

Nobody can Trust or Believe Anything: Brexit, Populism and Digital Politics*

Nadie puede confiar o creer en nada:
Brexit, populismo y política digital

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ABSTRACT: In this article, we focus on the link between the new populisms and the crisis of neoliberal capitalism, as well as its post-democratic forms of governance, in the context of digital politics and its social effects, such as the intense polarisation of public life or the distrust of citizens towards traditional forms of politics. Brexit is a paradigmatic case that encapsulates all of these problems and prompts us to think about how philosophy can challenge the way we understand contemporary political coordinates, modes of socialisation, or democratic action. The weakness of our deliberative democracies and the undermining of the bonds, interaction, and decision-making within our civil society seem to have found a compensatory function in the digital world. By carrying out a philosophical-political and film analysis of *Brexit: The Uncivil War* (Toby Haynes, 2019); we would like to focus specifically on how digital media foster the conditions for the success of a populist moment like Brexit.

RESUMEN: En este artículo nos centramos en el vínculo entre los nuevos populismos y la crisis del capitalismo neoliberal, así como sus formas post-democráticas de gobernanza, en el contexto de la política digital y sus efectos sociales, como la intensa polarización de la vida pública o la desconfianza de los ciudadanos hacia las formas tradicionales de la política. El Brexit es un caso paradigmático que condensa todos estos problemas y nos impulsa a pensar en cómo la filosofía puede preguntarse sobre la forma de entender las coordenadas políticas, los modos de socialización o la acción democrática contemporáneas. El agotamiento de nuestras democracias deliberativas y la debilidad de los vínculos, la interacción y la toma de decisiones dentro de la sociedad civil parecen haber encontrado una función compensatoria en el mundo digital. Nos gustaría preguntarnos específicamente cómo estos medios fomentan las condiciones para el éxito de un momento populista como el Brexit. Para ello, realizaremos un análisis filosófico-político y cinematográfico de *Brexit: The Uncivil War* (Toby Haynes 2019).

KEYWORDS: Populism; Brexit; British Identity; Digital Politics; Social Networks

PALABRAS CLAVE: Populismo; Brexit; Identidad Británica; Política Digital; Redes Sociales

*You won't see your old home again
You won't see the old ancient
You will tell yourself it will be okay
You will take the liberty*
"Glory", Gazelle Twin & NYX (*Deep England*, 2020)

1. "There is Nothing to Lose": Brexit, Populism, and Neo-Liberal Globalisation

1.1. Crisis and Populism: A Brief Introduction

It has recently been argued that it is necessary to look for the origin of the populist moment in "the declining structures of political representation across Western democracies, whose roots, in turn, must be found in the changing political economy of late capitalism" (Boriello & Jäger 2021). In the same vein, economist David Cayla warns

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that populism is not exclusively an electoral phenomenon or an inevitable consequence of modernity, but “is first and foremost the consequence of demographic and sociological transformations that are themselves the consequences of underlying economic dynamics” (Cayla 2020, 24). It is important to recall, therefore, the link between the new populisms and the crisis of neoliberal capitalism, as well as its post-democratic forms of governance. In the following introductory sections, we will try to provide a brief contextualisation of this scenario.

As the system has increasingly and tragically failed to ensure its own reproduction without rising exclusion and inequality; while showing a manifest inability to canalise growing social malaise through traditional political channels; a series of protests and revolts have spread around the world (15M Movement, Occupy Wall Street, Mouvement des Gilets Jaunes) and certain phenomena, difficult for the political and media establishment to assimilate took place (such as Brexit or Donald Trump’s electoral victory). During the ten years from 2011 to 2021, a “populist moment” that emerged in response to the crisis of neoliberal globalisation transformed political languages, mechanisms of social identification, and forms of community belonging. Until then, it seemed as if we had lived in a suspended political time, perceived as post-ideological. It was thought that the battle for the pacification of social conflict had been won, but only partially and temporarily, incubating an obscure, contradictory and multiform way of class struggle in the 21st century:

[...] the mutation of the global economic-financial crisis, which had already evolved into a geopolitical clash, into a social and political crisis in the Western countries, leading to the so-called populist moment. Such a transition becomes visible already in the first years of the crisis when [...] the first political reactions take shape [...]. But as the social crisis deepens and the hope of a quick exit from the tunnel of worsening living conditions tends to diminish, the picture evolves [...] into a second phase with some different characteristics. In this phase, the feeling that it is no longer possible to continue with business as usual prevails in broad strata of the population across class lines. This spectrum of populist reactions and positions - this is the usually pejorative term with which the media and so-called experts first liquidate, denigrate, and then attack the phenomenon - emerges, which here we will try, very cautiously, to characterise as neopopulism, a more recent and hidden phase of the class struggle (Sciortino 2019, 175).

Populisms, therefore, emerge as a reaction to decades of “class struggle from above”, represented by a ruling class that has led a process of capitalist globalisation with fatal consequences for the traditional structures of politics (nation-state, citizenship, etc.). It has also meant the battle for the meaning of ideas such as deliberative democracy and popular sovereignty, against which contemporary societies have needed to put in place some kind of self-defence mechanism. A reaction to the most antisocial effects of the system that is expressed, first and foremost, as a realisation of powerlessness on the part of the “losers of globalisation”:

But it is about more than just economics. I would also wish to suggest that populism is very much an expression in the West of a sense of powerlessness: the powerlessness of ordinary citizens when faced with massive changes going on all around them; but the powerlessness too of Western leaders and politicians who really do not seem to have an answer to the many challenges facing the West right now. Many ordinary people might feel they have no control and express this by supporting populist movements and parties who promise to restore control to them [...] (Cox 2017, 16).

