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PHILOSOPHICAL ALTERNATIVES TO POPULISM

Master's Thesis in Philosophy

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## Introduction

The post 9-11 world has promoted fear as a constant within the political sphere. As such, the rise of terrorism as a threat, and the subsequent geopolitical involvement of world powers exacerbated conditions of violence in the Middle East. Similarly, the 2008 recession had such a severe impact on the world, that still today we can identify some of its repercussions. Those outcomes, primarily in industrialized nations, are not limited to financial elements: in moments of a perceived crisis and political uncertainty, people tend to look inward, not as reflection, but as a reactive measure. Not as an exercise of individual reflection, but as a collectivity that is struggling to regain a lost sense of shared identity. That communal search found comfort in the identity provided by a mutual language, history, ethnicity, and belonging to a particular *nation*. This almost reactionary national self-identification has been worsened by an almost Western world-wide rise in challenging of democratic principles. One of the main criticisms is the lack of proper public representation, and the distant role of elites from ‘the common people.’ Populism, as it will be developed in this thesis, is one of those reactions. However, populism does not exist in a vacuum, it responds to certain shortcomings in a representative democracy.

While some of the most radical examples of populism could provide evidence that the political development of the Western world has hit a wall, I will argue that while it is true that democracy provides the conditions for populism to exist, alternatives and safeguards can be found within the same system. Those alternatives rely on the subject that has been claimed overlooked and to be represented by populists: *the people*, but with a non-ideal, concise and constructive aim — *citizenship*.

To explain my argument, I have divided this thesis into three chapters. Chapter 1 will deal with the historical background and description of populism, along with the elements that make it so appealing to a sector of the population. In this chapter, Jan-Werner Müller’s book *What is populism?* will be essential. While the historical elements are merely descriptive, they are key in understanding populism’s current popularity. Similarly, I will follow Müller’s argument of how to define populism, and the elements that make it so alluring to a particular group of people, and what are their conditions that make voters turn to populist leaders.

Chapter 2 will examine the philosophical roots of populism, and will rely on the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Carl Schmitt. Being the most philosophical of the three chapters, it will analyze political life under a social contract,

notions such as the general will and tyranny of the majority, along with the consequence of threat-reaction and exclusivity in politics. The objective of chapter 2 is to emphasize the relevance of Rousseau, Tocqueville and Schmitt, in a way that furthers our understanding of populism.

Finally, chapter 3 will present safeguards against populism. It is the objective of this chapter to provide alternatives within the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Jan-Werner Müller that support the importance of active and responsible citizenship. While Rousseau played an important role in chapter 2, I will present the reasons why within *The Social Contract*, we can also find sufficient elements that emphasize the citizen's role of active contributors in a polity. Particularly in this final chapter, I will support Jan-Werner Müller's claim that populism is a "permanent shadow of representative democracy," and provide normative arguments for possible safeguards against populism, which can already be found in representative democracy's framework.

## Chapter 1. What is populism?

For the past decades, *populism* as a political notion —or smear— has been recurrent. The widely different historical contexts populism has been associated with, make the concept blurry or difficult to identify as synonymous with one type of ideology. While it is difficult to provide a single definition of populism, as it will be described, populism responds to a series of behaviors, practices and moral stances, usually aimed at political and economic elites (Müller, 2016a: 7). Likewise, populism would be impossible to understand without its undoubted association with another opaque yet substantial concept: *the people*. Sometimes righteous and solemn (“We, the People”), occasionally unfavorable or derogatory (the whims of the masses, mob rule), the concept paradoxically refers to a specific group of individuals that are passed as the whole of a population— it speaks only of “a people, not really ‘the people’” (Canovan, 2005: 40). Populism, as it will be explained in this chapter, thrives on the idea of understanding and speaking on behalf of the people. Since they act in direct opposition to “the corrupt elites and oligarchies,” a populist leader possesses a self-entitled moral supremacy (Müller: *ibid*).

Self-righteousness, and their special ability to understand and tap into people’s anxieties and resentments, is what makes a radical populist leader knowledgeable of the true sentiments of the people. It is the association of a populist leader with the notion of the people that seems problematic, given that it can raise appealing but misguided questions about the legitimacy of representatives, and who populists speak for and represent. By tackling this topic, I intend to not only look at the current debate around populism, but also ask philosophical questions regarding its allure, the impact of populist parties, the role of the citizen, inter-European policies, and a normalization of certain behaviors in politics.

In this chapter, I will briefly describe the historical background of populism, focusing on what Cas Mudde (2016) described as the conditions that allowed a kind of populism to develop from 2015 onwards. Secondly, I will describe contemporary populism and its characteristics. Finally, I will analyze the appeal of populism and its representatives, and why they are supported by disgruntled and resentful citizens. This final section will emphasize some of the socioeconomic and ideological circumstances of the populace that support populist parties. While I provide a general description of populism, some of the examples provided will focus on right-wing populism and some of its representatives (like Viktor Orbán). As it will be explained throughout this thesis, right-wing populism’s propensity towards polarization and anti-pluralist action represents a significant challenge

to representative democracy, especially when those reactive behaviors become normalized in contemporary politics.

Similarly, the objective of this chapter is to present historical and descriptive accounts of populism and its recent advances. In doing so, it will provide sufficient background information that will allow for the development of a philosophical analysis, and consequent proposal of alternatives. Essential authors for this chapter are Jan-Werner Müller, Cas Mudde, and Margaret Canovan.

## **1.1 Historical backgrounds of populism**

To highlight the importance the concept of the people and its relation to populism, Margaret Canovan's book *The People* is central. In the early chapters, her historical account cites the Roman *populus*, the Glorious Revolution, the American War of Independence, and the French Revolution as history's most noteworthy use of the people in concise political movements (Canovan, 2005: 11-7). While those movements clearly respond to distinct historical contexts and causes, it provides evidence that the use of this slippery concept is neither new nor exclusive to contemporary populism. In a like manner, political action that has been justified as being inspired or lead by the people gained a distinct characteristic in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the development of the nation-state. Special attention must be drawn to this, since the delimiting characteristics of a nation have significant impact in populist discourse, and who is considered to be a part of the people. For Canovan, the link between *the people* and *nation* functions as a "reinforcement of the sense of *collective*, trans-generational peoplehood may have been politically important at a time when religious, economic and intellectual developments were beginning to emphasize individual rather than collective identity" (Ibid: 19). This contradictory relationship between the everlasting tradition and modern parameters of individualism and progress still resonates in contemporary politics. However, Canovan does clarify that the concept of "nation is not equivalent to an ethnic group" but it provides some relation or identification with a kind of ethnic group (Ibid: 43). It is this function of identification as ethnic and cultural self-identification that clashes with different value systems, ones that are often perceived as a threat.

Now, returning to the historical use of populism, in his book *What is Populism?* Jan-Werner Müller describes it as "a degraded form of democracy that promises to make good on democracy's highest ideals ('Let the people rule!')" (Müller, 2016a: 9). While Canovan's

account of the use of the people responds to diverse historical contexts, it is relevant to focus on the schism between the will of the people and genuine democratic rule, and if populist claims of the lack of popular representation is legitimate. Yet, this brings up the question: has there ever been a political system that speaks for the whole majority of its population? While his historical description is concise, Müller suggests that the use of the concept since the 1960s has been related with decolonization, “peasantism,” and Communism (Ibid: 10). While the true intentions of the policies behind the label are difficult to be known up to a certain extent, it is possible to infer that populism has been deliberately associated with the idea of radical and disruptive politics. However, Müller also points out that the general perception of populism greatly depends on the latitude it is being referred to, regardless of political ideology:

The notion of populism as somehow “progressive” or “grassroots” is largely an American (North, Central, and South) phenomenon. In Europe, one finds a different historically conditioned preconception of populism. There populism is connected, primarily by liberal commentators, with irresponsible policies or various forms of political pandering (“demagoguery” and “populism” are often used interchangeably) (Müller, 2016a: 12)

The latter differentiation of perceptions, along with not having one universally accepted definition of populism, makes the concept go on overused, or sometimes misunderstood. But nonetheless, this thesis will follow Müller’s assertions in order to better understand the phenomena of populism. While one could argue that radical political or even violent behavior has been present throughout human history, the causes linked with populism are usually associated with inadequate forms of representation. Constitutional representative democracy, among other things, strives for the rule of participation and rationality over unilateral and unreasonable exercise of power. However, the conditions that allow radical forms of populism to thrive are significantly present within representative government.

## **1.2 Characteristics of contemporary populism**

Now, this section will elaborate on some of the shared elements of populism. As stated, they are general observations, but I will mention specific examples. Jan-Werner Müller claims populism represents “a permanent shadow of modern representative democracy” (Müller, 2016a: 11), that is, the conditions that allow populist behavior to thrive are inherent to a democratic system. While distinctions between different types of democracy can be made, I will focus on representative democracies given the significance of elected officials, and the self-appointed relevance of those who claim to speak on behalf of the people.

