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Intervention

Interventions on European nationalist populism and bordering in time of emergencies

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Borders, sovereignty, and the revival of territory

Anna Casaglia and Raffaella Coletti

Research on populism has animated academic debate as populist parties and ideologies become increasingly salient globally (Human Rights Watch, 2017; 2018), and as recent events radically affect the border, security, and politics nexus. Populism differs greatly across space and time; indeed, its definition is widely debated (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013). In this intervention, we understand populism to signify, in general terms, a mixture of ideology and discursive style that articulates the will of the "pure people" against the "elites", or more precisely, the struggle between a reified "will of the people" and a conspiring elite (Brubaker, 2017a; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012).

Geographers have made important contributions to explanations for the rise of populism, especially in Europe and the US, by exploring spatial cleavages in elections involving populist candidates (Agnew & Shin, 2019; https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0962629818304712; Furlong, 2019; van Gent et al., 2014), and by analyzing the emergence of populism as a response to the perverse effects of globalization (Gordon, 2018; Ottaviano, 2019). Until recently, however, the contribution of political geography and border studies to the analysis of populism has been limited, even though borders, sovereignty, globalization, and inequality are crucial elements mobilized by the current populist wave. In responding to a call to "refocus political geography on populism" (Lizotte, 2018), and in light of research developed within critical border studies (CBS) and political geography, these interventions seek to encourage a discussion of borders and bordering processes as crucial perspectives for exploring the current wave of populism, and especially what has been termed nationalist populism, in which discourses focus on *nations*, as well as *people* (Rydgren, 2017; Stavrakakis et al., 2017). In a recent contribution Brubaker claims that populism and nationalism cannot be interpreted as analytically independent: they are both constitutive of populism itself, and "a sharp distinction between populism and nationalism misses the ambiguity and ambivalence that are internal to populist discourse" (Brubaker, 2020, p. 61).

With this in mind the interventions provide a dynamic picture of the spatialization of fear at a time when successive "emergencies" – the rise of populism, the alleged closure of Mediterranean ports, Brexit, and Covid-19 – have pushed earlier concerns into the background, resulting in the continuous re-elaboration of the spatial aspects of identity, our relationship with the Other, and the political articulation of threat. The discursive strategies mobilized by nationalist populist parties are directed against the perceived threats posed to a supposedly homogeneous national community ("we, the people") by the forces of globalization, supranational institutions, multiculturalism, and international mobility. These discourses and their associated narratives are articulated around the idea of "taking back control of the nation" to defend national interests through an agenda that embraces economic protectionism, as in the case of Donald Trump's isolationism. They also claim political and legislative autonomy, including withdrawal from international commitments, of which Brexit is the ultimate example; or they reassert border control and tighten asylum policies, as seen in several EU member states.

All these strategic elements merge with a notion of sovereignty that is strongly spatialized within the boundaries of the nation-state, which

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becomes the container of identity politics based on naturalized ideas of homogeneous ethnicity, religious belonging, and cultural commonalities. The borders of the state are the "locus of the populist performance of 'taking back control'" (Kallis, 2018, p. 285), both practically and symbolically. This performance is twofold: it is manifested externally through the biopolitical control of migrants' movements; and internally with the reassertion of domestic, state-level decision-making based on the idea that the nation comes first. The latter has resulted, for example, in the de-legitimation of multilateralism presented by the Trump administration's "America first" approach, and in the defense of sovereignty and national interests from the threats of European integration advanced by populist nationalist parties in Hungary, Italy, and the UK, among others. In all these examples, the state is presented and represented as the only legitimate actor capable of embracing and promoting the (good) will of the people. What "the state" means obviously depends on who is governing it, and this has been clear in the role populist parties in government or opposition play. They can thus question the reliability of state rulers when in opposition or attack institutions at higher levels when they are in governing coalitions. Driven by a compulsion "to be in constant electoral campaign mode" and to "mobilize public opinion even when they are governing" (Magri, 2018, p. 11), nationalist populist leaders in Europe have also built racist, xenophobic, and Eurosceptic transnational networks to counter supranational entities, whom populists accuse of failing to defend western values and culture from the "invasion" of migrants. This is exemplified by the coalition of right-wing populist parties under the Europe of Nations and Freedom group – replaced after the 2019 European elections by the Identity and Democracy group – which promotes an assumed common European cultural and religious identity, and which advocates for member countries' autonomy from EU bureaucracy and for the stricter regulation of borders and immigration.

To meet the expectations of "the people", nationalist populist parties' agendas combine the closure of borders, the construction of walls and fences, and the revision of visa policies with the objective of reclaiming sovereignty and protecting national political and economic interests. The contributors to this intervention, however, seek to complicate the claims of nation-state sovereignty that emanate from populist parties and to add important elements in the debate on the political geographies of populism by looking beyond the hardening of nation-state boundaries, highlighting the contradictions that emerge in the discursive and practical expressions of populist ideology.

John Agnew, for instance, analyses populist agendas, focusing on Italian populist parties and leaders and the various ways they redefine ideas about the nation and nationalism, strategically combining cultural identity and territory. Yet Agnew argues that populist policies are blind to the realities of EU member states' limited sovereignty. Adopting a territorial understanding of sovereignty, Agnew calls for an analysis that better captures the myriad relationships between populisms, borders, space at different scales. Virginie Mamadouh takes on this challenge but arrives at a somewhat different conclusion from Agnew. Mamadouh explores populist representations of borders within the context of the European Union, taking the case of Brexit as the fulfilment, however illusory, of the struggle of the "people" against the elites. Mamadouh's account, though, highlights a sort of "civilizational" turn in populist claims that, without necessarily abandoning the critique of the EU, have gone beyond mere nationalisms in their expressions of sovereignty. Populists, she shows, have scaled up populist politics transnationally to gain political control at the EU level – in her words "changing it rather than leaving it".

