Nothing but a piano-key: populism as a consequence of relational pathology

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The paper examines populism as a symptom of a dysfunctional relationship between the few (elites) and the many (the masses) in liberal democracies. We take as the core broken promise of contemporary liberal democracies the failure to deliver the assurance of there being a meaningful relationship between the citizens' self and the increasingly complex, difficult-to-understand world. Employing Frank's theory of credible commitment, we propose that populism's success lies in its ability to signal commitment through seemingly irrational actions, a strategy which creates trustworthiness on the part of populist leaders but exacerbates generalized distrust in the institutional system. Moreover, the non-populist forms of trust-building find it difficult to compete with such an emotionally loaded appeal. In the latter parts of the paper, we discuss the detrimental effects of the populist way of creating trust on democracy's self-correcting capacities, contending that it engenders its own relational pathologies and ultimately undermines the very system it seeks to correct. Finally, we address populism's disruptive impact on public justification of collectively binding norms and shared institutions. By highlighting the relational dimension of populism, the paper urges a nuanced understanding of populism's appeal as a reaction to, and simultaneously an amplifier of, the pathologies of liberal democracies.

> *It is precisely his most fantastic daydreams, his vulgarest foolishness, that he wants to cling to, just so that he can assert (as if it were absolutely essential) that people are still people and not piano-keys.*
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> Notes from Underground, Dostoevsky (1972 [1864])

Introduction

Populism and populism-driven generalized distrust are symptoms of relational pathology between the few and the many. The rest of this paper is devoted to unpacking this statement. As we want to make clear, the interface of democratic theory and psychology which forms the theoretical basis of our explication provides powerful *explanatory* tools—revealing a logic that renders the success of populist forces across the democratic world intelligible, and rather unsurprising—as well as resources for *critique* that help identify what is wrong with the populist version of distrust. There is a glimpse of a *normative* project toward the end of the paper, too; however, we largely leave this task for another occasion.

The explanatory facet of the paper deals with the sources of success of populist political forces and their close relationship to distrust. Like most commentators, we assume it has something important to do with the "broken promises of democracy" (Bobbio, 1987, Ch. 1) and link the populist surge to democracy's recent difficulties which many have labeled a *crisis* (Kaltwasser et al., 2017; Przeworski, 2019, Ch. 5). We also follow mainstream political science in understanding populism as mobilizing "the people" against "elites" (Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2016), where the latter have allegedly colonized positions of power in democracies and failed in their representative role vis-à-vis the democratic masses. Generally, we do not aim to directly compete with or replace foremost conceptualisations of populism or the role of (dis)trust; we believe our approach is largely compatible with them, especially those views which are themselves essentially relational (Ostiguy, 2017).[1]

However, the particular route we travel is treaded only weakly (if at all) in contemporary debates, for our argument harking back to Robert Frank's (1988) theory of credible commitment aims to elucidate populism's success through the logic of essentially *irrational* commitment signaling. The rationalist grounding of non-populist forms of trust finds it difficult to compete with such a strategy, especially amid the contemporary polycrisis-stricken context that is for many marked by uncertainty, alienation, and resentment resulting from democracy's broken promises.

To clarify the context in which this logic of commitment operates, we take as the core broken promise of contemporary liberal democracies the failure to deliver the assurance of there being a *meaningful* relationship between the citizens' self and the complex, difficult-to-understand world—a kind of *epistemic security*, or feeling of *connection*. In this regard, we zoom in on the ramifications of elite-led technocratic and expertocratic governance, grounded as it is in a fundamental distrust of the masses' competence for self-governance in such a complex world (Furedi, 2006; Busso, 2014). This mutual distrust engenders a multifaceted relational pathology, or disconnection, between the few and the many which populism exploits and, unfortunately, makes worse.

The notion of meaning and meaning-maintenance (Heine et al., 2006) is crucial here, for it helps understand why the populist promise may be more effective in anchoring emotional/identitarian security, thus averting the specter of *meaninglessness* that haunts democratic masses. Borrowing Dostoyevsky's memorable phrase, it

helps democratic citizens dispel the dread of being *nothing but a piano-key*, that is, passive elements without a sense of control over their existence, wielded by impersonal or depersonalized distant forces.[2]

This is then the sense in which populism serves as a corrective signal to liberal democracy—or more precisely, populism amplifies certain widespread cognitive and emotional stance of disregarded and alienated citizens who harbor not only distrust toward particular policy elites (which is a necessary ingredient of a functioning democracy; cf. Rosanvallon, 2008; Warren, 2018), but also generalized distrust toward the system as a whole (which signals its erosion and possibly downfall). Liberal democracies cannot afford to ignore the signal, or, worse, resort to a dismissive, contemptuous, or mocking attitude, on pain of further intensifying the divide and thereby nurturing future populist backlash. Democracy as we know and perhaps cherish it needs the mutual respect of both—the elites, because they provide abstract, depersonalized, but coherent articulation of problems and their possible solutions; and the masses, which keep the elites in touch with the lived, particularized world.[3]