Following what Müller and populist leaders themselves argue, it can be stated that *populists* are political actors (individuals and/or parties) who rely on a moralist judgement of their liberal or mainstream opponents, frequently separating themselves from the “immoral, corrupt elites”. They advocate policies that favor social exclusion and polarization, and justify those statements by claiming that is what the true people want (Müller, 2016a: 10). Similarly, since those “corrupt elites” and inefficient governments have acted against the claims of the people, populists make themselves appear as a natural response to them, a “corrective” form of representative politics (Ibid: 11). While the distinctions between left-wing<sup>1</sup> and right-wing populism would require a separate thesis, I will follow Müller in making overall observations of populism. However, some examples of right-wing populist parties and leaders will be provided throughout the thesis. Firstly, because the current rise of right-wing parties and leaders mirror a rise of polarization and radical behaviors that go beyond traditional political rhetoric. As will be explained, there are considerable dangers in the normalization of certain attitudes in politics, particularly those based on exclusive conceptions of national identity, prejudice, resentment, and Islamophobia. Moreover, the European context requires special attention, given its past with totalitarian regimes (Ibid: 48).

Populists do not shy away from rhetoric that favors polarization or exclusion, and serves as “an example of advocacy for the common people—without [...] pretending to represent the people as a whole” (Müller, 2016a: 45-6). They are open about how they represent a certain kind of people, who have nothing to do with career politicians or the wealthy sectors. Not only they do not speak for those elites, they are consistently condemning their actions as socioeconomic failures, or causes of potential crisis: “A ‘crisis’ is not an objective state of affairs but a matter of interpretation. Populist will often eagerly frame a situation as a crisis, calling it an existential threat, because such a crisis then serves to legitimate populist governance” (Müller, 2016a: 25). While the concept of crisis as an existential threat will be explored in chapter 2, it is worth stating that as common element in populist discourse, it is highly adaptable and mutable: any situation can be elevated to the level of crisis or threat. Since populists believe they recognize and share the fears of the common people, they can identify and gain support from those moments of discord. A

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding left-wing populism, Müller does identify some populist elements in US political actors, and in some governments in South America. However, the latter responds to a very different context than populists in the United States and Europe: populism has an aura of “inclusionary and emancipatory character” (Müller, 2016a: 15) that stands against imperialist intervention, and answers to a centuries-old resentment of unequal and cruel treatment of the indigenous population.

situation of crisis can vary from the political decisions taken in either Washington or Brussels, unregulated flow of immigration, economic grievances, refugee presence in Western countries, Muslim culture, plural conceptions of nationality, or globalized values that contrast traditional ones.

As mentioned earlier, 2015 has been identified as encompassing conditions that exacerbated populist movements: the intensified consequences of the 2008 economic recession, the 2015 refugee crisis, along with the 2016 Brexit referendum, and the prominence of Donald Trump as presidential candidate of the United States (Ibid: 16). No less important, terrorism as a perceptible threat, and an escalation of Islamophobia has given momentum to single-issue parties. Similarly, Cas Mudde claims that immigration functioned as a sociopolitical catalyst (Mudde, 2016: 10). While the identifiable events have led to the current wave of populism, it is noteworthy to mention them alongside a very clear sense of threat and fear— conditions that seemed to be ideal for a kind of politics that benefits from conflict and resentment, and not solidarity and true consensus.

To link populists as institutional representatives of the *vox populi*, it is pertinent to mention how this translates in electoral participation and political party impact. Mudde concludes that independently of criticism of elites, voter resentment, and general political unconformity, not all anti-system parties are necessarily classified as radically populist (Mudde, 2014: 219). While there is an ongoing debate on the electoral influence that populist parties can have in Europe, Mudde claims their impact should be measured in what is called the contagion effect— the way mainstream parties react, modify their platforms, and try to capitalize on radical right momentum in electoral terms (Akkerman, 2015: 21). That is, when topics such as Islamophobia, refugees or immigrants as threats move from peripheral to mainstream actors, or the inclusion of a charismatic figure that would guaranteed certain levels of support. Special attention should be given to cases that profit from exacerbating certain anxieties and resentments of the population, and exploit socioeconomic inequalities, deeply rooted ethnic tensions, or religious intolerance. Cas Mudde registered an “increasing willingness of the mainstream right to collaborate with” radical populist parties (Mudde, 2014: 221).

Furthermore, regarding concrete transnational issues of representation, the European Parliament allows minority parties from distinct countries to form coalitions. One of the most important in the context of this thesis is *Europe des nations et des libertés (ENL)*, which was co-presided by France’s Marine Le Pen from 2015-2017. As such, *Front National* plays a

significant role in *ENL*, and has transferred some of its main ideologies. Le Pen herself writes in the party's website:

Day after day, the Europe of Brussels reveals its deadly plan: to deconstruct the nation states in order to create a new globalised order, one that threatens the security, prosperity, identity and very survival of the peoples of Europe [...] This kernel of resistance, which now includes MEPs from eight European nations, is working towards an urgent objective: to free Europe from the chains of technocratic servitude and build a Continent of peace and prosperity. The Europe of Nations and Freedom group is the advanced guard of a movement towards a Europe of peoples that is already on the march, a Europe that tomorrow will regain full control of its destiny ([www.enfgroup-ep.eu/](http://www.enfgroup-ep.eu/))

The latter quote intends to build on the premise that there is an actual threat to financial security and cultural identity. It also tries to build on a supposed lack of representation of the people of its member states, and reveals a polarizing Euroscepticism. Likewise, Janice Atkinson, *ENL* representative from south England states: “I defend free speech, dislike political correctness, defend my country’s way of life, traditions and customs” (Ibid). Again, her claims try to state that the elements they stand for are at risk or nonexistent. However, how could a political coalition that openly opposes immigration exist without freedom of speech, or inter-European political coalitions? Nonetheless, what is relevant for this thesis is the rhetoric they use: simple wording, aggressive phrasing, catchwords that will resonate with their audience's anxieties, and an oversimplification of the plights of our time, some of which have profound and old roots. Finally, the *ENL* has members from France, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Italy, Romania, Poland, Flanders and the United Kingdom.

### **1.3 Populism’s appeal to resentful citizens**

During this final section, I will describe the alluring elements of populism, and how they manage to gain support from the disgruntled sectors of the population. One reason is because populist rhetoric acknowledges and justifies exclusive conceptions of *a people*: “Populists will seek to perpetuate what they regard as the proper image of the morally pure people” (Müller, 2016a: 34). Not only is the populist morally superior to his or her political adversaries, the people he or she claim to represent are *the true* people, therefore morally superior on equal grounds— a true, strong leader for a pure people. Ironically, the true people feel vulnerable, are underrepresented and ignored, and these conditions generate a strong sense of *resentment*: “Those suffering from resentment are by definition weak [...] The resentful are nonetheless defined by their inferiority and their reactive character” (Ibid: 13). Inferiority, a self-perception constructed by undeniable neglect of some of their needs

and marginalization of their claims. But also, by a misguided drive to defend themselves, as a people, against cultures and values they perceive as a threat.

The populist, naturally, rises above the resentful to speak for and guide them. Perceived as a strong and “charismatic” leader “because of his or her superior capacity to discern the common good, as judged by the people” (Ibid: 22), his or her confrontational stances will resonate with the forgotten people. The populist leader will not only speak for the people, he or she will claim to understand their predicaments, and most importantly, share their mistrust of the ones responsible. This almost metaphysical understanding can be understood as having “a sense of a direct connection with the ‘substance’ of the people and, even better, with every single individual” (Ibid: 23). It is that direct connection with the people that makes populist act while seemingly, institutions and other elected representatives fail to do so— only the populist leader can and will take proper action against those imminent catastrophes, but more importantly, suggests action while representative institutions (like parliaments) in their never-ending bureaucracy, fail to do so. This suggests Carl Schmitt’s conception of the sovereign, he who acts in moments of severe crisis and threat, and under certain conditions, might stand outside the law. Müller would argue “such contestation is different from attempts to speak in the name of the people as a whole—and efforts to morally delegitimize all those who in turn contest that claim” (Ibid: 37).

Even with all the alluring elements of a populist leader, it is unlikely the people would support a representative with undemocratic, or even authoritarian predispositions. That is why “‘democracy’ remains the chief political prize, [...] to ensure that they, too, are recognized by international organizations and Western elites as genuine democracies” (Ibid: 9). While populists dismiss elements of democracy, they need representative justifications for their tenure in government. Apart from their claim of unconditional popular support, democratic validation is compulsory to differentiate them from authoritarians or any other form of illegitimate ascension to power. “Yet when in power, populists tend to be much less skeptical about constitutionalism as a means of creating constraints on what they interpret to be the popular will—except that the popular will (never given empirically, but always construed morally) has first to be ascertained by populists, and then appropriately constitutionalized” (Ibid: 34).

This materialization of an abstraction, that is, the implementation of the will of the people in a body of laws, requires popular support. But also, it needs a very specific kind of national identity, one that is intrinsically link to that one people. This exclusive interpretation of nationalism and national identity can be related to *nativism*. In one of his most recent

newspaper articles, Mudde elaborated on his concern on the relevance of nativism: it refers to “an ideology that holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (‘the nation’), and that non-native people and ideas are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state” (Mudde, 2017). While cited in his earlier work as the triad of right-wing parties, nativism —along with authoritarianism and populism— has gone hand-to-hand with irrational sentiments: “the implied lack of critical thinking on the part of the populace, and the implied cynicism on the part of the leaders who exploit it” (Ibid). Similarly, he believes populism is being portrayed as a veil that masks “the nastier” intentions of nativism (Ibid), intentions that, again, have been normalized in contemporary politics.