If the dialectic between these two authors allows a problematization of populism's national spatial imaginary, Christopher Lizotte's contribution further complicates it by tracing the space of the nation from the body of the citizen to that of the state, and showing the complex ways through which bordering processes can be performed and expressed along urban, national, regional, and civilizational cleavages. Within this analytical framework Lizotte gives an overview of the evolution of nationalist political positions, stressing their instrumentalization of state borders in various parts of Europe and beyond. The mobile and instrumental character of borders is further elaborated by Claudio Minca, who uses the concept of immunitarian borders (Esposito, 2013) to analyze populist discourse around the Covid-19 pandemic, stressing how the very nature of the virus puts bordering narratives into play, radically altering the scenario described by Agnew. Minca shows us what happens when the state ceases to be the container of security and exclusivity and becomes the object of external discourses of fear and exclusionary practices. While contributing to the (at least temporary) enhancement of internal solidarity, the Covid-19 emergency also shows the limits of nationalist discourses in a globalized world. The diachronic focus on Italy in the accounts of Agnew and Minca clearly illustrates the dramatic change of scenario caused by the pandemic and the dynamic character of populist discourses, and how they can even contradict themselves as they continue to mobilize public opinion. Ironically, and despite their previous anti-EU positions, Italian populist leaders have complained about the lack of EU cooperation in coping with the epidemic, exploiting this lack of transnational solidarity in a fierce new criticism of European elites.

Critical border studies and political geography scholars have focused their analysis on the relationship between borders, territory (Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2009), and sovereignty (Jones et al., 2017) and the dislocation and mobile nature of contemporary borders (Amilhat-Szary & Giraut, 2015; Burridge et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2011; Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2012). Populist border narratives are indeed not limited to the physical location of national boundaries; they may be more effectively explored with reference to the notion of "polymorphic" borders as a ubiquitous mode of governance (Burridge et al., 2017). These approaches may offer a valuable and much-needed contribution to the analysis of nationalist populisms by pointing to the performed and performative features of bordering, the role of borders in the "identity making activities of the nation-state and other forms of political communities" (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2012, pp. 729–730), and the interplay between territorial borders and relational borders or networks (Paasi, 2012). The territorial redefinition of sovereignty, for example, goes well beyond nation-state boundaries through the externalization and outsourcing of control (Bialasiewicz, 2012) – brilliantly defined by Vaughan-Williams (2008) as "bio-political re-territorialization". Within the framework of nationalist-populist propaganda, walls and walling processes do not really stop people from crossing borders. Rather, they perform as "symbolic and semiotic responses to crises produced by eroded sovereign state capacities to secure territory, citizens and economies against transnational flows of power, people, capital, religions, ideas or terror" (Minca & Rijke, 2019, p. 82).

In this contribution we seek to initiate an exploration of bordering processes and walling, both metaphorical and concrete, as central features of populist agendas in the European context and beyond. We bring to the fore important conceptual tools related to territory and sovereignty that help us understand the present and the contradictions arising from the encounter between populist ideas and governing institutions. Furthermore, the dynamic picture offered in the interventions allows for a deeper understanding of populist discourses, hinting that they have evolved from a focus on immigration to a reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic. The challenge in such a situation is to maintain attention on the inner contradictions and inconsistencies of right-wing populist narratives as populist leaders attempt to shift the focus back to their usual scapegoats, predictably proposing stricter border enforcement to curtail the virus. The interventions follow the succession of the events and emergencies considered, from the global rise of populism to the pandemic, and include both theoretical elaborations and empirical case studies; together, they illuminate how nationalist populist ideologies and discursive strategies emerge from and produce particular understandings of territory and sovereignty that can transform or even radically overturn the status quo from the local to the global.

Nation, city, region: Bordered territorial images in European populism

Christopher Lizotte

All political projects that aim at overturning existing hegemonic formations have an underlying vision for the kinds of societies they want to produce. Radical political projects thus also have a vision of the kinds of geographic spaces they want to produce. Geographers have long been attentive to the notion of spatial imaginaries and how the ideological and the material co-constitute each other in the construction of space. Today we are faced with the challenge of unraveling how contemporary political movements—especially those on the far right that claim to represent the will of the one and true "people"—view their ideal world. We might begin by looking to how these movements envision the role of borders and bordering processes in the radical remaking of what has been, until now, a hegemonic form of neoliberal, multicultural globalization in the OECD sphere. Beyond the political goal of reclaiming sovereignty for a purified *demos*, what idealized future do these movements hope to achieve through borders – and the remaking of spaces within these borders?

The idea of the border is basic to the populist aspiration for remaking space in the image of the people. The sense that the true *demos* that is under siege rests on the clear demarcation of who is inside or outside the psychic, cultural, or security boundaries of the people's space. For far-right populists, the degrading effects of multiculturalism and immigration provide natural fault lines between us and them, the treasured and the expendable, the depraved city and the virtuous countryside. At every turn, far right populists see the undermining of national pride by the machinations of outsiders and the imminent pollution of European space by non-European invaders. From the starting point of the border, three geographical constructs – nation, city, region – can be investigated to understand how populists imagine their idealized spaces, and from there we can perhaps understand the emotional as well as ideological underpinnings of the policy prescriptions they put forward.