1.2. *Powerless and Helpless. Technocracy as Destiny and the Populist Response*

The emergence of a technocratic governing technique in recent decades has allowed national parliaments and governments to decline responsibility for economic shock and austerity policies in front of their own electorate. The abandonment of the representative relationship or the expression of interests and social responsibility has been produced under formulas such as “Europe demands it”. This implies a distancing between the electoral base and its representatives, between national citizens and the supranational and technocratic organs of power, which leads to indifference towards public affairs (as shown by the massive electoral abstentionism in a large part of Western democracies). Wolfgang Streeck has defined the climate of resignation, a horizon without alternatives and technocratic neo-liberalism that has been taking shape

[...] towards a rulebound economic policy, independent central banks and a fiscal policy safe from electoral outcomes; the transfer of economic policy decisions to regulatory bodies and “committees of experts”; and debt ceilings enshrined in the constitution that are legally binding on governments for decades to come, if not forever. In the course of this, the states of advanced capitalism are to be constructed in such a way that they earn the enduring trust of the owners and movers of capital, by giving credible guarantees at the level of policy and institutions that they will not intervene in “the economy” – or that, if they do, it will only be to protect and enforce market justice in the shape of suitable returns on capital investments. A precondition for this is the neutralization of democracy, in the sense of the social democracy of postwar capitalism, and the successful completion of a programme of Hayekian liberalization (Streeck 2014).

The progressive hollowing out of popular consensus and the neutralisation of democracy by supranational institutions has entailed a political and social regression that cannot be conceived without understanding how the discursive strategies in charge of legitimising it have functioned. The phenomenon of the neutralisation of national democracies in the hands of imposed constraints (“the markets want it” or “Europe wants it”) by global institutions has been subject to fatalistic discourses on the mechanisms and effects of the globalisation process.

The process of globalisation has at the rhetorical level, fuelled the creation of self-imposed constraints, which have allowed national politicians to reduce the costs of the unpopular policies they pursued in the decades of neoliberal implementation, presenting their most devastating effects on the subaltern classes as mere “turbulence” or “inevitable damage” to the process. Even an enthusiastic advocate of the process of European integration such as Kevin Featherstone (2011) explains how inscribing EU demands into the domestic law of individual member states has enabled governments to carry out unpopular domestic reforms while “blameshifting the EU, even if they themselves desired such policies”.

Both the process of globalisation and the process of European integration are presented as a “reality” fraught with change and transformation that governments cannot control, becoming subject to the imperative of adaptation. Thomas Fazi and William Mitchell comment on the EU as a paradigmatic case of how the self-imposed constraints and linkages that are created allow national politicians to reduce the electoral costs of neoliberal policies by appealing to norms already embedded in national law and international institutions; whose effects are presented as “painful realities of globalisation” (Fazi & Mitchell 2016, 139). Epistemologically, globalisation displays and veils an emerging reality, coded as a common destiny: this discursive strategy in turn becomes a political force that helps to create the institutional realities it

supposedly only describes, as Frances Fox Piven (1997) has commented. Of a similar opinion is Linda Weiss (1997), who notes how “political leaders —especially in the English-speaking world dominated by neoliberal economic philosophy— have themselves played a large part in contributing to this view of government helplessness in the face of global trends”, so that, in order to gain support for their unpopular policies, “many OECD governments have sought to ‘sell’ their policies of retrenchment to the electorate as being somehow ‘forced’ on them by ‘global economic trends’ over which they have no control”. Therefore, an ideology functional to the globalist project of neoliberalism has been delineated throughout the years for it to rule now. Such ideology is capable of presenting economic trends as destiny and displacing in the capacity for transnational convergence and management beyond the state the possibility of not being accountable to its citizens, neutralising social conflict and blurring the boundaries of the *res publica*.

1.3. “It’s People that are Flawed”? Brexit, Populism and Euroscepticism

The ethical-political rupture produced by neoliberal reason and practice can only undermine its own increasingly precarious forms of producing legitimacy. There are many conditions symptomatic of the social malaise: the perfect storm of the loss of sovereignty of the nation-state, the emptying of old economic-social rights in favour of a global market, the disintermediation of politics, the disappearance of the old collective subjects or the proliferation of sad passions such as fear and anger... It could be argued that it is as if under these conditions the quintessential form in which social malaise is expressed could only have one name: populism. This does not mean that *a priori* populisms necessarily have a revolutionary or progressive valence. Perhaps populism is the only way in which society today can defend itself against the effects of an increasingly anti-social system:

The current quest for sovereignty is in fact a symptom of economic and psychological suffering, of a self-defence of society against the excess of movement, mobility, instability, produced in societies which are not necessarily traditional but rather evolved, but which nevertheless feel exposed to unacceptable risks (recurrent economic crises, real or threatened, are in fact structural and not contingent) or to unbearable injustices (growing social inequalities, which are functional to the current economic paradigm and not its perversion) or to indigestible cultural shocks (Galli 2019, 126-127).

The devastating Great Recession has generated a reaction, still diffuse and unconscious, according to which the recovery of national sovereignty in late capitalism would become a necessary condition to conquer spaces and institutions that are on the side of the subaltern classes. The return of “sovereignty” as a central element of contemporary political debate, however, is still a phenomenon to be deciphered: the question of whether it is merely a nostalgic desire for a reactionary and exclusionary national identity, or, rather, the expression of a need for social defence, protection against the market and the rejection of inequalities, remains unanswered. Instead of demonising the growing and multiform demands for sovereignty, it would be worth asking, firstly, how it can be possible that it has been an idea essentially and successfully demanded by right-wing populisms, while left-wing populisms have been incapable of linking the defence of the nation-state and vindication of sovereignty in the same political programme aimed at articulating a progressive historical bloc. In essence, the discontent and resentment of the “losers of globalisation” has provoked a new political map suitable for the emergence of populist phenomena:

The “golden years” of welfare capitalism and homogenous societies arguably made this appear less urgent, but recent decades have led to an explosion of questions pertaining to issues such as identity politics, often framed along the lines of the immigration debate. These have been put to effective use by populists, who are often aware of the fears and insecurities that rapid change can cause in communities, especially among the most vulnerable (Tsarouhas 2019, 136).