Also, it is pertinent to mention that as of April 2018, the following countries have populist governments: The United States, with Donald Trump winning the 2016 election with 44.6 % (CNN). Austria under Sebastian Kurz, who won in 2017 with 31.6 % (DW). Viktor Orbán was reelected for his third tenure as prime minister of Hungary in April 2018 with 93 % of votes (NY Times). Equally important are the parties and populist actors that managed to make quick political advances or remained with parliamentary representations in both national and European levels. While Angela Merkel secured a fourth tenure in the 2017 German elections, *Alternative für Deutschland* managed to secure 13 % of votes, making it “the first radical party to enter the Bundestag in six decades” (The Guardian). Similarly, 2017’s elections in France brought considerable attention to *Front National*’s candidate, Marine Le Pen; although she did not win, she still managed to gather 33.9% of votes (Le Monde). While officially not holding office, far-right Jarosław Kaczyński is considered to hold considerable sway in Polish politics.

Before concluding this chapter, it is pertinent to return to Viktor Orbán, not only because he is one of Europe’s most notorious populist leaders, but because of what he represents as a figure of change, from pro-democracy activist in communist Hungary, to symbol of populism (BBC Newsnight). As stated, in April 2018 Orbán was re-elected for his third term as prime minister of Hungary by an overwhelming majority<sup>2</sup>, and has made Hungary the main representative of an *illiberal democracy*. While he did not create the term, he has been promoting it extensively as a solution: he claims that Europe is experiencing an

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<sup>2</sup> During his 2018 re-election campaign, Viktor Orbán depended on anti-Semitic propaganda against businessman and philanthropist George Soros, whom we claimed is funding international organizations to destabilize Hungarian society and allow for an influx of immigrants. Similarly, his government has systematically jeopardized the permanence of NGOs, and the existence of Budapest’s Central European University.

unprecedented crisis, which began as an economic one, but turned to a “crisis of the elite” that has taken a considerable toll on “ordinary people” (Orbán: 2017). While more educated and articulate than some of his counterparts, Orbán does point out situations that are proving challenging to contemporary democracy: financial crisis, unchecked mass migration, value differences between European countries, and representative constraints of trans-European political bodies on a national level. However, he portrays a simplified diagnostic of the state of affairs, usually driven by an overly protective and polarizing stance: “Illegal migration presents a threat, facilitates terrorism, and boosts crime. It repaints Europe’s cultural face, brushing over national cultures on a massive scale” (Ibid). Granted, some of the EU’s policies on migration and refugees have deficiencies, and some situations of integration are far from optimal. Yet, a conclusive correlation between mass migration and a rise in crime and terrorism in European soil is yet to be demonstrated.

In addition, Orbán frequently relies on situations that can be labeled as Schmittian existential threats (more on this in chapter 2), how a polity perceives substantial peril from another: “the impending danger of an unprecedented mass of people,” “There is no escape from protecting our external borders,” or building of a fence that by “doing so, we safeguarded the lifestyle, economic model, and safety so dearly cherished by Europeans” (Ibid). He escalates otherwise conflicting situations and turns them into an extreme-case scenario where the mere existence of a European or Hungarian culture is directly threatened by incoming (mostly Muslim) immigrants. Likewise, Orbán blames the “institutions in Brussels” for imposing “a mandatory quota system for resettling migrants,” and not being able to protect European borders. He claims that “the political and intellectual elites are pitted against most of the people, who still nourish patriotic and commonsense sympathies,” and are unable to recognize “the natural, indeed *elemental, instinct to defend ourselves* [emphasis added], our families, our homes, and our lands” (Ibid). Orbán’s proposed solution is an anti-pluralist *illiberal democracy*:

And so in this sense the new state that we are constructing in Hungary is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state. It does not reject the fundamental principles of liberalism such as freedom, and I could list a few more, but it does not make this ideology the central element of state organisation, but instead includes a different, special, national approach (Orbán: 2014).

Much has changed since Orbán’s 2014 speech. His idea of freedom has become aggressively exclusive, not only against those who do not qualify as Hungarian citizens, but also against those who represent ideological opposition within the country. Orbán’s illiberal democracy is one that intends to reclaim its national sovereignty, its right to resolve legislation based on its own interests, and decide who is entitled to live within its secured borders. While still a

democracy in theory, it relies on what Jan-Werner Müller labelled “occupation of the state”, namely, when a populist leader takes office after an election, he or she would make substantial legal or constitutional changes that would allow them to “place loyalists in what should have been nonpartisan bureaucratic positions” (Müller, 2016a: 26). It is worth mentioning that the state of threat and constant fear is not exclusive to the foreign other: Orbán has similarly claimed that while “it is not non-governmental organisations who are moving against us, but paid political activists who are attempting to enforce foreign interests here in Hungary” (Orbán: 2014), political opposition has faced harsh treatment, NGOs have been leaving the country (BBC Newsnight), and the Hungarian Roma population has experienced gradual exclusion. While it is impossible to determine how Orbán’s administration will continue to develop, his actions and behaviors so far fit with Müller’s definition of a populist leader. Moreover, Orbán provides an example of why right-wing populism can be more challenging for the democratic background it develops in.

In conclusion, this chapter has outlined the historical backgrounds of populism, its characteristics, the concept of *the people*, and the reasons of its appeal. While different types of values and political principals are forced to correspond to contemporary representative democracies, the issue of national sovereignty is constantly argued. Likewise, I have provided concrete examples of populist parties and leaders, as well as countries that have either a populist government, or considerable populist party presence. With some of the descriptive elements behind, it is pertinent to move to what I consider to be philosophical elements of populism. To better understand claims like ““Above the law stands the good of the nation”” (Müller, 2016a: 32), a philosophical evaluation of the roots of populism will be presented in chapter 2.

## Chapter 2. Philosophical roots of populism

After the characteristics of right-wing populism have been explored, this chapter will elaborate on the some works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Carl Schmitt. I will argue that the two former thinkers incentivize active civil participation, while the latter author focuses on threat-reaction and exclusivity in politics. This approach will provide a set of concrete concepts and criticisms that will further a philosophical understanding of populism.

While it can be argued that the chronological differences<sup>3</sup> of the cited authors might present a deficient diagnostic for the contemporary phenomenon of populism, I propose that by following some of their core concepts, Rousseau, Tocqueville and Schmitt help us to deepen our understanding of populism, not justify it. In addition, it is pertinent to clarify that while some similarities can be observed (specifically between Rousseau and Tocqueville), none of the chapter's main authors wrote with populism in mind (although Carl Schmitt did elaborate considerably on his suspicion of democratic representation). Even more, they wrote centuries apart from each other: Rousseau wrote during the antecedent years of the French Revolution. Tocqueville described democratic ideals crystallized in the young United States (both wrote during times of intense democratic vibrancy). Schmitt, on the other hand, bleakly outlined the failings of democracy and parliamentary representation of the Weimar years. The former addressed participation, citizen involvement and agreement. The latter, conflict, threat and forthright action. Nonetheless, I will argue that regardless of their historical context, the conjunction of some of their contrasting political observations on democracy can provide valuable insight on populism, given that all three authors have focused on ways that contribute to democratic development, or in Schmitt's case, to its failures. Like an inevitable age-associated disease, populism drastically demands our attention and challenges democracy's current well-being.

### 2.1 Jean-Jacques Rousseau: the *general will* and *the people*

To illustrate my argument, it is necessary to turn to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). His relevance for this thesis is instrumental in two ways: in his book *The Social Contract* (hereafter *SC*), we can find elements that will further our understanding of populism by

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<sup>3</sup> Rousseau wrote in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Tocqueville during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Schmitt in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

focusing on central concepts such as *the general will and the people*, but no less important ones like covenants, body politic and the sovereign. Additionally, and as will be explained in chapter 3, some of Rousseau's notions also contribute as safeguards against populism. A central author for this thesis, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's legacy is substantial whenever we analyze political associations. While some of his ideas might be perceived as controversial or radical compared to other of the social contract thinkers<sup>4</sup>, I will elaborate on some of his concepts that, after cautious analysis, will further our understanding of what I claim are the philosophical foundations of populism, along with the discrepancies on which it thrives upon.

### **2.1.1 The general will**

In *The Social Contract*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau coined and extensively used the term *the general will*. He states that when people determine to live under civil society, they agree on covenants that guarantee their well-being. The notion of a covenant, that is, the transcendent moment of political conception that determines the 'birth' of a people, is usually addressed by populists as the pristine moment that 'their people' should return to. Through the social contract, a political society is formed, which will guarantee tranquility, justice, civil liberty and moral freedom. This social pact relies strongly on civic duty, given that members of such a political organization will choose arrangements that benefit others and themselves; no action should be held against another member because they form part of the same political association or body politic —also known as a republic (Rousseau, 1968: 50, 54, 64-5). In this artificial body, "each one of us puts into the community his person and all his powers under the supreme direction of the general will; and as a body, we incorporate every member as an indivisible part of the whole" (Ibid: 61). Therefore, the general will represents agreements reached within a given political association, a tangible definition of common interests and understandings (Ibid: 72). But also, quite intricately, there is room for interpreting it as a fictional single expression of a polity. This reading can occur because Rousseau himself did not provide a concise and definitive definition of what the general will is, he just described its characteristics. Therefore, under the social contract, voluntary acquiescence follows the understanding that under it, general wellbeing and political justice can and must be assured. Now, in this precise context, the general will manifests itself as the expression of the body politic (a living community with a shared understanding of their own

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<sup>4</sup> For example, John Locke claims that parliament is the depository of the people's will. While for Rousseau, at first glance, there should be no intermediary of popular will.

common interests), but only if it is made through a social pact: the purpose of the general will is to shape common interests in its political organization.