At the same time, there is an all-important distinction between the cognitive-emotional state of the many and the way populist political forces put into political practice the newly acquired trust of those disconnected citizens. This is because populists ultimately exacerbate generalized distrust of the institutional and normative framework of liberal democratic politics, whereas scholars widely agree that generalized *trust* is empirically and perhaps conceptually necessary for *any* kind of social cooperation to thrive—especially a liberal democratic one. Philosophically speaking, new relational pathologies thusly engendered result in the demise of public justification of laws and other collectively binding norms as well as liberal democratic institutions themselves. Publicly justified norms are anything but *imposed*—whereas we argue that the relational pathologies we identify in the paper lead precisely to such imposition.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In the next section, we situate the dynamic of trust and distrust in democracy with respect to the age-old relationship issues between the few and the many, pointing out the limits of democratic distrust. We then turn to the topos of broken promises of democracy, arguing that in the case at hand (i.e. the populist surge), we must focus on their broadly epistemic aspect, especially the centrality of meaning and meaning maintenance. We think that its shrinking could be plausibly traced to certain features of the technocratic, rationalistic trend in liberal democratic governance. Next, building on Frank's theory of commitment, we outline how the success of populism in gaining trust of large swaths of democratic citizens could be explained in terms of an exploitation of irrational sources of bonding, which nicely corresponds with the oft-noted populist emphasis on emotions and collective identities. As we subsequently show, however, while

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1   The phenomenon of populism could be certainly approached from other theoretical perspectives, too. One of them would be the macro-structural argument that ultimately, the roots and causes of populism (more precisely, right-wing populism) should be traced to the expansion of capitalism and its attempts at self-reproduction, as a reviewer for *Frontiers* suggested. Populism and especially the nationalist thread in it are then claimed to be a tool in the liberal democratic elites' hands that serves to redirect the masses' attention toward an emotionally appealing, exclusive collective identity, thus blunting their awareness of the structural injustice on which the liberal democratic state is founded (see e.g. HadŽidedić, 2022, Ch. IX for this line of analysis). Regardless of the substantive merits and demerits of such claims (which it is impossible to even hint to in the given space), this suggestion is largely tangential to our present concerns and would require writing a different paper, most likely by different authors.

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2   Study of the bureaucratisation ("administrativisation") of the modern state is certainly relevant here.

3   An analogous tension has been suggested by Vervaeke et al. (2012) for any cognitive system that is capable of consistently realizing relations of relevance.

propelling populism to success, the populist way of creating a meaningful partitioning of the world only replaces one relational pathology with another, for it delegitimises opposing voices and subdues the expression of distrust *against* the populist way of being-in-the-world. As we show in the concluding two sections, besides paralyzing democracy's self-corrective mechanisms, such cognitive authoritarianism precludes successful public justification of collectively binding norms, precisely because it prevents the building of trust under diversity and disagreement which is liberal democracy's inescapable predicament. We close by discussing the proposed merits of the approach we employ in the paper.

Trust and distrust between the few and the many

Arranging the relationship between *the few* and *the many*, or *the elites* and *the masses*, constitutes an age-old question of political theory. Even a cursory glance over the classical contributions to the canon attests to this claim, from Plato and Aristotle to Augustine, Aquinas, Machiavelli, Hume, Burke, Rousseau, Kant, Tocqueville, Mill, Marx, Schmitt, Pareto, Schumpeter or Dahl to contemporary debates in democratic theory (Chambers, 2024). The reason for this *philosophical* interest plainly is that the question has always been of paramount *political* importance, often either directly causing, or at least contributing to, all kinds of socio-political changes, including major upheavals—or, contrariwise, to (surprising) robustness of certain socio-political arrangements (Ober, 1989).