Brexit is a paradigmatic case that encapsulates all of these problems and prompts us to think about how philosophy and society relate to each other in these convulsive times of many disruptive innovations for ethical, social and political reflection. Thus, like other populist phenomena, Brexit has challenged the way we understand political coordinates, modes of socialisation and deliberative and democratic action. First of all, by way of methodological caution: it is not our aim to understand Brexit according to a pre-adapted “mould” that is populism, but rather to account for the singularity, following an approach of situational and conjunctural analysis which:

offers a vital way of making sense of the heterogeneous and contradictory forces, trajectories, and political projects that were condensed in the moment of Brexit. Despite the temptations of identifying the one “real” cause, conjunctural analysis invites us to think about how various lines of force (from class recomposition to postcolonial melancholia) intersected with the fracturing of apparently established governmental and political formations (from the crises of the European Union to the disuniting of the United Kingdom). These lines of force were recombined in new articulations and found new voicings that promised to overcome the failures and frustrations, as well as the contradictions and antagonisms of the existing arrangements (Clarke & Newman 2017, 113-114).

It is not possible to speak of single, determining causes, but of a mixture of historical, cultural, economic, geopolitical, etc. factors, whose genealogy would be impossible even to outline, for obvious reasons of subject matter and space in this article. But at least we can offer a few brief notes, in an impressionistic way, and then approach the phenomenon of populism, Brexit and disinformation by focusing on the case of the film *Brexit: The Uncivil War* (Haynes 2019). As the start of this article was from a more general context, we can now focus on the link between the economic consequences of globalisation and specifically the rise of Brexit populism. As journalist Fintan O’Toole has pointed out, the malaise and resentment of the British underclass can find a justification in the disastrous management of the Eurozone Crisis and the undemocratic character of the European Union:

It also moved away from evidence-based economics – the German-led austerity drive after 2008 was impervious to the realities of its own failure. The social consequences have been shrugged off. Inequality has risen across the continent: the richest seven million people in Europe now have the same amount of wealth as the poorest 662 million people. There are now 123 million people in the EU at risk of poverty – a quarter of the EU population. This has been allowed to happen because the fear of social and political chaos went out of the system. There is a European technocratic elite (especially in unaccountable institutions like the European Central Bank) that has lost its memory. It has forgotten that poverty, inequality, insecurity and a sense of powerlessness have drastic political repercussions [...].

Working-class communities in England, like their counterparts in most of the EU, are absolutely right to feel that they have been abandoned [...].

The distress is real. And Brexit gives the pain a name and a location – immigrants, and Brussels bureaucrats. It counters their sense of powerlessness with a moment of real power – Brexit is, after all, a very big thing to do (O’Toole 2018).

What is certain is that the link between economic inequality and the escalation of feelings of fear and resentment where socio-cultural aspects come into play is evident. It has been empirically demonstrated in a study showing the cause-and-effect relationship between structural economic problems and the sense of economic insecurity and cultural grievances:

[...] the results indicate that cultural values typically associated with a backlash against immigrants and the European Union tend to be more prevalent in localities where unemployment is going up and lower in districts where real household incomes are increasing (Carreras, Irepoglu Carreras & Bowler 2019, 1415).

The vulnerability and precarity of those named with the continuously repeated sentence of “left behind” can be appreciated in a very powerful scene from *Brexit: The Uncivil War*. Craig Oliver, Remain’s main strategist, gathers a diverse group of people to test Remain’s main points and arguments. Unhappy with how the conductor is testing them with the group, he decides to enter the room. The tension quickly escalates, crystallising in the climax of the Northern, middle-aged woman bursting into tears after being accused of racism: “Well, I’m sick of it! I’m sick of feeling like nothing like I have nothing like I know nothing like I am nothing, I’m sick of it!” (Haynes 2019). The feelings of nothingness that the woman expounds provoke in Craig Oliver a brief moment of *anagnorisis*, where he realises and understands the failed approach of the Remain campaign. The political strategist finally understands the momentum, not derived just from a temporary turn but brewing for decades. However, it would be unfair to attribute the outcome of the referendum vote exclusively to the aforementioned depressed areas. Whilst the importance of topics such as unemployment and immigration is not to be denied, there have been discourses linking the Brexit vote exclusively to the depressed North, hence framing it as the culprit. Berry proves in his study the injustice of associating the Brexit vote exclusively with the North: “as Los et al.’s analysis makes clear, the relationship between EU dependence and support for Brexit is not evident only in Northern England and is indeed stronger in many other regions – yet it is Northern England which tends to illustrate the ‘left behind’ narrative most often in public discourse” (Berry 2019, 6-7). The association between the North and Brexit, as well as the overuse of “the left behind phrase” have permitted populist discourses to permeate among the citizens, as its only shield against the current thunderstorm.

Beyond the derelict North, however, the relationship with the EU was already flawed from its early beginnings of entering the EEC, whose structures were already designed without Britain’s input. Moreover, the failings of the supposedly cosmopolitan European project have been linked to a British perception of dullness and bureaucracy instead. Beck and Grande (2007, 20) have coined the notion of *deformed cosmopolitanism*, rooted in “the egoism of the member states, economic self-interest and the asymmetries in influence on political decisions in the EU, the technocratic policy approach of the supranational institutions and the weakness of actors from civil society”.

The weakness of our deliberative democracies and the undermining of the bonds of community, interaction and decision-making within our civil society seem to have found a compensatory function in the digital world, whose impact on “traditional” politics should not be underestimated. As some authors put it, “British Euroscepticism is a multifaceted social construct present at the level of public opinion, party system, and the media” (Ruzza & Pejovic 2019, 436). While it has long since become commonplace to value social media as privileged arenas of political socialisation, we would like to ask specifically how these media foster the psycho-

logical and cultural conditions for the success of a populist moment like Brexit. In order to do so, as suggested, we will carry out a philosophical-political and film analysis of *Brexit: The Uncivil War*.