As it was explained in the preceding chapter, populist rhetoric displays its leaders as the only ones who can truly speak on behalf of the people. In factual terms, this presents a setback in terms of representation and exclusive identification of a people. Jan-Werner Müller argues that one of the reasons why populism is so appealing is because it presents its leaders and ideologies as a much-needed corrective against a type of “politics that has somehow become too distant from ‘the people’” (Müller, 2016: 10). Correspondingly, they, as symbolic representatives of the people claim to oppose elites and their overlooking of the common folk (Ibid: 25). If a populist states that he or she represents what the people want, i.e. the general will, it is required first to clarify what this concept meant for Rousseau: “the major difference between populist representation of the people and Rousseau’s general will. The formation of the latter requires actual participation by citizens; the populist, on the other hand, can divine the proper will of the people on the basis of what it means, for instance, to be a ‘real American’” (Ibid: 19). As Rousseau describes in *SC*, the role of a citizen as part of the general will has to be under very precise conditions. The characteristics that a citizen must portray to formulate a legitimate general will, such as communality, civil organization, and responsible citizenship, will be explained in chapter 3.

However, what populists refer to (or at least, what they interpret as such) functions only as a device, a fiction, not as an actual expression of communality. Additionally, if the general will is taken to extremes, it can be interpreted as a popular manifestation that disregards mediators of popular representation, such as elected politicians and parliament. While Rousseau envisioned the general will as the tangible result of a common agreement based on a shared understanding of interests; unfortunately, it also has a very abstract interpretation of one single demand of a political organization. And this vagueness is why Rousseau’s concept of the general will is relevant for understanding populism.

In a like manner, the idea of preservation must be made through a social pact or covenant: its purpose is to shape common interests in a political organization, while the structure is known as body public (Rousseau, 1968: 61-2). Thus, the general will prescribes the direction that the political body moves in, ideally combining common interest, self-preservation, and collective organization. This collectivity, Rousseau emphasizes, must be active and conducive for those under the covenant to be able to become the sovereign: “Those who are associated in it take collectively the name of a people, and call themselves individually citizens, in that they share in the sovereign power, and subjects, in that they put

themselves under the laws of the state” (Ibid: 62). Therefore, individuals become the people, but only under conditions of acquiescence and responsibility, and their relevance relies on how they represent the will of the whole body politic. Rousseau elaborates on the idea of a kind of maturity that must be reached in order for the general will to truly “tend to the public good” (Ibid: 88, 72). Accordingly, the general will not just function as the manifestation of all that have decided to live under common agreement, but also of their explicit resolve for cooperation.

Conversely, Rousseau’s strongest contributions to this thesis can also present serious disadvantages. However, as will be demonstrated in the final chapter, Rousseau’s unmistakable egalitarian and republican stances serve as a reminder of the constant participation that democratic life demands. Representative democracy, as Carl Schmitt harshly proved, has considerable disadvantages. And, it would be unwise to rely on highly normative and universal implementations of democracy without encouraging citizen participation. In a like manner, Rousseau’s sometimes paradoxical stances on social organization can serve as a reminder that actual democratic life demands constant and factual involvement; failing to do so will result in stagnant and polarizing conditions like the ones populists thrive on.

Nonetheless, the general will, such as described by Rousseau, could prove problematic in the context of populism. Several authors have claimed that Rousseau actually legitimizes authoritarian and despotic practices, and Jan-Werner Müller suggests that “populism always sounds a bit ‘Rousseauian’” (Müller, 2016: 18). Because it describes something intangible, and with a definition that can lead to multiple interpretations, the general will can and is used to justify all sorts of practices that go against what Rousseau originally intended. Still, this imaginary *volonté générale*, in Rousseau’s conception, represents one will of a people, once united in civil society, and under the willing submission of some individual freedoms (Rousseau, 1968: 51). The idea of common good is reached by citizens when they recognize the “great difference between having an obligation to oneself and having an obligation to something of which one is a member” (Rousseau, 1968: 62), and is agreed upon assuming an active role as citizen and through communal interaction. But, it also raises the very pertinent question of disagreement among citizens: can one voice be truly made manifest without silencing the view of the minority? In the context of populism, this concept requires special attention, given how populist leaders determine who “the people” are, and how they also present themselves as the only *true* interpreters of their anxieties and

frustrations, but also hopes (Müller, 2016: 10, 14). What happens, then, to the voices of those who do not share the understandings of “the people”?

### 2.1.2 The people

Before moving forward, it is pertinent to mark the distinction between “a people” and “the people”, especially given the relevance that this concept plays in populist discourses. Rousseau claimed: “Hence, before considering the act of which a people submits to a king<sup>5</sup>, we ought to scrutinize the act by which people become *a* people, for that act, being necessarily antecedent to the other, is the real foundation of society” (Ibid, 59). That is, any culturally identifiable group, with a brief historical or genealogical justification of that moment of unification (or covenant), could claim to identify as such. The troubling association made by populists emerges when “a people” (generally a cultural or religious majority within a nation) is made to represent “the people”, as the entirety of the population (Canovan, 2005: 40-1). This represents a delicate and dangerous possibility: claiming to know what everyone or all the people want, and delimiting who belongs within those abstract boundaries. On a similar note, Margaret Canovan states that the people is just one of many “political myths” used throughout history. She recognizes the complexity of such an abstraction, but correspondingly notes how dismissing the concept entirely can also be problematic: “Calling the sovereign people a ‘fiction’ may imply that any action, consent or legitimation attributed to that fictitious people is a sham, so that regimes relying on it are not really legitimate at all” (Canovan, 2005: 131). The concept of the people has limitations, but it also functions as a form of collective identification and as a cohesive element. Populists take such sentiments of identity seriously and use them as polarizing tools.

Granted, there are several passages in *SC* that can be interpreted with despotic tendencies, the sovereign cannot “alienate a part of itself or submit to another sovereign” (Rousseau, 1968: 63). That is, that functional body must act and move in unison, disavowing dissidence; the general agreements reached by all members dictate the direction this organization takes. Any significant discord or hindrance would annihilate its existence (Ibid). But perhaps one of the most controversially discussed excerpts in the whole book is the following: “whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the whole body, which means nothing other than that he shall be *forced to be free* [emphasis

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<sup>5</sup> In the context relevant for this thesis, any yielding of individual freedoms or submission to an authority higher than one’s own.

added]” (Ibid: 64). Here, the ubiquitous high-handedness in populist rhetoric would seem to thrive. What does this overly normative restriction by the will of others, say about individual freedom? Undoubtedly, according to Rousseau, a level of compliance is expected, some aspects of liberty must be yielded, and in some cases, even enforced. But, it is relevant to remember that he wrote *SC* with the clear idea of opposing a unilateral, despotic exercise of power, one held by absolute monarchs. Rousseau also emphasized that to prevent inequality, measures must be taken so “the general will is always enlightened and the people protected from error” (Ibid: 64). However, it is possible to argue that when citizenship is not linked to what Rousseau considers to be common values and virtues of the republic, it can be easily misguided by incendiary rhetoric.

While sometimes paternalistic, Rousseau’s aims are distinctly democratic and inclusive: to agree upon the social contract, and to actively exercise one’s citizenship was enough to be a member of the body politic. Authoritarian and populist exploitation of “blood and soil” identity features of citizenship would develop with the nation-state (a shared language, cultural background and ethnicity). *SC* refers to a very specific kind of voluntary covenant, made manifest “once men have entered into society, freedom comes to be inseparable from virtue” ([Cranston, Introduction] Rousseau, 1968: 26). That is, the freedom to choose to live under civil society and the laws its members choose for themselves becomes its own form of virtue. For Rousseau, life under representative democracy, while not perfect, provides significant benefits. Still, living under such a civil community demands a constant *quid pro quo*, and Rousseau’s interpretation similarly functions as reminder of several of democracy’s representative paradoxes, and possible authoritarian outcomes: as it will be addressed later on, with respect to what concerned Alexis de Tocqueville, instead of a tyranny of one, there is the risk of the tyranny of all.

Subsequently, other limitations to Rousseau’s interpretation relate to the size of a state: it must be —ideally— small, and that “the same laws will not suit various provinces [regions or states in our context]” because citizens with diverse backgrounds “cannot tolerate the same form of government” (Rousseau, 1968: 91). While this claim could represent a significant drawback, specially speaking of current-day states and their levels of population, it might draw attention to the importance of regional decision-making organizations. Doing so could minimize issues of mass public representation that populists appropriate. Not taking Rousseau’s considerations literally but rather as a guide, it is possible to infer the importance of a communal backdrop in determining the implementation of a body of laws that responds to the needs of that group.

Furthermore, another element that Rousseau did not consider (but Tocqueville did), was the existence of political parties, and their role as mediators between the people and government. On the contrary, he stated that “the sovereign, which is simply a collective being, cannot be represented by anyone but itself — power must be delegated, but the will cannot be” (Ibid: 69). As Müller argued, populist leaders claim to be interpreters of the general will, but they do so under conditions that Rousseau might argue are misleading it. As it was described in chapter 1, radical populist parties are can be long-running political groups (like the France’s Front National), single-issue parties under one person (like Geert Wilders), or in Donald Trump’s case, a politically-unversed participant, integrated into the political mainstream by a longstanding, non-populist party.