The nation is an obvious symbol for populist movements looking to reclaim the people's sovereignty. But what is perhaps more intriguing is the influence of nations and states that no longer exist legally but whose borders continue to case a long shadow in the populist imagination. Molnár (2015), for instance, discusses this in the context of Hungary, where mythic narratives of Hungarian resistance to outside invaders and cartographic symbols of "Greater Hungary"—a Hungary prior to its 1920 territorial losses—are mobilized by far-right activists. Similarly, as documented by Batuman (2010), non-official cartographic representations of Turkish territory in circulation since the 1990s reflect long-held territorial anxieties by exaggerating the country's spatial extent into Kurdish northern Iraq. Von Hierschhausen (2017) provides another perspective, showing how memories of states and borders that no longer exist continue to fuel nationalist imaginaries throughout central Europe. All of these draw upon an intuitive sense of what 'belongs' organically to the nation and commonsense understandings of the nation's destiny, while simultaneously insinuating that interlopers who would deny that destiny must be combatted or destroyed.

The nation also serves as a touchstone for popular identity by inscribing borders through the most basic of reproductive functions. The so-called "Great Replacement" is a conspiracy theory that has become *de rigeur* ideology on the populist right, asserting that cultural and political elites are abetting the massive immigration of non-European populations who, through their higher birthrates, will eventually replace the 'native' White, Christian peoples of the continent. Rallying cries to combat this supposed demographic takeover draw on utterly banal images of food and sex: in the former case, French members of the right and far-right have made the eating of pork a litmus test of membership in France's ostensibly secular (*laïque*) society. The *Rassemblement national* mayor of the southern city of Beaucaire, Julien Sanchez, even went so far as to ban alternatives to pork in his city's school cafeterias, saying he refused to "assist in the *Great Replacement* of pork". In the latter case, members of a loosely knit cadre of female white supremacist activists who call themselves "trad wives" use their bodies to produce additional white bodies and turn back demographic trends (Kelly, 2018). Both seek literally to fill the space of the nation with the products of human reproduction – food and babies – so that dangerous outsiders will have no space for themselves.

Next, we could investigate how self-styled populist movements, looking for cultural and demographic renewal against what they see as decadent democratic liberalism, have used the city in its various historical forms as a source of inspiration or of disgust. Nazi, Fascist, and Communist regimes all held the city in ambiguous regard: as a symbol of decadence, national decline or depravity on the one hand, and of potential renewal on the other, where rationality, monumentality, and a modern aesthetic could sweep away the past (Caprotti, 2007; Lane, 1986; Schenk & Bromley, 2003). Today, regimes claiming to represent the popular will tend not to undertake grand urban planning projects in the same way as in the past, but the city still serves as a convenient reference point for populist demagogues and partisans. For instance, the *polis* of Ancient Greece holds a position of reverence both for right-wing intellectuals who see the classics as a source of enduring morality (DuBois, 2001), as well as for the rank-and file of extremist movements who see Greek culture as representing the epitome of masculine virtue or as the ultimate rebuttal to multiculturalism (Askanius & Mylonas, 2015). At the same time, abstract notions of urbanity can help inscribe borders within states, as populist actors seek to make identarian claims about the people of the "heartland" as opposed to city-dwellers. Echoes of anti-urban sentiment can be found across the European continent: in Finland, the agrarian Center (Keskusta) Party MP Anne Kalmari wrote in *Suomenmaa* of the city's literal pathological potential for young people, comparing "eating disorder-afflicted Helsinki youth" unfavorably to the "countryside's good youth" (Viilo, 2019). Marine Le Pen, president of the far-right French Rassemblement National, often makes appeals to "forgotten lands" in rural France (Rouarch, 2019), hoping to capitalize on the "revenge of the places that don't matter" (cf. Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

One imagined future of some European populists is one in which the current borders of the continent are radically redrawn. Indeed, one influential vision for achieving this is one that can be found in both left and right populism – the autonomous region. As Spektorowski (2016) notes, post-national federalism is applauded by European intellectuals and activists on the left who see it as an antidote to exclusionary forms of nationalism; but paradoxically, this same federalist vision is championed by neo-fascist and right-wing populist intellectuals and parties as a form of radical democratic self-determination. The basic political entity in this system is an ethnically homogenous community spread over its 'natural' spatial extent and federated with other similar units to make up a homogenous civilizational bloc of 'Western' culture (Bar-On, 2008). Perhaps the most prolific exponent of this version of ethno-regionalism is Alain de Benoist, the leader of the French New Right. Against the contractual legal citizenship of the nation-state, De Benoist offers a model of organic, ethno-regional, identity-based citizenship that claims to preserve the dignity of different cultures. Such rhetoric presents itself as being opposed to classical racism, with no inherent hierarchy of superior and inferior peoples. Such ethnopluralist thought has been hugely influential among populist parties on the right, and has helped these parties achieve considerable mainstream electoral success by dissociating their main ideological draws – opposition to immigration, skepticism of multiculturalism, and defense of traditional culture – from older stigmatized far-right tropes such as biological racism, anti-Semitism, and open xenophobia (Carter, 2018; Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019). While many populist parties remain committed to the nation-state framework, the idea of a "Europe of regions" can nevertheless be found throughout the greater European far-right populist ecosystem. Spektorowski (2016) finds evidence of such thought in the programs of the former Lega Nord (see also Richardson & Colombo,

2013) and the Austrian Freedom Party, for instance.