2. “We have to hack the political system”. An analysis of Brexit, Populism and Digital Politics in the film *Brexit: The Uncivil War* (Toby Haynes 2019)

2.1. Populism, digital turn and the end of the old politics

A first consideration about the link between populism, social networks and disinformation is that this is not only an epistemological problem, but also an ethical-political challenge for social theory; for as soon as the boundaries between truth and falsehood or the link between values and rational ends are blurred, any normative content of the different projects of common life is eliminated. In this sense, it is no coincidence that the issue of disinformation is often associated with the problem of the intense polarisation of public life or the distrust of citizens towards traditional forms of politics.

Let us first analyse what the “digital turn” consists of in terms of the “social impact of the new information technologies” and, specifically, its four main phenomena:

our lives are increasingly mediated by digital technologies and subjectivity itself is changing accordingly; traditional forms of political, cultural and economic organisation are being transformed by digitalisation; the production and social reproduction of knowledge are being altered and adopting hitherto unprecedented forms; and digitalisation produces its own ideologies that modify our perception of reality and of ourselves, as well as novel customs and forms of interaction (Arias Maldonado 2016, 30-32).

There are many characteristics that make social networks such propitious platforms for the rise of populism. At first glance, social networks offer a hyper-individualised scenario that has more to do with the cult of individual autonomy of neoliberalism than with the communitarian nostalgia of populisms (Gerbaudo 2018, 748). However, it could be argued that the “generic social media user” functions as an adaptation of the “common man” to which populists appeal: his or her subscription to Facebook, Twitter or YouTube allows him or her direct access to alternative channels of information at a time when traditional media suffer a justified loss of trust (Gerbaudo 2015). How does the way in which social media are used coincide with the psychological and cultural conditions suitable for the emergence of a “populist moment”? To answer this question, Manucci provides some clues:

[...] In particular, social media are often said to represent a perfect channel for the diffusion of populist messages: first, populist actors often accuse the traditional media system of being controlled by the mainstream political elites, and therefore they consider the new social media as the only neutral and independent arena; second, populist actors build their credibility on their links with ordinary people and advocate unrestricted popular sovereignty, hence the possibility of communicating directly with their electorate can reinforce their image of being approachable people; third, social media are more informal and favor a type of communication close to colloquial language, based on emotions rather than on reasoning, this being close to a populist discursive style. For all these reasons, populist actors are expected

to mobilize voters via social media more easily than mainstream actors, thus enhancing their electoral performance (Manucci 2017, 475-476).

In populism, charismatic figures with indeterminate and deliberately ambiguous speeches replace the discussion of measures and programmes: the leader speaks directly to a spectator who is conceived as the common man devised by populist movements. The Brexit campaign has been known to have been one of the first experiments in mass data collection and its use to influence opinion and voting. The film is quite revealing when the workings of the technological part of the strategy are being dealt with: “Silicon Valley, eh? That’s my kind of people. The British. Cambridge Analytica” (Haynes 2019). The mention of Cambridge Analytica, as well as Robert Mercer, is not something extensively expounded, for the film focuses more on the Canadian firm AggregatIQ. In contrast, the explanation of the inner kinetics of the populist strategy regarding technology and data is vaster and rather enlightening: “Technically, we use sophisticated algorithms to micro-target the population in political campaigns. The other side has a voter database that I don’t have access to, and I have to build my own, find voters and target them with our ads” (Haynes 2019).

By bombarding citizens with tailored ads according to their most ardent fears and worries, the mobilisation of a commonly disinterested part of the electorate is achieved. The Brexit campaign did not focus on the ones that were already convinced or the ones whose convincing was impossible: the target was the unsure part and also, especially, those who had never even considered voting, since they did not believe something was at stake for them. For the convincing of this newly found part of the population, nothing that reminded of the establishment or traditional politics could be introduced:

We should start sounding it out with our growing band of MPs. Why? Well, their experience in this is invaluable. We don’t need them; we’re going to be making decisions based on science and data. No matter how counter-intuitive to traditional political thinking. No advertisers, no snake oil salesmen, or fucking Saatchis. We’re gonna follow algorithmic, statistical analysis (Haynes 2019).

In essence, the link between populism and social networks is at the forefront of today’s turbulent political scene, to the point that Forbes magazine asked the following question: “Have social networks been the cause of populism?” (Dans 2018). If, as Arias Maldonado rightly states, “social networks are less the sources of our information than the structure of the new public conversation” (Arias Maldonado 2018, 161), the truth is that this public conversation is something very different from the traditional one and there have been major changes: the alteration of news formats, the approximation between mass media and interpersonal forms of communication, new consumer/citizen preferences and the use of social networks, consumption patterns associated with algorithms (De Vreese et al. 2018, 423-438). In short, “it is only by understanding the way in which the power of rhetoric is deployed in politics and the media that it is possible to see how a certain hegemonic conception of identity is asserted” (Ahluwalia & Miller 2016, 454). Although the persistent erosion of public space and representative democracy is the result of long-standing processes, the fact is that the “digital turn” in politics cannot be understood as the origin of the problem, but rather as the worsening of it:

The populist political era of our time culminated in the early twenty-first century when two powerful torrents fused together into a grand channel: the spread of conspiracy theories, and the avalanche of misinformation boosted by a change in media. In this new digital media environment, populist politicians

have been able to spread conspiracy theories and misinformation much further than before, crafting an especially successful recipe for undermining the political establishment.

The transmission of fake news was fueled by the emergence of 24-hour broadcast news media. In addition, the proliferation of online media, especially social media, undercut the gate-keeping role that mainstream reporting played in the twentieth century. In this new media environment, the populists were able to take their appeal directly to the people (Bergmann 2018, 252).