Finally, and to conclude the relation between the people and the general will, it might also be pertinent to question the identities of nation-states, since they were conceived as both communal and exclusive. European nation-states historically constructed an idea of citizenship based on lineage, language and Christianity as factors of unity and affiliation.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, those national conceptions of citizenship are expected to inherit a restricted sense of citizen identity. However, if we follow closely Rousseau’s suggestions, a willing participation in a social covenant, as well as its obligations, might broaden the civil paradigms of citizenship, and therefore, clarify who actually belongs as one of *the people* on more substantial terms.

## **2.2 Alexis de Tocqueville: the tyranny of the majority and rule of few**

The second author that serves as a philosophical basis for understanding populism is Alexis the Tocqueville (1805-1859). Along with Rousseau, his observations about democracy and the potential risks of a tyranny of the majority, provide insights into citizenship, representation and institutions. If we follow Müller’s claim that populism presents “a permanent shadow of modern representative democracy” (Müller, 2016: 11), I consider it to be a pertinent starting point because, those challenges highlight the relevance of democracy as the dominant form of political governance, particularly as an ideal space for populism to rise and gain relevance. Also, democracy is a type of government that holds citizens, and their representatives, in high regard, as those who make the system work. Now, if the citizens

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<sup>6</sup> While writing in different times, both Alexis de Tocqueville and Hannah Arendt recognize the exclusionary limitations of early nation-states. For the former, the aristocracy was kept out of political life, and for the latter, the nobility (Toqueville,1947: 41; Arendt, 1973: 165).

as a majority are as relevant in a democracy, how does populism thrive from it? Have citizens as a majority drifted from their democratic responsibilities, and relied contentedly on their representatives? In order to answer these questions from the perspective of populism, I will analyze Alexis de Tocqueville's argument for the possibility within democracy of a tyranny of the majority. His relevance is due to his suspiciousness of the power of the majority, and potential rule of few, referring to magistrates (representatives of the people). Similarly, he provides plausible safeguards against any would-be abuse of power.

### **2.2.1 The tyranny of the majority**

Tocqueville arrived in the United States in 1831 with the original purpose of his *Democracy in America* to be a study of the penitentiary system. However, he would instead write a thorough description of the political configurations, social relations, and everyday life that would allow America to adapt some of the ideals of the French Revolution, and serve as fertile ground for democratic rule. Even before consolidating as a world power, the United States had an appeal as a nation built on the quintessential ideas of providence (as part of mostly Puritan religious influence), equality, and probably the most important in a democratic context, sovereignty. Tocqueville wrote: "In America the principle of the sovereignty of the people is not either barren or concealed, as it is with some other nations; it is recognized by the customs and proclaimed by the laws" (Tocqueville, 1947: 47). The idea of true self-government, materialized in a new nation, was also ratified by its Constitution, laws, and way of life. A similar appeal for change and innovation presented life in America as one that would antagonize traditional forms social hierarchy.

While Tocqueville praised how the United States managed to embody some of the highest Enlightened values, and some passages read as he is if he were completely swayed by its democratic effervescence, he was also mindful of the hindrances that unchecked democracy could present. Likewise, Tocqueville was particularly suspicious of a potential omnipotence of both ideology, and the will of the majority: "The very essence of democratic government consists in the absolute sovereignty of the majority; for there is nothing in democratic States which is capable of resisting it" (Ibid: 156). If democracy is indeed an unpreventable force, as he suggested, it can be inferred that some of the universalist principles it thrives on can also turn into normative stances, creating its own forms of regulation.

Tocqueville never claimed that democracy was a perfect system of government. On the contrary, he was aware of its potentially dangerous and inherent mechanisms:

“Democracy, carried to its furthest limits, is therefore prejudicial to the art of government; and for this reason it is better adapted to a people already versed in the conduct of an administration than to a nation which is uninitiated in public affairs” (Ibid: 127). While the latter quote might be interpreted as the author opposing certain kinds of people to access positions of representation or administration, he was convinced that the class differences would prove fruitful, he was more concerned with how “mutable” the laws were, the rapidness of how they changed (perhaps making the assimilation process of law difficult), but how that legal variability “raise[d] men to power in very rapid succession<sup>7</sup>.” (Ibid: 150, 159).

Another central issue described and subsequently analyzed in *Democracy in America*, is the possibility of the will of the majority turning into tyranny. Following Tocqueville, we must direct our attention to the potential omnipotence of the majority (Ibid: 254-55), an inescapable normalization and universalization of values and ideologies. Here a relation can be drawn back to Rousseau’s elements that might be interpreted as authoritarian, particularly on how the will of many overshadows the distinct opinions of some of its members. Similarly, Tocqueville questions how representatives, while elected democratically, are depositaries of an immense power: “It may even be observed, on attentive consideration, that under the rule of a democracy the arbitrary power of the magistrate must be still greater than in despotic States. [...] the sovereign power is not only supreme, but it is universally present.” (Ibid: 125-6). Tocqueville remained vigilant of, if left unchecked, the excesses of that amount of responsibility on the hands of the few, speaking for the many.

As mentioned earlier, representation plays a central part in determining the philosophical roots of populism. Rousseau did not consider political parties, but Tocqueville did. Another difference is that they differ in their conception of representation: for the former, it would not be problematic because it would be unanimously manifested by the general will. For the latter, it would reside in the difference between the majority and the minority, particularly when those minorities “can never hope to draw over the majority to their side, because they must then give up the very point” that makes them disagree (Ibid: 158). In the context of populism, it is pertinent to address who the minority is, and if their voice is still represented if its contrary to what is presented the true will of all. Also, Tocqueville challenges the claim that the majority has “moral authority” because “there is more

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<sup>7</sup> In the context of populism, notable examples are Donald Trump as Republican candidate and eventual president of the United States in the 2016 elections, Sebastian Kurz’s election as chancellor in Austria’s 2017 elections, and *AfD*’s rapid ascension in German politics.

intelligence and more wisdom in a great number of men”, compared to less numbers (Ibid: 157). It could be argued that his distinction between majority and minority responds to Rousseau’s general will as an overwhelming authority. Likewise, in a contemporary setting, if populists are successful, then they really manage to speak for a specific sector of the population. If that is true, there is no problem of representation, even if they speak for a minority. However, I claim that the adjacent risks of populism emerge from the potentially dangerous polarizing<sup>8</sup> and exclusive methods and rhetoric (some or which might qualify as hate speech or anti-Semitism) for gaining support. While some populist leaders and parties are more successful than others, it does require turning our attention to this relationship of actual support. Indeed, as it was argued in chapter 1, there are conditions of vulnerability and resentment that make people turn towards populist leaders. If we speak of minority or majority support for a populist, the conditions that should be addressed are why, under the conditions previously described, they managed to obtain such popular support. And, in other instances, tapping into exclusive and anti-pluralist identification of a people, populists claim to speak for all the people, when they only represent a people.

Similarly, Tocqueville recognized the importance of political parties, given that they were created on a constitutional basis, and presented at least two possible alternatives to one will (Ibid: 98-100). Nevertheless, “incomprehensible and puerile domestic controversies” have made the two main parties succumb to a self-maintaining dynamic that excludes the citizens they intend to represent, particularly when party practices create more polarization. As Tocqueville writes: “The vanquished citizens despair of success and conceal their dissatisfaction in silence and in general apathy. The nation seems to be governed by a single principle, and the prevailing party assumes the credit for having restored peace and unanimity to the country” (Ibid: 101). In a bipartisan system, the probability of one’s will to be manifest in political triumph is higher than in a parliamentary system. As a manner of concluding this section on Tocqueville, it is important to point out that he also recognized the importance of the ignored minorities, their irrational mistrust of “the wealthy”, and the troubles of “being intoxicated by passion, or carried away by the impetuosity of its ideas” (Ibid: 175). While he does find ways to “check and stop” this behavior, there is an almost inevitable “propensity which democracies have to obey the impulse of passion rather than the suggestions of prudence, and to abandon a mature design for the gratification of a

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<sup>8</sup> As it was explained in chapter 1, in populist rhetoric, the idea of threat can come from both external (flow of immigrants) or internal factors (political or civil opposition).

momentary caprice, was very clearly seen in America on the breaking out of the French Revolution” (Ibid: 139). About passion, impetuosity and irrationality in politics, Carl Schmitt can provide a distinct awareness of populism.

### **2.3 Carl Schmitt: the friend/enemy distinction, the sovereign and the state of exception**

Populist polarizing and incendiary oratory resonates heavily with the work of Carl Schmitt (1888-1985), whose friend-enemy distinction will be relevant for understanding unavoidable frictions between a polity of people. For Schmitt, who wrote during the Weimar years, the concept of the political was almost synonymous with state (Schmitt, 1996: 20), any relation within it would be closely entwined with inevitable hostility (something inherent in populist discourse). For Schmitt, such primal violence “denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation. It can exist theoretically and practically, without having simultaneously to draw upon all those moral, aesthetic, economic, or other distinctions” (Ibid: 26-7). As stated, Schmitt’s distinction is always present in the most basic aspects of human life, and will be made manifest in the political sphere, and thus, provides insight to the animosities sparked by radical populism. Similarly, Schmitt’s severe criticism of liberal parliamentary democracy were aimed at the turmoil of his historical context: Liberalism, he argues, was responsible for turning “the enemy [...] into a debating adversary,” and therefore, would be incapable of dealing with moments of crisis, such as protect its citizens from external enemies (Ibid: 28, 51-3). Also, he claimed that liberalism by the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was an “outdated ideology” that just “justified elites rationally debating policies in parliament, but in the age of mass democracy, parliaments were a mere façade for sordid deals among special interests” (Müller, 2016: 29).