A larger-scale variation of the regionalist view can be found in the considerable discourse dedicated towards imagining a civilizational Europe that is united in its incompatibility with non-European, usually Muslim, outsiders. These discourses capture what De Cesari et al. (2020) identify as one of the central paradoxes of today's European populism: even strong Eurosceptic voters and activists with strong nationalist orientations draw upon tropes of a common European cultural identity and/or heritage in differentiating themselves from racialized Muslim Others. Beyond more obvious cases of virulent Islamophobia, the bordering processes involved in defining Europe against its immanent outsiders can take on softer forms. For example, rejecting asylum seekers can be portrayed as a 'caring' response to the challenges posed by immigration. Such as been the case with women active in the far-right Swedish Democrats, who claim that caring for one's 'own' is a humane response for natives and newcomers alike (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2014).

Empirical work on populism has revealed that populist movements, especially those on the far right, are not just driven by race, class, and gender divisions, but that all of these divisions are refracted through place (Gordon, 2018). We should, therefore, be attentive to how borders and bordering help to delineate places, both familiar and faraway, and to spatialize the kinds of Us-versus-Them distinctions that populists rely on to articulate their grievances. Further work can look more deeply at the kinds of spatial symbols, tropes, and clichés that populist movements draw upon in their struggles to restore sovereignty to an imagined people. In those symbols we might not only find clues to the origins of the current wave of populist anger, but also identify ways to respond effectively to it.

Populism and territorial sovereignty

John Agnew

Around the world, hostility to immigration, globalization, and multilateral organizations (such as the European Union) is increasingly framed in terms of reclaiming a 'lost' territorial sovereignty that has slipped into the hands of foreign capital, transnational institutions, and global cultural elites (Agnew & Shin, 2019; Feltri, 2018; Zúquete, 2018). The use of the term 'sovereignty' on the part of populist movements that privilege such claims is thus shorthand for a set of ideas and political positions that call for reinstituting a national government's control over economic and cultural policies and restricting the regulatory and cultural scope of external agencies (Feltri, 2018). Sovereignty has become the key word to contrast those who advocate 'taking back control' and national renaissance against the globalists and cosmopolitans who are the *bête noire* of populism. In a more positive take on such claims, the Italian political theorist Carlo Galli (2019) argues that sovereignty and democracy are internally related. In his rendering of the two concepts, you cannot have one without the other. By definition, therefore, the word democracy is terminally territorialized by its association with a 17th Century, European conception of sovereignty. It is this connection that contemporary populism takes for granted.

Italy is an interesting case for considering territorial sovereignty as an intrinsic element of populism because it is widely thought to be an example of a state that lacks the strong sense of nationhood that invokes 'the people' as the leitmotif of political desire (Berezin, 2018; Bodei, 2006). The Italian state originated more from conquest than from popular national revolt and was unified relatively late compared to many other European states. Multiple factors—cultural differences between regions, the developmental gap between north and south, the lack of a national vernacular language until the late nineteenth century, and the weakness of state authority relative to social institutions such as families and the Catholic Church—have conspired to produce a weak national identity. The one major attempt to impose a strong sense of state sovereignty, under Fascism, from 1922 until 1943, ended in dramatic failure. Thus, the appearance of a discourse of territorial sovereignty (*sovranismo* in Italian) in contemporary Italy is initially surprising.

Although *sovranismo* has some currency among intellectuals of various political persuasions, the term has also come into use in a much more bottom-up way to refer to a singular alternative to the disenchantment with the financial, economic, and immigration policies that have become associated with a world in which seats of power are both more distant and more opaque. More specifically, and among populists of all types on the left and right, the crisis associated with the use of the Euro following the 2007-08 global economic crisis has become an important symbol of the limits of supranational power, while the democratic deficit of European Union institutions has pointed towards the legitimation crisis facing open-ended European unification. More generally, and typifying leftist positions, multinational corporations and free trade are viewed as undermining national sovereignty as supranational organizations like the European Union underwrite their operations. Beyond this, the major difference between left- and right-leaning variants invoking the logic of territorial sovereignty is that the right sees 'nel popolo un'unità organica, intessuta di legami fortissimi, che "il sangue e la terra" cementano all'interno di "confine" ben definiti' ('the people as an organic unity, woven by strong identity links, that "blood and earth" cements within well-defined "borders"' Laboccetta, 2018). It is thus among right wing or identitarian populists that the defense of territorial borders looms the largest (e.g. Provenzano, 2018).

This leads right-wing populists, such as the League and its leader, Matteo Salvini, to emphasize national/cultural homogeneity and concern about the cultural impact of immigration. Such insistence is more than ironic given the League's origins in the 1980s as a political movement based on a fundamental discrimination between northern and southern Italy as distinctive cultural worlds. On the left, by contrast, the emphasis rests on the call for politics to take primacy over the market or the economy more broadly. The national territory may not necessarily define the sole regulatory or sovereign space; in fact, the European Union can do so. Thus, any space 'open to progress' including the supranational could fit into this conception of regulatory authority (e.g. Labocetta, 2018; Cannavò, 2018). Increasingly, however, some leftist proponents of *sovranismo* have argued that they cannot cede ground to the right and have increasingly accepted national borders as essential, thereby redefining the term's meaning on the left (e.g. Somma, 2018). Such arguments have had some resonance among activists in the Italian Five Star Movement suggesting that the left-right distinction loses much of its meaning as territorial sovereignty and the defense of borders assume a central place in the discourse of both sides (contrary to Provenzano, 2018).