The film *Brexit: The Uncivil War* portrays how the campaign led by Dominic Cummings was able to challenge the establishment power of Westminster; reflected in many long shots of the building and its undeniable entity; to build a campaign with simple and resolute slogans. A delusion, perhaps, for many, the future was posited as a more idyllic reverie outside Europe, recovering the notion of England as Arcadia, and appealing to a long cultural tradition from Shakespeare (the film even quotes the St. Crispin's Day speech from *Richard V*) onwards, including William Blake and George Orwell. In contrast, the Remain version proposed a more traditionalist vision for its campaign, drowning citizens solely in data and painting an apocalyptic future.

The contrast between establishment (Remain) and populism (Leave) can be interpreted as an expression of the tensions between two models of governance, namely technocratic and populist:

This appears to place technocratic political style in direct opposition to populist political style in a way that makes trust between actors employing these distinct means of communicating difficult to achieve – the legitimacy of populism comes from the people, and therefore any institutional rules or procedures curtailing their wishes are illegitimate. In contrast, the legitimacy of technocracy comes from its compliance with rules, procedures and checks and balances, as well as its efficient outcomes, rendering attempts to circumvent these rules and procedures as illegitimate. In the context of Brexit negotiations, not only are the framing of issues in populist and technocratic discourses diametrically opposed, but so too are the sources of legitimacy upon which their arguments are based. If in discursive interactions between actors employing populist and technocratic political styles there is a mutual questioning of legitimacy, there is scant room for trust between those actors (Farrand & Carrapico 2021, 154).

The supposedly opposed views on how to deal with media coverage and how to create the strategies are epitomised in Dominic Cummings vs Craig Oliver in the film. After Jo Cox's assassination, both strategists haphazardly meet in the train station, standing of course on opposing platforms but agreeing to have a drink. It is then that Oliver warns Cummings of the risks of his strategy: "You are feeding a toxic culture, where nobody can trust or believe anything" (Haynes 2019). In short, the disruptive effects of populism expose the struggle between two models of organising social life: the "new politics" vs the "old politics", in which trust, and deliberation are difficult or practically impossible to achieve, as they are based on opposing foundations, values and worldviews.

2.2. Populism and Brexit in the Digital Age: Emotions, Post-truth and Misinformation

The problem of post-truth, usually linked to populism, cannot be understood without reference to technological transformations and new mass media. The alteration of news formats, the combination of mass and personal communication thanks to information self-selected by algorithms, new patterns of consumption of information and entertainment, etc., are some

of the causes. Social networks have contributed to the increasing political polarisation by undermining the legitimacy of traditional media: filter bubbles, bots, and fake news, all contribute to increasing relativism, i.e. understanding certain information, and even evidence, as a matter of mere opinion, hence the contemporary rise of conspiracy theories.

A deeper analysis of the problem of fake news is that it is not so much about what is true and what is false – although that is also true – but about *objectivity itself*, about *how we understand reality*. This would be similar to what Theodor W. Adorno said about fascist propaganda: “its ultimate aim is probably not so much the selling of a false argumentation as, in effect, the total breakdown of logical meaning in the listeners and eventually the collapse of any meaning that the idea of truth may have for them” (Adorno 2009, 47). As Garland has said of Brexit:

In the limbo of the last three years following the referendum result of 2016, Brexiters have repeated their slogan, “Take Back Control,” *ad infinitum* in the tried and tested terms of propaganda. Brexit and the idiocy of the UK leaving the EU, of course, have not the slightest thing to do with taking back control of anything, but the slogan seeks to confirm the biases of those promulgating it and those repeating it (Garland 2019, 61).

The blurring of the essence of truth, remaining in form but empty in content, can be shown in the slogan that Garland mentioned, since taking back control can mean everything and nothing at the same time. It can also be appreciated in the term post-truth: it is not the same as truth, but neither is it associated in a strong sense with its opposite, a lie; if we knew the “truth” to which a “post-truth” is opposed, we would react, we would be able to enunciate it, but it seems that we find ourselves in a world where truth has long since ceased to belong to our vocabulary. Hannah Arendt in her research on totalitarianism said that:

Just as terror, even in its pre-total, merely tyrannical form ruins all relationships between men, so the self-compulsion of ideological thinking ruins all relationships with reality. The preparation has succeeded when people have lost contact with their fellow men as well as the reality around them; for together with these contacts, men lose the capacity of both experience and thought. The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist (Arendt 2004, 474).

If there is a breakdown of logical sense or perception of our shared reality, does this mean a primacy of emotions as a compensatory function to other “rational” processes? As a matter of fact, things are not as easy as such dichotomies suggest. Undoubtedly, the prominence of political passions is favourable for a discourse as intentionally ambiguous as the populist one, which also focuses on an emotional tone capable of registering both a set of sad passions (indignation, rage, etc.) and happy ones (illusion, hope, etc.). As stated in the film: “What’s our message? [...] It can’t just be a slogan. We need to capture a feeling. What’s the feeling?” (Haynes 2019). The prevalence of passions and feelings that Cummings’ motto encapsulates is highlighted throughout the film. As opposed to “Jobs and Economy”, Cummings appeals to the inner *pathos* of the nation. The dichotomy of head vs heart is something the film dwells on; on one hand many voters wanted to leave the European Union, on the other hand, they were concerned about instability and possible job losses.

Appealing to the emotions was undoubtedly a feature of the populist discourse that dominated the campaign, alluding to the issues that caused the most fear and concern among

the population and at the same time labelling the apocalyptic and tremulous discourse of the Remainers as “Project Fear”. However, as Moss, Robinson and Watts comment, there was not really such a clear distinction between the head and the heart as the one they wanted to delineate: “During the referendum campaign, a repeated refrain circulated in news reports that voters would have to choose between their heads and their hearts” (e.g. Hewitt 2016). Despite the prevalence of this trope among commentators, observers rarely articulated a distinction between “head” and “heart” (Moss, Robinson & Watts 2020). Moreover, the study challenged the narrative that the Leave campaign appealed to the emotional side while the Remain one was the more rational appeal according to citizens’ votes and opinions, the perception most widely held across academia and even within society itself. Even former prime ministers subscribed to such a view, John Major even claiming that “the campaign was a war between economics and emotion”.