#### **2.3.1 The friend enemy distinction**

For Schmitt, every aspect has potential to be political given relations within a polity, and the “distinction of friend and enemy denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation” (Ibid: 26). His claims for this enmity should direct our attention to the idea of constant threat presented by populism, defined, yes, but also highly inconsistent: refugees/immigrants (the other), foreign values, the imposition of financial policies, or universalist claims (open societies or pluralization). The recognition of fear, of a state of existential threat is what fuels Schmitt’s friend/enemy distinction, a core

element of the political. His Hobbesian understanding of human nature recognizes irrationality (or “intense passion”) as a factor that was left out of politics by liberal democracies. Populism cannot be understood without considering irrational behavior, especially, when this intensity is crystalized through authority and not legality (Schmitt, 2005: 15, 33). Passions and sentiments are fueled by populist incendiary rhetoric, with precise nativist aims. Nativism “is an ideology that holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (“the nation”), and that non-native people and ideas are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state” (Mudde, 2017). That is, nativism, as an extension of Schmittian hostility, can be understood as appealing to a primal sense of belonging, an irrationally restrictive conception of identity. Similarly, nativism’s defensiveness against imposition of values considered foreign, relates to how Schmitt described a “World state” that would not just bring forth cultural and economic impositions, but would prevent the people from determining their own friend-enemy distinctions (Schmitt, 1996: 57-8). Therefore, this organization, with its “embracing” qualities would not only have dissociative consequences, but it would also justify a non-liberal state, one that decides for the people *who* their enemies are. For populists, like Viktor Orbán, reactiveness against what they consider universally normative values (ones that threaten traditional ways of life), is a natural reaction against the biggest failures of liberal governments: for Orbán, liberal turmoil creates “a fantasy world where ideology mingles with illusion and reality, the boundaries become blurred between nation and nation, culture and culture, man and woman, the sacred and the profane, freedom and responsibility, noble intentions and actual action” (Orbán, 2017).

### **2.3.2 The sovereign and the state of exception**

For Schmitt, there are permanent conditions of crisis and conflict that transcend our political relations, and strictly define a people and who their enemies are. Far-right populists identify conditions of threats in liberal values, and intend to create an almost perpetual state of fear and mistrust of the other. Schmitt feared that liberal states would allow the political nation to slowly wither, or would be overwhelmed by external enemies, who, in turn, are politically united (Schmitt, 1996: 69-79). Given these perceptions, it is relevant to elaborate on his concepts of the sovereign and the exception. Closely intertwined, I argue that their philosophical pertinence can improve our understanding of the figure of the populist leader, his/her relationship with institutions and legal framework, but also their role as self-appointed saviors, with mystical links to the political. The sovereign “stands outside the

normally valid legal system” as he “decides on the exception” (Schmitt, 2005: 5, 7). Consequently, the exception is that “which is not codified in the existing legal order, can at best be characterized as a case of extreme peril, a danger to the existence of the state, or the like. But it cannot be circumscribed factually and made to conform to a preformed law” (Ibid: 6). Therefore, the sovereign would have extralegal authority, but must be bound by a legal system; he did not argue for an exercise of absolute power or a dictatorship. The elusiveness of a true moment of exception, and the seductiveness of the sovereign are dangerous tools held by populists. The moment of crisis that requires unexpected decision-making is never defined, therefore, always open for possible interpretation. The sovereign must be active, and his decisions “on the exception [are] decision[s] in the true sense of the word” (Ibid). That is, the actions of the one who is given extraordinary power to determine how to act in moments of crises, are not only “absolute purity” (Ibid: 13), but differentiate him from the passivity of parliamentary bickering Schmitt disagreed with.

Finally, his recognition of theological elements in an otherwise secular political arena provided awareness of those metaphysical elements in populist rhetoric: the purity of one people (one true French, Christian nation), and the idea of an original covenant between a higher authority, and the original depositories (leading the people to the time when the situation was plentiful). But also, turns our attention to self-righteous claims of populist as the only interpreters of the will of a people, and the purity of their actions and decisions.

In conclusion, this chapter has included key concepts by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Alexis de Tocqueville and Carl Schmitt. By looking back to these thinkers, I have proposed a way to further our understanding of the philosophical foundation of populism, regardless of the temporal differences with them. In doing so, I believe not only can populism be made more accessible to engage with, but also, some questions about how we understand politics might need answering: Is the endeavor of politics more related to compromise and dialogue, or to reactions to constant threat and unilateral action?

### **Chapter 3. Safeguards against populism**

During the last chapter of this thesis I will focus on Jan-Werner Müller's claim of the inevitability of populism in representative democracies. I will respond to it by providing arguments that prove that while it is true that within a democratic system, populism cannot be eradicated, certain measures can be taken to constrain it. After chapter 1 described what is populism, and chapter 2 analyzed the philosophical roots of populism, chapter 3 will utilize some of the same thinkers to provide viable normative alternatives to the practices that enable populism to exist. I will construct my argument based on Rousseau's responsible citizenship, Tocqueville's emphasis on civil society and the free press to balance the tyranny of the majority. And finally, Müller's proposed grassroots solutions and politics of mediation.

It is the objective of this chapter to provide alternatives taken from political philosophers and thinkers, and like them, emphasize the importance of active and responsible citizenship. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to deconstruct concepts as nation and nationality, I will propose that under the conditions they describe, the idea citizenship in relation with the latter can become more inclusive. Similarly, I will argue that Rousseau, Tocqueville and Müller provide viable alternatives to populism, all within a democratic setting, and their proposals have the potential to turn resentful reaction into constructive action. It is, however, possible to argue that the chronological difference between authors could generate discrepancies in understanding populism (Müller is the only author that writes with this phenomenon in mind). However, as it will be explained, it is their convergences regarding citizenship that will be significant for this thesis. Similarly, in this chapter, I will argue that in order to deal with populist moral and polarizing stances, these authors provide suggestions that can be used to respond with pragmatic action and institutionalization that are inclusive in nature because of their participatory tendencies. But also, —like in Schmitt's case— we must not disregard the fact that democratic representation is by no means a perfect system, and a permanent observance of its shortcomings should not be overlooked.

It is my intention that chapter 3 provides an answer to Jan-Werner Müller's claim that populism is a "permanent shadow of modern representative democracy" (Müller, 2016: 11). I argued that yes: populism as we know it can only exist in this kind of political administration. To answer this question, I will return to Rousseau, Tocqueville and Müller in order to identify within their work, regardless of temporal discrepancies, democratic elements that predate contemporary populism, but that nonetheless, still manage to respond

to the circumstances that enable it. It can be argued that it is possible to imagine a political system that would not allow populism or some of its characteristics, to exist. However, almost paradoxically, eliminating the conditions that allow populism to exist would also jeopardize the constructive aspects of democracy.

### **3.1 Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Responsible citizenship, active civil society**

In the previous chapter, Rousseau's *The Social Contract* provided elements that can be taken as the philosophical origins of populism. Nonetheless, there are substantial considerations in the same book that depict the precise kind of citizen that might hinder populist practices. As one of the most important Enlightenment thinkers, *SC* aimed to emphasize a maturity reached by humankind after collectively developing from a natural state<sup>9</sup>. In his book, Rousseau describes a point where after weighing the benefits of communal life, humankind voluntarily decides among themselves to form a community. As it will be explained further on, Rousseau's contributions and observations to modern political life resonate in a time when democracy appears to be tested in unprecedented ways. In furthering an understanding of his concepts of *the general will* and *the people*, I argue that it is possible to substantially challenge radical populist discourse. Similarly, in his notion of responsible citizenship and the importance of institutions, viable alternatives can be identified that could mitigate the advancement of such polarizing inclinations. While some of his social contract elements might seem idealistic, Rousseau's account of representative democracy is rarely portrayed as ideal.

For Rousseau, being a part of social organization and complying to its laws are not enough to be a responsible citizen. He recognizes that with regard to the public good, it must

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<sup>9</sup> While the characteristics of Rousseau's *natural state* are not completely related to this thesis, it is relevant to cite its relevance for *The Social Contract*. In his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, Rousseau manages to identify many sorts of natural inequalities—which humans share with animals: health, strength, age—, but *moral* and *political* inequality existed only when society first came to be, thus are inherent only to mankind. Moral inequalities exist mainly because of social vigilance and tradition; political inequities thrive in society, because it is in society itself where laws came to be. Moral and political inequities exist because society exists. Similarly, Rousseau critiques how social norms, law, private property, and morality have perverted and narrowed a proper improvement of mankind. Progress—a fundamental Enlightened concept—is not argued for, but challenged: it is a manner of denying our innate behaviour and close relation to nature. Thus, mankind left behind natural ways of organization, giving in to rational association, which leads them astray from their natural, equal living. Nevertheless, between *Discourse* and *The Social Contract*, Rousseau adjusted his criticism on society and its institutions, and proposed a pragmatic interpretation of civil organization as a natural progression of humankind.

be through “deliberations of a people properly informed”, and whilst minor differences between members are allowed, “they will always produce a general will and the decision will always be good” (Rousseau, 1968: 73). That is, informed citizens act and collaborate in the search for the common good, and even a certain level of dissent is tolerable. It can be argued that deciding on the common good would require special effort. However, I will follow Rousseau’s claim that under a social agreement, some basic ideas of these mutual benefits are shared, especially if there is a clear distinction between “the common interest” (the general will), and what constitutes “private interest, and is indeed no more than the sum of individual desires” (*the will of all*) (Ibid: 72). The will of all is allowed and even encouraged, but only to the extent that it does not interfere with the general will. Citizens self-regulate their decisions, not just because they have a moral obligation to do so, but because they understand the relevance of yielding some individual interests and working towards a common goal (Ibid).