The timing of this political debate about territorial sovereignty is hardly coincidental. Ever since Italy formally adopted the Euro in 1999, it has experienced a much lower rate of economic growth than it did before. Previously, Italian governments could always devalue the Lira when faced with serious economic crises or declining competitiveness. This was no longer possible once the Euro fully replaced the Lira in 2002. Following the financial crisis of 2007–08, Italy was one of the countries that suffered most from the austerity policies that followed from the increasing spread in yields between German and Italian bonds, showing the limits of a monetary system in which the lack of European Union-wide bonds and banking imposed costs very unevenly across member states of the Eurozone. Finally, Italy's population dynamics have changed substantially. Once mainly a country of emigration, over the past twenty years Italy has become the first and sometimes final stop for an increasing flow of immigrants, largely undocumented, from Africa, the Balkans, and the Middle East. Even though many of these migrants and refugees intend to move beyond Italy's borders, Italy, as the country of first arrival, has been given the challenge of managing their presence under European Union rules. The fact that many of the immigrants are culturally distinctive in numerous ways, combined with the absence of a significant domestic tradition of multiculturalism or cosmopolitanism, creates difficult conditions for integrating

immigrants.

All contemporary populist movements share the goal of reestablishing national sovereignty in a globalizing world. The idea of reinstating presumably lost border controls is a central moment of this process. Quite what it means to *have* territorial sovereignty is not always clear. But, according to Jacques Sapir, a French economist who specializes in Russia and is an important source for those right-wing intellectuals supporting the idea of *sovranismo*, there are three distinctive senses to the term: the social, the political, and the identitarian (Sapir, 2016). If the social focuses on the social costs associated with supra-nationalism and the political on the centrality of nation-statehood to political identity, the identitarian claims a peculiar national and popular cultural milieu as its métier. These three elements of sovereignty overlap in different ways from case to case but are useful in distinguishing the various arguments for the importance of national-territorial sovereignty (Feltri, 2018, pp. 48–51).

In Italy, the identitarian perspective is intrinsic to the League (formerly the Northern League) and its leader, Matteo Salvini, who finds ways to argue an identitarian strategy in the public defense of things like Italian food and in the wearing of Italian police and firefighter uniforms as he campaigns around the country. Additionally, a strange version of this perspective claims leftist credentials with a critique of capitalism that romanticizes an essential Italian culture in its singular struggle with globalization (Fusaro, 2016). Either way the European Union and globalization are jointly identified as undermining the settled territories of individual nation-statehood to which all peoples allegedly must belong. Yet, as Sapir himself suggests, the racism and xenophobia on which much identitarianism depends also constitute its Achilles' heel. For one thing, many identitarians favor 'European' or 'Western' rather than, for example, specifically Italian or French values (Feltri, 2018).

In practice, the focus on cultural identity within long-established borders (however recent those borders might actually be) is typically the driving force behind much of the populism that has swept across Italy and the rest of Europe. That said, in looking backwards for its utopia it provides no basis for imagining a future that is not simply based on reactionary premises somewhat like those behind the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The key one is to re-establish cultural-political consensus through coercive enforcement of norms that have been undermined by "foreign" values. Needless to say, this is not a comparison that European and American populists would care to hear. But it is a similar nostalgia for a lost utopia, as critics have pointed out. First, critics point to how contemporary states are increasingly redundant in a world in which capital now operates on supranational and global scales rather than on a country-by-country basis. Regulatory and democratic checks therefore need to be imagined at those scales rather than nostalgically relocated to the increasingly irrelevant national scale (e.g. Appadurai, 2006; Cannavò, 2018), particularly since existing states are themselves largely arbitrary, artificial entities and thus not necessarily good fits for managing many functions.

A second critique is that most of the world's states, including Italy, have never been very good at the democratic accountability assumed by proponents of the first two arguments for territorial sovereignty (e.g. Schiavone, 2013). The economic history of the world (including Putin's Russia, which Sapir seems to admire) is largely one of extractive or despotic elites extorting rents from populations rather than benevolently guiding economic development in the collective interest (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

The third critique is that many of the institutions of the European Union that are demonized by *sovranismo*, such as the European Central Bank, are in fact of the same species of independent organizations that are found on the national scale. The independence of central banks from governmental influence has become widely accepted the world over (e.g. Cassese, 2006; 2018). Finally, many of the world's states have never been fully sovereign in almost any sense of the term. Controlling borders, resisting foreign intervention, serving national populations equally across national territories, and generating national feeling have never been exercised in the ways that populists contend. Indeed, the entire exercise of claiming more-or-less absolute territorial sovereignty at the center of contemporary populism is based on a dangerous illusion: the recuperation of a territorial sovereignty that has never actually existed anywhere (Agnew, 2018; Feltri, 2018).