The study from the University of Sussex also questioned the narrative that delegitimises the Brexit vote as a ploy achieved through emotional trickery; as well as demonstrating the inefficiency of the separation between emotions and rationality in such ventures. Thus, according to Moss et al., voters were perfectly capable of discerning when their emotions were being appealed to. One of the emotions most prevalent in the campaign, having taken precedence in the British consciousness over the last century, was nostalgia. British identity has been articulated through numerous factors that have contributed to specific structures of feeling.

Even today, many of these factors remain anchored in the nation’s psyche, playing a major role in forging its idiosyncrasies. Britain has been shaped as a nation whose identity lies crucially “in the narratives, myths, landscapes, cultural artefacts and materials of the past” (Monk & Sargeant 2015, 1). Cumberbatch’s Dominic Cummings supports this perspective by arguing in the film that “much of understanding who we are comes from our nostalgic view of the past” (Haynes 2019). Nostalgia played a central role in the campaign, but it had played a central role in the very formation of Britain’s national identity crisis before. The nation has been immersed in a loss of hegemonic power that has made some long for the glorious days of the empire.

Despite the obvious fact that the Leave campaign did use national symbols and nostalgia to achieve their purpose, media and news have attributed it entirely to Brexiteers, as a way of explaining the phenomenon. Nevertheless, Richard, Heath and Elgenius battle against the notion that nostalgia can be used to explain political positions or provide them with justifications. Investigating the voters’ attitude towards the past, the researchers conclude that: “It highlights the need to see nostalgia for what it really is – a social construction reflecting the sentiments that flourish in political discourse – not as a satisfactory justification or explanation of political preferences *per se*” (Richard, Heath & Elgenius 2020, 79). The oversimplification of attributing one political position solely to nostalgia has been a constant in British politics during and after the referendum. While the role played by nostalgia is difficult to refute, “nor indeed should we forget that Remainers are nostalgic too” (Richard, Heath & Elgenius 2020, 79). Different types of nostalgia flourish depending on the different profile votes, but not as antithetical as initially portrayed. What is new is how this deep-rooted sense of nostalgia for the British nation has been combined with populist forms of identification and expression, giving rise to a new, more intense, and widespread phase of the sense of exceptionality linked to Euroscepticism: “We would also note that Brexit vote has the potential to transform

'hard' Euroscepticism from being a minority concern to being a viable political project" (Pirro & Taggart 2018, 5). It is in the previously mentioned moment of *anagnorisis* that Craig Oliver has where he realises that the Brexit campaign had been brewing for decades and now it was way too late to stop it.

2.3. "No one has knocked on that door since about the eighties". Brexit Referendum, Digital Democracy and the Illusion of Popular Sovereignty

As it has been previously suggested, the Leave campaign and its supporters not only showed disaffection towards the political establishment but also wondered: "whether the public endorses the principle of popular sovereignty" (Norris & Inglehart 2018, 8). In the film, the making of the motto reflects the cementing point that articulates the whole purpose and strategy of the campaign:

We can tap into all these little wells of resentment, all these little pressures that have been building up, ignored, over time. We could make this about something more than Europe. Europe just becomes a symbol, a cypher, for everything. Every bad thing that is happening has happened. It's brilliant. Take...control. I like it. Simple, clear. Empowering. Brilliant (Haynes 2019).

And who is the subject who should take control again? The "people", hitherto supposedly ignored, as opposed to an elite detached from their problems. In this sense, the Brexit campaign is a paradigmatic case of the famous definition of populism coined by Cas Mudde, that is, "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* of the people" (Mudde 2004, 543). In this sense, it is illustrative how, once again, Brexit offers us an example of how populism functions as a catalyst for other latent tendencies such as national sovereignty:

National sovereignty has characterised (parts of) both parties since the UK considered its membership in the then European Economic Community. Economic and civic sovereignty were also part of their discourses and Eurosceptic positions. What is newer – and triggered both by the emergence of significant challenger parties (i.e. UKIP) and the use of an instrument of direct democracy such as the referendum – is the emergence of a form of populist sovereignty opposing the "will of the [British] people" to the unresponsive Brussels bureaucracy. To be sure, elements of populist sovereignty have been present in the political debate since at least the early 1990s, with the Maastricht debate and the emergence of a Referendum Party. However, the context of Brexit has made the populist facet of sovereignty much more visible and significant (Baldini, Bressanelli & Gianfreda 2020, 233).

The appeal of Cummings' notorious "TAKE BACK CONTROL" was indeed the yearning to reverse a feeling of loss of sovereignty, of helplessness in the changing waters of our current days. Populist discourses have taken advantage of those feelings of being politically and ontologically adrift and insecure, with the promise of the aforementioned better future:

To conclude, it has been argued that a contributing factor to the outcome of the Brexit referendum was the ability of populist narratives to appeal to and cultivate existing feelings of ontological insecurity prevalent amongst large sections of the British population, which were often connected to anxieties of "losing home", feelings of marginalization and powerlessness, and low self-esteem. Drawing on Lacanian understandings of subjectivity, it was argued that populist fantasies promised to replace these anxieties with the fulfilment of a full and stable identity. Brexit fantasies came in different forms, offering nostalgic and contradictory visions, be they of a more protectionist inwardlooking Britain or of an enhanced

globalized free-trading nation, but both of which drew on common emotive signifiers of regained “control”, “sovereignty”, “nationhood” and subjectivity which resonated with desires for ontological security (Browning 2019, 18).

