shrinking middle class, as Aristotle also observed. Demagogues and populists exploit this polarization, intensifying it and channeling it into a project of political polarization to seize power (cf. Urbinati, 2014, pp. 138–142).

A final key difference, at this level of analysis, has been highlighted by Patapan (2019). While the ancient conception of demagoguery pivots around the distinction between statesman and demagogue, finding in education one key solution, modern thinkers have attempted to address the problem of demagoguery mostly at the level of institutional design. This includes creating mechanisms such as the separation of powers and constitutionalism, which aim to limit and distribute power to curtail and redirect the negative influence of demagogues. The Founding Fathers, for instance, saw demagoguery as a major threat to stability and believed institutional measures were key to curtailing it. The combination of a large republic and representative government, for them, would limit direct leader–mass interaction—where demagogic rhetoric thrives—while fostering a diversity of interests that would prevent any single faction, led by a charismatic demagogue, from dominating, and instead encourage compromise and moderation (e.g., Ceaser, 2007). The institution of the presidency was also designed to limit the rise of a demagogic figure, for instance, by restricting direct presidential appeals to the public and instead directing communication toward Congress to foster a more reasoned form of rhetoric (Tulis, 1987). In a similar vein, contemporary critics of populism often identify as its political risk its alleged threat to the institutions and procedures of liberal democracy, and seek to counter it also by strengthening them (e.g., Crick, 2005; Galston, 2017; Müller, 2021; Urbinati, 2014, 2019).

Even if the focus on institutional solutions represents a significant departure from the ancient conception of demagoguery, this is not to suggest that the ancients completely overlooked institutional measures to counteract demagoguery. Aristotle, for instance, emphasized the importance of a mixed regime and, also, of the rule of law—which indeed was an important element in democratic Athens (see Harris, 2013)—to

prevent the kind of demagogic democracy discussed above. In Athens, furthermore, there were also specific institutional means aimed at curtailing the excessive power of demagogues: among them, the inability of speakers to speak on topics that had not been put on the agenda by the Council; or the *graphe paranomon*, which could be invoked if a proposal made in the assembly was considered to be against the law; or finally, ostracism (e.g., Aristotle, 2002, 45.4; Hansen, 1991, pp. 35, 205–212; Pacheco Bethencourt, 2021, pp. 17–18).

4. Conclusion

Needless to say, the analysis developed here couldn't but be incomplete. For instance, much more could be said about the relationship between economic and social polarization and demagoguery and populism, or about the differences in political style between ancient demagoguery and contemporary populism, particularly those arising from the profound transformations in modern communication—a huge topic that I haven't even touched upon. Nonetheless, I believe this article offers a sufficiently broad overview to see why comparing these two phenomena can deepen our understanding of both.

To conclude, I will briefly explore one of the many questions that this type of historical-theoretical comparison can raise, illustrating how it might open new avenues for research on populism and democracy.

A central point in the ancient critique of demagogues was related to the idea of the common good: Demagogues were accused of not having one and not pursuing it. If we move to the contemporary debate on populism, we'll see that one of the leading theories of populism—that proposed by Laclau—defines populism as a form of articulation, a mobilization strategy, downsizing the relevance of its ideological dimension. However, as it is generally recognized, such an approach has created a normative problem, as it reduces populism to a mere instrument (e.g., Kitus, 2020; Urbinati, 2014). At the same time, we have recently seen a number of theorists advocating for a partisan (but not populist) democracy—against the liberal emphasis on consensus—pointing to the relevance of the common good as a basis of a principled commitment compatible with good faith and civic respect (e.g., Muirhead, 2014; Rosenblum, 2008; White & Ypi, 2016). This however poses us a conundrum.

Populism is often criticized on ideological grounds for the threat it poses to pluralism and other liberal values. At the same time, however, populism is a phenomenon whose ideological core is very thin, while the forms through which it is expressed hold significant political relevance. This implies that a critical approach to populism must necessarily consider its formal, stylistic dimension. But in this regard there is a notable difference with the ancient conception of demagoguery. In that conception, it was implicitly understood that, albeit not without complexity (as we have seen in our discussion of Aristotle), it was possible to make a normative distinction at the rhetorical level as well.

Today, however, the landscape is much more fragmented. Many scholars who adhere to a stylistic approach indeed support what could be broadly defined as a "post-modern," or "post-structuralist" conception of language, with Laclau being the most prominent example. At the risk of being too blunt, we can say that, from this perspective, since everything is discourse, there are no external standards from which to determine whether one type of discourse is, for instance, more manipulative than others. In this case, a normative dimension comes into play as we remind ourselves, first, of the contingent nature of all discursive

formations and thus of their potential for rearticulation, and then, as a consequence, of the possibility of creating ever-expanding conditions for emancipation (e.g., Laclau, 1989; Marchart, 2007; Palonen, 2021).

On the other hand, scholars within a more liberal tradition have offered critical analyses of populism, with part of their critique focusing on its insufficiently deliberative nature. The underlying conception of deliberation in these analyses aligns broadly with that of the paradigm of deliberative democracy. But in the last years, this paradigm has undergone profound transformations, including a significant relaxation, and sometimes even a complete rejection, of its early rationalist assumptions to incorporate forms of communication more akin to real-world politics, including the kind of rhetoric closer to populism. Some of these contributions have also been directly influenced by the classical conception of political rhetoric (cf. Abizadeh, 2007; Garsten, 2011; Goodman & Bagg, 2022; Badano & Nuti, 2023; Walter, 2017). What remains to be understood, however, is whether these two major paradigms can find points of contact to foster a more fruitful dialogue.

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