Scaling borders and the paradoxical Europeanization of populism

Virginie Mamadouh

In an age defined by the electoral success of populist parties around the world, the 2019 European election provided a distinctive arena for populist movements. The election also enables us to think about the geographies of populism in terms of scalar frames (next to the '*where?*' questions articulated by Lizotte, 2019). More specifically it applies to the othering and bordering processes at work in their discursive representations and practices. In these populist engagements with borders, nationalist populist movements not only focus on national borders but also increasingly see themselves as the defenders of European civilization and of EU borders.

The European Parliament (EP) has been elected directly by the citizens of the Member States every five years since 1979. The representative body of the most developed supranational experiment in the world has long been—perhaps counterintuitively—a welcoming arena for nationalist populist parties. The first reason for this is that the European Union has been an ideal target of populist critique of the elites—the technocrats in Brussels being the incarnation of the elites who remain remote from the citizens they are supposed to serve. Therefore, EP elections enable populist parties to mobilize against specific EU policies, against EU enlargement, against the EU membership of their own country, and, more widely, against the very existence of the European Union. Such mobilization actualizes disputes among EU member states as much as disputes between EU members states and EU institutions, and it exemplifies both the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of the *Us vs. Them* opposition identified by Brubaker (2020): 'them' the elite above us (vertical), and 'them' the Other across the border (horizontal). This is particularly true for right-wing populist movements and their mobilization of essentialist national identities. Although populists of the left also can be Eurosceptic, they mostly criticize the EU as a tool of globalization and neoliberal regulation undermining national welfare states; in foregrounding class identities, they rarely set people from the different Member States against each other. That is, they promote the construction of a social Europe rather than exit (Halikiopoulou et al., 2012). Thus, inspired by Ernesto Laclau, Pitcher (2019) even pleas for an antiracist populism.

The second reason is procedural. EP elections are national second-order elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). They are organized in national constituencies with national candidates and national electoral campaigns, and they are often seen as a popularity test for the national government. Voters tend to vote for more extreme candidates, considering the consequences to be limited. This effect is strengthened by the fact that electoral system used for EP elections is often more proportional than the one used for national elections. Populist parties are therefore more likely to attract voters than in national elections because EP elections are perceived as safe occasion to cast a protest vote. For these parties, seats at the EP are a welcome resource, bringing them jobs, salaries, grants, and visibility.

Populist parties—especially those of the radical right—have been successful in EP elections, as seen with the breakthrough of Jean-Marie Le Pen when the Front National won 11% of the French votes. They have, however, failed to gain much traction within European institutions because they have failed to unite as one parliamentary group. Despite their ideological commonalities, they have not worked together formally to avoid being tainted by each other's extreme-right reputations (McConnell & Werner, 2018).

The largest and most vocal nationalist populist party in the EP has long been the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which held up to a third of the British seats in the 2014–2019 legislature. To thwart their progression, the Conservative leader and Prime Minister David Cameron promised a referendum on the British membership of the EU during the campaign for the 2015 general election. The referendum eventually took place in June 2016 and resulted unexpectedly in a majority vote to leave the EU. The campaign for Brexit was dominated by populist rhetoric about taking back sovereignty from Brussels and controlling national borders. Such rhetoric focused more specifically on curtailing migration from other EU Member States, a backlash to the country's implementation of the freedom of movement of EU citizens. Although the UK had opted out of Schengen and maintained identity controls at the border, it was the most liberal regarding registration of EU residents and attracted large numbers of EU citizens from the Southern and Eastern Member States (see Roos, 2019, for a discussion the politicization of the freedom of movement).

The result of the British referendum brought about some celebration among Eurosceptic nationalist-populists in other Member States: the 'pure people' had scored a victory over the elites and had defeated the there-is-no-alternative-to-the-EU mindset (to paraphrase the Thatcher's famous slogan about the globalized, neoliberal market economy in the 1980s). Moreover, the lengthy and arduous process to implement Brexit was a validation of populist assertions about the unwillingness of EU and UK elites to fulfil the will of people.

Paradoxically Brexit also made exit very unattractive. In the wake of the 2019 EP elections, it was notable that long time Eurosceptics aiming at leaving the EU, like Marine Le Pen in France and Matteo Salvini in Italy, stopped advocating for Frexit and Italexit, respectively. Whether they changed their mind or were only abandoning the tactics out of fear of losing votes is open to debate. An alternative explanation is that exit from the EU lost its appeal because right-wing were becoming more confident in their ability to actually scale up populism and to join forces transnationally to gain political leverage over the EU—changing it rather than leaving it, or, as announced in Marine Le Pen's political programme *Pour une Europe des nations* (For a Europe of Nations), rescuing Europe and the Europeans from the EU (Rassemblement national, 2019). This Europeanized populist discourse foregrounds a genuine union of 'true' European peoples pitted against the EU elites, and it up-scales the representation of the borders to be defended as the borders of Europe and European civilization, rather than those of individual member states.