As much as there is a permanent feeling of a battle against the elites, it is not a total and altering revolution that the Leave campaign was seeking, there is no dethroning or debunking of the pillars that hold British politics and society. Paradoxically, it is simply the recovery of the British essence, supposedly diluted in the European project, that is prioritised: “We’re asking voters not to reject the *status quo*, but to return to it. To independence” (Haynes 2019). The film constantly highlights that political speech is not truthful in essence and does not have to be, but it does have to be convincing, to be able to articulate a given identity:

To take something back means it was, is, rightfully yours, taken from you. So much of our understanding of who we are comes from this nostalgic view we have of our past. These stories, these myths we tell each other. Normally, I hate them, they stop me from progressing, but, in this case, let’s use it. The idea that we want to return to a time when we knew our place. When things made sense, fictional or not. It’s perfect (Haynes 2019).

The return to simpler times represents a blow to the intricate ideas that the establishment, epitomised in the Remain campaign, tries to spread. This is one of the principles upon which *Brexit: The Uncivil War* is built, the over reduction to simple statements and binary oppositions that create a certain allure, a certain identification. Benedict Cumberbatch’s character expresses his discomfort with a yes / no question meant to decide the turn of a nation, for “it forces people into tribes” (Haynes 2019). Cummings may not share the established reality but proves he is able to grasp it, to comprehend this newly found sense of exceptionality. Not only does he seize the opportunity of using social networks (his so-called “air war”) to spread Britons’ most ardent fears, such as Turkey entering the EU; but also, he, again and again, rejects the failed traditional leadership and mediations, as well as the popular (and therefore cross-cutting) nature of its campaign. As pointed out by the authors of an empirical study,

To sum up, first, the “people versus elites” cleavage has proved to be the overarching frame of the post-Brexit vote Facebook debate unfolding on the pages of EU institutions. This finding speaks to the scholarly literature that identifies a strong populist ethos in the Brexit process. As a number of scholars argue, the referendum empowered those ‘left behind’ by globalization and Europeanisation (Ford & Goodwin 2014) and offered them an opportunity to express their discontent with national and EU elites and have the final say on the future of the UK’s membership in the EU. The anti-elitist character of the Brexit vote crosses the left-right divide. It is reflected in the fact that sizeable numbers of both Conservative and Labour voters chose the Leave option, whilst the majority of UK political elites supported EU membership (Ruzza & Pejovic 2019, 446).

The destruction of everything representative of the establishment, especially “conventional wisdom” (Haynes 2019) becomes one of Cummings’ purposes since the axis between the old/new is one of the other contrapositions upon which Cummings works, which crystallises into the Remain/Leave battle. Social media turns fundamental in such deeds in two ways. Firstly, simplified plebiscites are rapidly spread and secondly because it allows Cummings and his team to test the waters by testing the reactions to their points.

This is particularly relevant in the sphere of social networks, where the supposed “virtual immediacy” collaborates in the mystification of simulating the social relationship par excellence desired by populism: the direct link between the representative and the people. In social

media, the planned and the mediated are confused with a false social immediacy; the fact of being able to tweet directly to a political leader, for example, does not mean that mediation disappears. At the same time that citizens have more opportunities *to feel* that they can connect directly with their representatives practically 24 hours a day, mediating elements are growing, such as large companies (Google, Facebook and Twitter, mainly) or media oligarchies (“platform capitalism”). All of this happens due, partly, to the functioning of algorithms or – on a psychological level – the very laws of the economy of attention, at a time when the omnipresence of screens, stimuli and information flows considerably diminishes reflection and memory (Duerto 2021). A particularly significant consequence of these phenomena for politics is the progressive emptying of the space between the leader and his or her voters, eliminating the entire network of organic positions and middle management – often responsible for the “cultural elevation” of voters – which is occupied by communication professionals, pollsters, experts in persuasion, marketing and image techniques:

This process of resignification, as in the case of the USA, involves redefining institutions as obstacles rather than as articulating structures, i.e. mediating structures between the political subject and its representative, so that the specific weight of a popular majority that is clearly unqualified - in the usual terms of political theory - ends up wielding more force as a supposedly popular mandate than the agreements that the British Parliament might reach in this respect (Valls Oyarzun 2020, 18-19)

Specifically, in social networks, there is a politicisation of the private person: meaning both an interest in the leader as a “human being”, as a “person”, and that the personal sphere is the result of constant politicisation, which becomes an object of evaluation in order to legitimise ideological values or the exercise of political activity. The personal sphere (habits and tastes), the relational sphere (affective and family life) and the personal spaces in which the leader moves outside his or her public function are the three spaces where a process of substitution of the political for the intimate takes place (Rega & Bracciale 2018). In this way, politics becomes individualised (attention is focused on the individual qualities and facts of a given political actor and not on party life), privatised (interest is centred on the leader’s personal interests, tastes and relationships, rather than on the programme or specific policies) and sentimentalised, with special attention being paid to the leader’s emotions, positive or negative, as an instrument that indicates the degree of closeness or rejection of his or her voters.

The paradigm of the cult immediacy and the rejection of the mediation of populist movements is the idea of “direct democracy”. Social networks and new technologies make it possible to extend *the feeling of a permanent plebiscite that feeds the illusion of political participation*; however, some problems arise: this type of online voting is more of a plebiscite than an expression of a real process of deliberation. Also, we must bear in mind that the preparation of the issues to be voted on is inevitably in the hands of a minority group of people, which means that voters end up approving or rejecting the plan that has already been cunningly designed by others. Therefore, the influence of voters is qualitatively limited and can often be reduced to decisions that resolve with a “yes” or “no”. As Cumberbatch’s Dominic Cummings suspiciously points out in the film:

Referendums are quite literally the worst way to decide anything. They’re divisive, they pretend that complex choices are simple binaries, red or blue, black or white, and we know there are more nuanced and sophisticated ways out there, to make political change and reform, not that we live in a nuanced, or political age, do we? Political discourse has become utterly moronic, thanks to the morons who run it (Haynes 2019).