Rousseau continues to write about the development of mankind and the role of the citizen: “Nations, like men, are teachable only in their youth” (Ibid: 88). Just like in life, the maturity of the people is properly reached when organized into a social state, and with those who abide by the same contract. Under the conditions described, Rousseau conciliates his idea of maturity with proper citizen engagement, and living in an effective direct democracy. While it can be argued that those characteristics are seldom met in our contemporary and ailing democracies, it is plausible to achieve conditions that allow citizen activism in a preexisting in a democratic setting. Although some of populism’s stronger arguments against one-sided decision-making from elites are understandable, they can be easily overcome by redirecting it from misguided populist support, to communal organizations with reinvigorated agency.

Equally relevant, is the fact that Rousseau’s inclusive interpretation of citizenship is not limited by belonging to a specific nation, cultural heritage or speaking a determined language. He values a person’s willingness to become a citizen and live under a determined social contract. For Rousseau, identity elements such as blood, soil and religion are irrelevant to determine one’s citizenship. Thus, the value of a citizen is given by the way he relates and treats his fellow citizens, but also, it should be incorporated in the early stages of any social framework. While some of Rousseau’s claims could be considered as paternalistic, his emphasis on an acknowledged idea of shared responsibility could provide insight — especially in the context of populism— to rethink the role of the citizen as a person who meets certain critical and ethical requirements that disregard notions of nation or nationality,

and primarily focuses on acknowledged responsibility to the community that one belongs to. Similarly, and under these precise conditions of citizenship, the general will would not be just be a vague concept or a metaphor; it would represent a concise organization: “for the general will is an institution in which each necessarily submits himself to the same conditions which he imposes on others” (Ibid: 76).

Likewise, Rousseau considered such institutions to be closely related to citizen responsibility, because citizens decide on the best law based on their sense of the common good. He established that an effective system of law must guarantee freedom and equality. While Rousseau recognized that some of his own requirements for equality could be considered “chimerical,” he ponders: “But if abuse is inevitable, ought we not then at least control it?” (Ibid: 96-7). Rousseau’s proposed that the minimizing of those circumstances could be done by institutions that pay close attention to the specific circumstances that cause inequality: “these general objectives of all institutions must be modified in each country to meet local conditions and suit the character of the people concerned” (Ibid: 97). With this regulative function, Rousseau had no intention of proposing a perfect institution; on the contrary, he knew that a static organization with equally stagnant laws would eventually be unable to respond to certain contexts. Since populism gains support from a severe sense of inequality and the overlooking of a certain group of people, what better way to avoid those circumstances than by providing citizens with the possibility of being an active part of their own decision-making and creation of institutions? The consistency of participation is fundamental, and sporadic voting periods, in some cases, fail to nurture this sense of active citizenship. Rousseau did not intend for his citizen to remain static. Neither should we. In addition to a kind of institution, Rousseau intended for it be supported by

the true constitution of the state, a law which gathers new strength every day and which, when other laws age or wither away, reanimates or replaces them; a law which sustains a nation in the spirit of its institution and imperceptibly substitutes the force of habit for the force of authority (Ibid: 99)

While one could argue that Rousseau insists on the absolute role of the constitution, he also specifies that it must not be built “on principles that differ from what is demanded by the circumstances” (Ibid: 98), given that following his claims, “the spirit of its institution” could be identified by the perception of common good they agree on. These adapting and revising characteristics of a constitution are substantial in taking strength away from populist claims. Firstly, precisely because it emphasizes how we have chosen laws to rule ourselves, and have a duty towards obeying them. Secondly, its revisionist distinction and ability to focus on pragmatic solutions to situations that afflict a kind of people, answers the question of

what happens when those laws are anachronistic, merely handed down and which citizens are compelled to be obeyed. This dynamic body of laws can give people the opportunity to reclaim some of the self-sufficiency they claim is not guaranteed by contemporary representative democracies, or has been lost to centralized governments and distant politicians.

To conclude this subsection about Rousseau's active society, it is necessary to elaborate on the following quote: "the law one prescribes to oneself is freedom" (Ibid: 65). That is, by following the laws that society actively decides in favor of, one is not only exercising self-determination, it also represents the result of the covenant when people decided to come together, first, as a matter of self-preservation, and secondly, as the consensual decision to live under a social contract.

### **3.2 Alexis de Tocqueville: Democracy as a way of life, democratic institutions and a free press**

In this section of the chapter, I will emphasize Alexis de Tocqueville's emphasis on democracy as a way of life, which he interpreted as not only the dependence on institutions. Active citizenship provides plausible safeguards against potential abuse, or as he put it, against a 'tyranny of the majority'. In the context of this thesis, given the nature and demand of its required involvement, democracy as a way of life can incentivize true civil commitment. As described in chapter 2, Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America* while travelling and observing day-to-day life in that country. One of the political characteristics that allowed democracy to function as such in the United States, is that "society governs itself for itself" (Tocqueville, 1947: 49), and in doing so, constructs institutions, and a way of life that supports significant political involvement, which for him, were considered commonplace activities. While it can be argued that Tocqueville was awestruck by a (then novel) functioning democratic system, and perhaps overly idealized some of its elements, his praise of *sovereignty* was well founded. On the other hand, one could argue that precisely because those conditions are no longer met, hence the perceptions of failing self-rule (of which populism is a clear symptom) and underrepresentation. While those interpretations are valid, it is required to recognize that representative democracy as a project is not without its flaws.

Now, I will describe some of the quotidian practices of direct citizens in a proper democratic lifestyle. While Tocqueville was correct in predicting that democracy would

extend outside America, he was aware that the effective implementation of democracy would not come easily. On the contrary: he recognized democracy as something complex, an “attitude of mind and habit of conduct” (Ibid: xiii). While Tocqueville described the conditions of democracy as a way of life in the United States, it is appropriate to extend these parameters given that representative democracy is the form of government preferred by Western countries, some of which are experiencing a rise in populist movements. Tocqueville saw democracy as a way of life as an appealing enterprise because he thought it relied on pragmatic interpretations of Enlightened thought, and left concepts such as natural law and human nature as secondary or irrelevant to participating in such a system. It can be argued that both democracy, and the way of life that Tocqueville prescribes are achievable, regardless of human inclination to good. The equality of conditions he describes depend on more tangible, artificial, and less naturally inherent elements. Similarly, if we follow Rousseau, those conditions can be agreed upon through participation and discussion of a common wellbeing.

In addition, Tocqueville had faith in the regulating role of law and institutions, particularly those that have been fashioned by the citizens themselves, by their representatives, and in everyone’s interest: “Men are not corrupted by the exercise of power or debased by the habits of obedience, but by the exercise of a power which they believe to be illegal and by obedience to a rule which they consider to be usurped and oppressive” (Ibid: 10). Equally important are the notions of rights that “dignify the individual, but they are not in themselves individualized because they reflect a status equally or indifferently belonging to all” (Maletz, 2002: 747). Rights, in this context, are universal and inalienable, and provide an *equality of condition* for citizens. Similarly, Tocqueville believed that democratic life would create its own non-legal regulatory practices: “The authority that is ‘absolute’ in principle can be balanced by other essential elements of government or by informal powers, customs, or principles” (Ibid: 753).

Another element that might serve as a safeguard against populism are civil associations. Townships and municipal bodies are small kind of citizen-run associations that allow decision-making on a local level. While they function as a basic “principle of sovereignty of the people,” Tocqueville recognizes that it also has “its hindrances, its advantages, and its dangers” (Tocqueville, 1947: 51). While his objections run from the number of total townships, their ability to deal with “transient passions and the interests of an hour,” and possible despotic tendencies that flirt with “forms of independence,” Tocqueville is certain that with the unique characteristics of each township and a clear

observance of a general law, each representative body would gain “stronger support [in] matters of the community” (Ibid: 53).

Similarly, another constant in populist rhetoric is the alleged loss of self-sufficiency, or an overwhelming interference from transnational political bodies (like the European Union). It could be argued that if a township is self-sufficient, it does not require belonging to a higher national unity, and it would provide arguments for populist claims. However, Tocqueville emphasized: “A highly civilized community spurns the attempts of a local independence, is disgusted at its numerous blunders” (Ibid: 52). A substantial part of active and responsible citizenship is the acknowledgement of affiliation to a larger national body. It is until this notion of constrained autonomy is reached, balanced by laws overseen by the citizenship, that a township will function effectively (Ibid).

Likewise, a *free press* can also function as a potential deterrent against populism. While recent political events might make this claim sound counterintuitive or even redundant (can it be said that such a medium gives populists most of their influence?), I will follow Tocqueville’s assertion that a truly free press may prevent populism. He stated that censorship of the press “is not only dangerous, but it is absurd,” and identified a “correlative institution” between the sovereignty of the people and a free press (Ibid: 103). In this absolute freedom, he also acknowledged a wide range of quality and influence: some examples of the press can portray “destructive principles,” have the outmost pedestrian and shallow content, and even try to incite in different places “the same violence without the same reasons for indignation” (Ibid). Similarly, Tocqueville argues that since the freedom of press had been a constant in the United States since its foundation, some of its factual political impact began to diminish: “The liberty of writing, like all other liberty, is most formidable when it is a novelty” (Ibid: 105). However, in today’s populist context, it can be argued that the free press can play a significant role in balancing populism, as it can challenge the spread of fake news and biased sources of information.