These scalar frames are however not new, and their evolution should bring our attention to the variegated representations of borders in the discourses of populist parties. The defence of European civilization has long been present in the discourse of several populist parties. Brubaker (2017b) comments on the opposition between nationalist and civilisationist populism (the latter foregrounding European civilization). Mamadouh (2012) signals the upscaling of invasion metaphors, while this European element is also present in the European discourse of the Front National before the Maastricht Treaty (Perrineau, 2017). Once they are in office, like the Hungarian party Fidesz, led by the charismatic Viktor Orbán, their border representations are even more consequential (as with Slovakia–see Kazharski, 2018). The complexity of Orbán's border rhetoric is particularly notable for its combination of seemingly contradictory elements: building fences while maintaining open borders in Schengen; closing the border for migrants while keeping it open for co-ethnics living outside the EU (Lamour & Varga, 2017; Crawley's intervention in McConnell et al., 2017; Varga, 2017; Scott, 2018). Varga (2019) demonstrates the differences in the border framings of Viktor Orbán and Marine Le Pen between 2015 and 2017, noting that Le Pen, before changing the name of her party into *Rassemblement national* and abandoning the goal of leaving the euro and the EU (as explained above), was mobilizing the border at the national level exclusively; Orbán, meanwhile, was claiming to defend the borders of the nation but also those of European civilization and of the Schengenzone. The recent shift in Le Pen's programme is a definitive move towards Orbán's more complex border frames.

Next to the national and regional (read: subnational) scales of populism (Heinisch et al., 2018), this justifies a call for more scholarly attention to the European (read: supranational) scope of populist politics. Research is much needed regarding the transnational diffusion of populist discourses (Wodak, 2015; Van Hauwaert, 2019), but foremost regarding the details of exclusionary populists' engagements with the EU, the border frames they articulate, and the bordering practices they advocate at the national and at the EU levels.

The enemy-in-us: Border populism in the time of coronavirus

Claudio Minca

I am writing this short intervention while stuck at home in Trieste, Italy. To impede the spread of the coronavirus, the Italian government has mandated the closure of most shops and restaurants and has asked all citizens to stay at home. Technically, we are not allowed to walk or drive anywhere unless we have documented reasons to do so. Squares and streets are empty. Schools and universities have been closed for weeks already. We see no friends or relatives, and those who can afford to work from home are constantly online. It feels like living in a brave new world where nothing will be like it was before. It is in this new world that populist discourses and imaginaries reveal all their fragility and unsustainable ambivalence.

Only one month ago, the Italian Senate authorized the court hearing of senator Matteo Salvini, the leader of the Italian right-wing party Lega who is often described as a key figure in the recent resurgence of populist political agendas across Europe. Salvini was accused of having hijacked, as then-Minister of the Interior, 113 migrants rescued by the Italian warship *Gregoretti* when he refused to permit the ship to land in any Italian port in July 2019. Tellingly, during the debate in the Senate, Salvini explained his decision by claiming that "to defend the national borders was my duty" (La Stampa, 2020). His appeal to the border as a real-and-imagined space of containment of potential invasions of the national (territorial) body should not come as a surprise. The sacralization of borders is, in fact, part of populist agendas everywhere in Europe. Salvini's muscular agenda visualizes the Italian border as a factual certainty and explains border militarization as an effective way to immunize the country—the national territorial body—from the presence of alien bodies. The use of such border rhetoric (and the related policies against 'irregular' migrants) on the part of Salvini and other populist leaders has indeed been successful in terms of popular consensus despite the fact that the management of borders in Europe has radically changed in the past decades and is clearly not limited to traditional state territorial frontiers. As it has clearly been demonstrated by a rich body of work in critical border studies (see, among others, Burridge et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2017; Vaughan-Williams, 2008, 2009, 2015), practices of bordering are implemented today potentially everywhere and on every body. Biopolitical technologies and new conceptualizations of spatial monitoring and control have radically transformed the ways in which borders and bordering are used by the authorities to operationalize their agendas. The traditional linear border mentioned by Salvini in his defense speech is therefore just one out of many manifestations of how the state implements border politics today. Despite this, the visual, material, and sometimes even 'walled' border, still seems to have a powerful rhetorical effect in popular and populist imaginations, since it is presented as the most tangible form of immunization of the national community from the possibility of contamination by uncontrolled alien bodies. In populist narratives such alien bodies also are presented as potential vectors of actual contagious disease, exposing the national body to different forms of biological threat.

Some time ago, in a chapter dedicated to the 'walling' of borders, Alexandra Rijke and I wrote that if one tries 'to look at the proliferation

of walls from the perspective of their visual but also almost tactile presence, we wonder whether these "assemblages" are actually about "migrants" and "refugees", or if they rather represent a spatial technology aimed at symbolically governing the body politic of the concerned countries – a sort of "self-fencing", an immunitarian practice to preserve the idea of a possible and final territorial integrity' (Minca & Rijke, 2019, p. 83). Drawing on the work of Italian political philosopher Roberto Esposito, we argued that the immunitarian paradigm in (border) politics has adopted the bio-medical understanding of immunity as 'a form of exemption from, or protection against, an infectious disease; in the juridical lexicon immunity represents a sort of safeguard that makes someone beyond the common law. In both cases, therefore, immunization refers to a particular situation that saves someone from the risks to which he or she is exposed (and to which the entire community is exposed)' (Esposito, 2013, p. 58; cited in; Minca & Rijke, 2019, p. 87). For Esposito (2011, p. 59), if one moves 'from the realm of infectious diseases to the social realm of immigration', one will find evidence of how the immunitarian paradigm has penetrated the sphere of politics and the reproduction of the body politic itself: 'The fact that the growing flows of immigrants are thought […] to be one of the worst dangers for our societies also suggests how central the immunitary question is becoming' (Minca & Rijke, 2019; also cited in Minca & Rijke, 2019, p. 87).