This is a phenomenon strictly linked, firstly, to the transformation of traditional democracy into a “democracy of the public”, where the media are the stage and where “the test of the discussion” must take place. Secondly, due to the transformation of mass parties into liquid and personal forms of representation (Andretta & Bracciale 2017, 9). The source of legitimacy of action is in danger of residing not in the ethical, political or social validity of the action, but in the number of positive or negative reactions and uninformed knowledge. This has profoundly transformed the way we relate to each other in deliberative democracy and the way we do so in a political atmosphere colonised by the digital world:

In this respect we might say that social (digital, participatory and shareable) media tend towards the formation of relationships that are not only parasocial but cultic in nature and that through them political discourse tends to move away from negotiation over differences of interest and become part of a kind of celebrity theodicy, an argument about suffering, sin and a promise of salvation when the demons are destroyed. Today, on all kinds of platforms, online and offline this mode of discourse dominates our politics (Kock & Villadsen 2022, 102).

3. Conclusion

Populism as a new form of political expression and organisation in the context of the crisis of neoliberal globalisation has not disappeared. It cannot disappear. As this paper has attempted to show, the populist moment explodes as a consequence of the crisis of capitalist globalisation, as we have tried to show, challenging Britain’s specific neoliberal growth model in the context of Brexit (Wood & Ausserladscheider 2020, 1489). We have also tried to focus on the correlation between populism and the end of the political, cultural and anthropological mediation structures and material-symbolic universe of “Modernity”, specifically, the historical, cultural and social structures of feeling of British identity.

All of this is only accelerating today. It is, hence, paradoxical that, faced with a situation of permanent crisis and post-democratic forms of governance, the subaltern and impoverished middle classes are looking for some kind of solution on the margins of what the system may consider acceptable. Not only is populism not going away but it will make new waves. In an era of enormous social fractures and inequalities, the dissolution of hegemonic economic and ideological consensuses, and the breakdown of identity security in the political community, populism, with all its ambiguity and contradictions, reveals itself as a solution to the loss of foundations (anthropological, social and political) of contemporary societies.

Nowadays, the economic, political, and social crisis resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic offers a great opportunity to recall what is no more than historical evidence. The greatest social, economic, and political advances have been achieved through the institutions of the sovereign and democratic nation-state, not through international, multilateral, or supranational agreements and institutions that in most cases have been used to reverse precisely those advances. In this context, new ways of understanding the state and its role in regulating economic life, such as the return of Keynesianism or Quantitative Easing policies, would have seemed surreal to us years before the arrival of the virus. Nevertheless, new forms of populism are also present, with increasing social consensus and adaptation in our political societies.

The Brexit issue prompts us to continue thinking about the way in which philosophy and society relate to each other in these convulsive times of many disruptive innovations for ethical, political, and historical reflection. There are currently talks of processes of *de-globalisation* underway that would entail a whole geo-economic reconfiguration of the world according to parameters perhaps unknown in past decades. In such a context, philosophy should reflect on the most devastating effects of an economic system, that, in its very reproduction, puts welfare, cohesion, and democracy at risk. The future challenge will be to rethink a fairer and more inclusive political economy, in the light of a redefinition of the role and functions of the state and the relationship between public and private (Dobre 2021; Fernández-Jardón & Sánchez Berrocal 2021). This should also include the new forms of collective identification and political socialisation, as well as the complexity of the idea of autonomous, responsible citizenship, together with a revival of civil society that is committed to the formation of a critical public sphere (Wagner 2021).

The film *Brexit: The Uncivil War* (Haynes 2019) is helpful when it comes to understanding both the societal issues and symptoms from which populism arises, and the diverse ways in which populist discourses can be moulded. The British population was in firm need of a redefined narrative that helped to reshape a fragmented identity: “We need to define ourselves so as to create a coherent narrative that explains our lives, our need to find peers in whom we can see ourselves reflected, our need to differentiate ourselves from others, our need to be full-fledged individuals” (Garzón 2021, 228). What Garzón comments about the need for a narrative on an individual level becomes even more urgent on a national one, where identities in crisis affect the whole ontology of the nation. It is then that populism crawls into the scene and is embraced by the orphan population. The Brexit campaign was paradigmatic in showing populational disaffection with traditional measures and modernity, in need of a new twist, what Cummings constantly repeats about killing “conventional wisdom” (Haynes 2019).

The intense precariousness of all vital domains, the malaise and inequality, especially aggravated after the pandemic crisis, does not make it difficult to foresee that the dynamics of public polarisation or the formation of new authoritarian governments will continue to play a leading role in our political life. We are undoubtedly living in a populist *Zeitgeist*. If populism is becoming the quintessential form of the political expression of social unrest, it is urgent to understand its chameleon-like nature and its consequences in an increasingly unstable global political scenario, endangering deliberative democracies. As Cumberbatch’s Dominic Cummings confesses in the film:

What are your expectations, realistically? Well, ideally it would be to create the biggest political upset the world’s seen since the fall of the Berlin Wall. So what does your campaign look like? I’d like to think it looks like an insurgence against the establishment (Haynes 2019).

It must be said that hasty assessments tend to be wrong: Brexit as the end of Western civilisation or some kind of apocalypse has not yet arrived. We cannot afford to fall into the self-congratulatory trap that citizens were deceived or even “voted wrong”, despising the popular classes and everything that is not easily assimilated by the aforementioned “conventional wisdom”. After all, it constitutes an analytical framework “that reproduces colonial narratives about some people being more educated and enlightened than others, which operated alongside an already highly charged atmosphere of everyday racism” (Closs Stephens 2019, 411). Fortunately, social phenomena are far more complex than the most impartial commen-

tators tell us. A long-term philosophical evaluation, however, can help diagnose the causes and understand the effects of the populist moment. Withal, as Cumberbatch's Dominic Cummings says in the film: "This is a... Well, it's going to be a multi-decade project" (Haynes 2019). Nothing is excluded from the future, but it is in our hands to arrive as best prepared as theoretically possible to react with the best practices and solutions.

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