Apart from this correlation between newness and political impact, some of the press he saw dedicated themselves less to political affairs, and more to a “coarse appeal to the passions of the populace” (Ibid: 107). Notwithstanding, all of this should not just be tolerated, but encouraged. Tocqueville firmly believed that an unregulated press, apart from allowing a free flow of diverse ideas, also served as a diffuser of possible social tensions: “When the question is reduced to the simple expression of the struggle between poverty and wealth, the tendency of each side of the dispute becomes perfectly evident without further controversy” (Ibid: 108).

Now, to provide a kind of objection to what Tocqueville argued for democracy as an almost universal and natural aspiration. Although his observations in the United States at that time might be true, what Tocqueville identified as a democratic way of life, was the Americanized, pragmatic interpretation of some Enlightened tenets. To conclude this order of ideas, Tocqueville correspondingly shared a critical position on inequality. More precisely, how aristocracy as a social and political institution was “imposed by force; and after it had been introduced into the manners of the country it maintained its own authority, and was sanctioned by the legislation.” (Tocqueville, 1947: 237). While in our contemporary setting the idea of an aristocracy in politics as such could be analyzed separately, some exclusive attitudes can be linked with the *elite* that populists rage against. Tocqueville wrote when the United States was experiencing a democratic “effervescence” (Ibid: 77), and praised the ideal of equality. However, in the populist context, it could be argued that elites have taken over the role of the aristocracy. While populist disapproval of certain groups of power tends to be incendiary and polarizing, they do raise the question the level of commitment of (some) public representatives once they have gained certain positions of financial and political privilege. Rousseau would concur that this imposition generated a tendency in modern values, especially, those regarding the political, intellectual, and cultural aspects of life.

### **3.3 Jan-Werner Müller: Grassroots solutions, acknowledging and engaging with supporters of populism**

Lastly, I will return to Jan-Werner Müller’s claims, particularly that populism should be engaged with. In the last chapter of *What is populism?* he concisely but strongly elaborates on how we must recognize the “promises of democracy that have not been fulfilled and that in a certain sense simply can’t be fulfilled in our societies” (Müller, 2016a: 40). That is, only by moving away from utopian interpretations of democratic life, can the very factual shortcomings be recognized as such, and be acted upon. Likewise, Müller establishes the importance of not dismissing the claims of either populists or their supporters: “as long as populists stay within the law—and don’t incite violence, for instance— other political actors (and members of the media) are under some obligation to engage them” (Ibid: 43). Müller recognizes the consequences of ostracizing attitudes of liberal politicians, how they enhance the distance between the people and some of their representatives. Following Müller, I propose that action can take place on a local level, with more listening and dialogue. The objective can be to recognize the genuineness of their resentment, and which measures might

be taken to amend it. These kinds of actions require the understanding that giving populist a platform to be engaged with *is not* promoting or support their cause. It merely represents the conditions, like the free press, that exhibit some of the less-desired characteristics of democratic life.

As stated earlier, I support Müller's claim that populism is inherent to representative democracy. In concluding his book, *What is Populism?* he proposed "Seven thesis about populism." While some of them give us brief and concise descriptions of this phenomenon, some offer more normative claims. To coincide with the objective of this chapter, thesis 7 is worth mentioning: "Populism is not a corrective to liberal democracy in the sense of bringing politics 'closer to the people' or even reasserting popular sovereignty, as is sometimes claimed," but it does prove that populism can speak for a sector of the population who are undoubtedly unrepresented (Ibid: 52). This should make popularly-elected representatives more aware of their constituents, and make efforts to reach out in better ways to them. One of those measures can be a grassroots level or bottom-up approach to politics, that is, recognizing and upholding the significance of small-level, community-centered civil organizations by higher political representatives. And in doing so, engaging in a more direct level of representation that leaves out populist claims of representation.

Similarly, Müller opposes the indiscriminate use of vague concepts such as the people, will of all, and suggests the questioning of pluralism as a first order value, and its arguable imposition as a universal ideal (Ibid). However, he concludes that some of the arguments made by populists transcend mere inflammatory rhetoric and have potentially harmful consequences:

the real problem with populism is that its denial of diversity effectively amounts to denying the status of certain citizens as free and equal. These citizens might not be excluded officially, but the public legitimacy of their individual values, ideas of what makes for the good life, and even material interests are effectively called into question and even declared not to count. (Müller, 2016: 43).

In conclusion, with the benefit of hindsight, the limitations of representative democracy have become evident. As argued in the introduction, the actual rise of populism can be considered as such. But democracy is mutable, not a fixed institution: we might expect this immovability for a nation's constitution. A political system should be constantly reinforced by all, in order to resist its own permissiveness, which can result in practices that favor both mediocrity and detrimental criticism. Under those circumstances, citizenship and a functional democratic lifestyle requires a healthy balance between individuality, and a strong sense of belonging to a communality. After following the main authors of this chapter, it can be

inferred that democratic life is never static: it requires constant involvement, stark compromise, active participation, and a certain degree of (perhaps even paradoxically) *inquisitive compliance* from citizenship. Moreover, the collaboration between and active citizenship and their representatives can make the “permanent shadow of democracy” that is populism less present.

## **Conclusion**

Populism evidences the most notable shortcomings and failures of representative democracy. It thrives on feelings of resentment, and advocates for an exclusive conception of *the people* and their belonging to a nation. While it is true that democracy provides the conditions for populism to exist, it was demonstrated that the alternatives and safeguards can be found within the same system.

Briefly, I will summarize what I have claimed in the three chapters of this thesis. Chapter 1 outlined the historical backgrounds of populism, its characteristics, the concept of *the people*, and the reasons of its appeal. In a like manner, I have provided concrete examples of populist parties and leaders, as well as countries that either have a populist government, or considerable populist party presence. Chapter 2 presented the central concepts of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Carl Schmitt that form the philosophical roots of populism. I argued that Rousseau and Tocqueville incentivize active civil participation, while Schmitt focuses on threat-reaction and exclusivity in politics. This approach provided a set of concrete concepts and criticisms that will further a philosophical understanding of populism. In factual terms, this philosophical analysis, apart from making populism more accessible to engage with, will be followed by concrete alternatives. Finally, chapter 3 provided alternatives taken from Rousseau, Tocqueville and Müller that are central for this thesis, and like them, I argue for the importance of active and responsible citizenship. Similarly, I proposed that under the conditions that these thinkers describe, the idea of citizenship can become more inclusive. Likewise, I proved that the Rousseau, Tocqueville and Müller provide viable alternatives to populism, all within a democratic setting, and that their proposals have the potential to turn resentful reaction into constructive action.

Correspondingly, in combining the ideas of Rousseau, Tocqueville, Schmitt, and Müller, this thesis provided an innovative approach for understanding populism from the perspective of political philosophy. If a distinction should be made from that of political science, this thesis proposes more normative actions: to rethink current conceptions of citizenship in a context of growing defective democracies and to return to citizen-led communal organizations that actively cooperate with higher levels of political representation. Additionally, I argue that representative democracy is mutable and flexible, not a fixed institution that can properly function indefinitely without constant reevaluation. Finally, perhaps the most philosophically relevant issue, the thesis draws attention to our understanding of politics: are political relations based on dialogue, compromise and constructive action (as Rousseau and Tocqueville proposed), or are they, as Schmitt claimed, rooted on irrational reaction, conflict or threat?

As possible objections to this thesis, it can be argued that these thinkers developed their ideas without populism in mind, and that the temporal gap between them and us might make their work provide an insufficient diagnosis. Nonetheless, as I have argued, while all the thinkers wrote in different centuries, they made significant observations, proposals, and severe criticism about democratic life. Their works serve as beacons we can look back to, not only because of how they described and proposed different stages of democratic development, but also because their work, as is the case with Carl Schmitt, can function as a stern warning about the possible failures of representative democracy.

On a personal level, I believe that the conclusions I have reached in chapter 3 can have real life implications. After the conclusion of my MA studies, I will contribute as an intern to a public policy think-tank specializing in citizen organizations and new ways to engage with democracy. I believe that whatever resonance this thesis might have outside of its requirement for graduation, its effect will be found in the sector of civil society. And finally, in a time were flirtations with authoritarianism are not as uncommon as we might hope, it is relevant how one becomes, or remains, an active or responsible citizen in a nation that has already succumbed to populism. Might we infer that given how some sectors of the population deal with censorship, prosecution, and other forms of state violence, it is possible to envision the concept and exercise of responsible citizenship as a form of resistance?

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## **Abstract**

Philosophical alternatives to populism  
[Populismi filosoofilised alternatiivid]

This thesis supports Jan-Werner Müller's claim that populism is an inescapable consequence of representative democracy. While it is true that populism cannot be detached from this form of government, I will argue that alternatives and safeguards against it can already be found in representative democracy's framework. The thesis also gives an historical account of populism and describes the aspects of its appeal. This work turns to the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Carl Schmitt, particularly their concepts of the general will, the tyranny of the majority, and existential threat, respectively, to analyze the philosophical roots of populism. Lastly, this thesis not only argues for safeguards against populism (mainly in the form of active and responsible citizenship, grassroots politics, and communal organization), but it also proves that those solutions already exist in representative democracy.

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