Nick Vaughan-Williams – we noted in that essay – has taken this argument further, claiming that when the imperative of immunity is implicated in border management, despite the primary purpose being a protective response in the face of a risk, borders may potentially develop excessive, aggressively militaristic, and indeed autoimmune tendencies: "The logic of immunization works by using precisely that which it seeks to oppose in order to develop a resistance against it. But while in non-lethal doses this operation may protect life, beyond a certain threshold Esposito argues that it may threaten that which it is supposed to protect: an autoimmune crisis" (Vaughan-Williams, 2016, no page).

Is the coronavirus pandemic potentially generating an autoimmune crisis in Italy and Europe? We do not know that yet, but what we do know is that in a few weeks it has entirely undermined—and revealed the tenuous foundations of—any border populist rhetoric. When news about the novel virus began to circulate in the early weeks of 2020, the (presumed) geographical determinations of this phenomenon provoked in Italy strong reactions on the part of the most influential populist leaders: they called for a travel ban to/from China, but also for a ban on 'Chinese' children resident in Italy (often times Italian citizens with Chinese heritage) from attending the schools in the Northern regions, all of which are governed by Salvini's party members. Such rhetoric of domestic bordering was reflected in those early days by several episodes of racial discrimination against 'Asian-looking individuals' who were not allowed, for example, to enter some shops or restaurants.

However, after February 21st when the virus began to affect many Italians, the previous populist border and racial rhetoric was confronted with an entirely new scenario that suddenly laid bare all its inconsistencies and contradictions. Italy was soon 'bordered' by many other countries, and many Italian travellers found themselves discriminated against, quarantined or expelled simply because of their nationality. This reversal of perspective—the border-imposed-on-us-because-we-are-Italians—has caused a frenzy of inconsistent reactions on the part of the few populist voices left. Despite the initial calls in favor of more severe border controls, when the virus began to make its way into Italy and most tourists cancelled their trips to the country, Salvini and other populist leaders frantically used social media to invite international tourists to come and visit 'Il Bel Paese' (see: Lega, 2020), only to change that a few days later by criticizing the government for not having taken more drastic measures to limit mobility and to contain the epidemic. At the same time, despite Salvini's well-known anti-European stance, he also called for a new radical bordering of Europe (La Repubblica, 2020), while complaining about the lack of solidarity on the part of other countries in their determination to isolate Italy with a series of new bordering practices.

In this unprecedented political climate, the populist references to an immunitarian border have thus vanished into thin air, and the populist geopolitical fantasies of most Italian political leaders have evaporated when faced with the challenge—real and metaphorical—of a new enemy, the virus, that is potentially 'in-all-of-us'. The 'national body' is now deeply contaminated; however, the enemy and the threat to the national community resides within and not outside that very community. In this political contingency, irregular migrants have been simply forgotten, and national borders have become a prison cage imposed by other countries to immunize their own territory and national body from us!

This is not just populist border politics turned against itself. It is the painful demonstration that the immunitarian imperative applied to border politics by populist agendas incorporates an inherently self-destructive horizon for a national community. Suddenly, what is becoming clear to everyone living in Italy right now is that the *border is in us*, in each of us, marked by the presence or the absence of the virus. The epidemic simply shows what is possibly the most banal aspect of the human condition: that for viruses we are all the same, we belong to the same species, we are all potentially vectors. The coronavirus, as an unprecedented geopolitical agent, may potentially penetrate each and every body (with no respect for political or national identity). But it also cuts across our body politic and, in this way, it forces everyone to reconsider the meaning and the political efficacy of any populist border narrative.

The border marked on our body by the coronavirus is uncertain and undefinable. We are told to keep distance when meeting someone in the street, but the truth is that everyone can be contagious: our parents, our friends, our partner, our colleagues. Nonetheless, you have to trust others since they provide food and health care and other essential services; they also share with you the same danger and fear, like in times of war. But you do not really know which others to trust: the whole set of invented certainties (i.e. 'we, the Italians') advanced by the populist rhetoric of racial bordering simply evaporates, together with the related fantasies of geographical and biopolitical purification. The virus is an invisible enemy that destroys any certainty, including the certainty of protection promised by the visibility and materiality of the walled borders celebrated by populist leaders in Europe. The contaminated body is thus not that of the migrant anymore; it is our own body; it is everyone's body. The immunitarian imperative on which populist rhetoric often builds its border imaginations, if implemented in the presence of the coronavirus threat, would in fact impose a 'cut', *a bio-political caesura into the population body precisely in order to save it*, revealing in this way all its self-destructive potential (see Agamben, 2000; also; Campbell, 2011; Minca, 2007).

Collective resistance, genuine collaboration, solidarity among humans—only humans with no label or attributes—is the name of the game today in Italy. In present circumstances, the populist rhetoric based on external threats and purified geographies of belonging, of immunitarian borders to be defended, not only fails to engage with the dramatic situation experienced by all people living in Italy, but sounds entirely out of tune with popular sentiment. The appeal to protect the border to defend the nation launched by Salvini just one month ago, when recalled today, has the flavour of a past polemic that seems incredibly remote and meaningless in this dangerous present. At this moment, the efficacy of the public health system, the trustworthiness of the government, and the competence of medical professionals are crucial factors that may determine life or death for many around us, and also may help prevent the unraveling of the social fabric. In this time, populist leaders have literally nothing to say, silenced by the affirmative reaction of a community (not just a fetishized and purified national community to be defended by imagined threats) *really under threat*.

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