Accordingly, the relationship and the ensuing social dynamic in both pre-modern and modern societies has long been a topic in political sociology, too, and recently has been receiving systematic interdisciplinary attention (e.g. North et al., 2009; Evans, 2017). We start with this seemingly trivial observation to highlight that one defining feature of contemporary populism in liberal democracies—that is, the division of the society into the "good" (authentic, genuine etc.) people and the "bad" (corrupt, nefarious, self-serving etc.) elites (Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2016, 19ff.; Rosanvallon, 2021, Ch. I.1)—is but a variation on a phenomenon which human societies have dealt with since forever. To anticipate a thread interweaving our argument, the challenge is to ensure a certain desirable type of relational dynamic between the elites and the masses, since a healthy liberal democracy needs both.[4] What *has* changed are the empirical circumstances. Especially relevant to the topic at hand are two aspects. In the age of representative democracy, modalities of political trust and distrust between those in power and the recipients of political authority's decisions have become much more complex—on top of the issue of horizontal social (dis)trust among citizens themselves. Moreover, the evolution of human societies toward an ever-increasing complexity, compounded by the deepening and complexification of our knowledge of how both the physical and social worlds function, has rendered it exceedingly difficult to orientate oneself in these worlds, therefore elevating trust into the center of attention for an independent set of reasons (Luhman, 1982; Warren, 1999b, 3ff.; Citrin and Stoker, 2018; Vahlne and Johanson, 2021).

Because most citizens lack the specialized knowledge required for competent assessment of whether elites in power exercise it well or badly, desirably or wrongly, their reliance on intermediaries or other experts seems inevitable. That is, citizens find themselves forced to trust experts, either as the very sources of public policies, or guarantors of the criteria for evaluating them. This, however, introduces a layer of systemic fragility on the back of the problem of broken promises (on which we comment in the next section). The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a striking example of a situation in which perceived inconsistencies and reversals by elites, or perhaps their "mismanagement, miscommunication, and even outright deception" (Cole, 2022), intensified public distrust. Populism then can be read as offering a vehement answer as to in whom to invest one's trust.

Before proceeding further, let us highlight an important point: a functioning liberal democracy is premised on a certain constellation of both trust and distrust. On the one hand, any large-scale social cooperation requires sufficient measures of social (horizontal) *and* political (vertical) trust among members of a society.[5] On the other hand, a foundational kind of distrust toward the formal apparatus of the state, including persons who happen to occupy official positions of power, constitutes the latent engine of a functioning representative democracy: "most of the principles constitutive of democratic order assume the institutionalization of distrust" (Sztompka, 1998, p. 26). This becomes obvious on many levels of reflection.[6] In fact, the mundane invitation to periodically change political elites via elections embodies a recognition of the foundational role of distrust.

Crucially, the distrust relationship operates in the opposite direction, too. This is evidenced, first, by the institutionalization (often constitutionalisation) of elected representatives' *free mandate*, which, besides guarding representatives from pressures "from above" (especially their parties), guarantees limited accountability to the electorate. Urbinati's (2014) concept of *diarchy* which highlights the need to shield (to a certain extent) collective democratic *judgment* (or *reason*) from the unmediated, unpredictable *will* of the empirical masses helpfully reveals the

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4 Interestingly, Deneen's (2023) call for a "mixed regime" seems to paint a similar picture.

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5 Horizontal, because citizens form empirical expectations about other persons to comply with a certain set of social-moral norms, as well as normative expectations about whether others think they should comply with the same norms (Bicchieri, 2006). Trust then constitutes the belief that these others will comply and thus confirm the expectations. Vertical, because while the ultimate source of political power must reside with "the people" (conceptually speaking), or the citizen-voters (empirically speaking), the people/citizens cannot consistently rule in a literal sense. This is why they cannot but trust both their political representatives to act in accordance with the desired goals, interests, identities, principles etc. As Warren (1999a, p. 4) points out, by trusting political representatives, one voluntarily "forgoes the opportunity to influence decision-making."

6 Warren (1999a, p. 1; cf. Warren, 2018, p. 76ff.) notes that liberal democracy "emerged from the distrust of traditional political and clerical authorities" and the need to check their discretionary power, so that "[m]ore democracy has meant more oversight of and less trust in authorities." See also Rosanvallon (2008) or Keane (2012) for forceful statements that contestation, oversight and generalized vigilance toward formal institutions are necessary, and perhaps primordial, stimuli of political action in a democracy.

rationale behind this institutionalized distrust. Second, trends such as the rise of technocratic governance or the judicialisation of politics make it clear that even political representatives themselves, to the extent that they *do* articulate democratic will, are not to be left without checks.

That a functioning liberal representative democracy needs both trust and distrust operating alongside each other under a certain dynamic that allows exploiting the productive consequences of the tension is a fact that cannot be overstated. The standard story then goes roughly like this (Sztompka, 1998; Warren, 2018; Vallier, 2021): while first-order political *distrust* needs to be particularized and institutionalized, i.e. channeled toward particular political institutions (especially executives and legislatures), or more precisely toward the persons populating these institutions, democracies must protect second-order general trust in the institutional framework as such—its impartiality, inclusiveness, and effectiveness. The former accommodates political disagreement and contestation which is inevitable in a free society; the latter ensures that the media of political conflict remain "talking and voting" (Warren, 2018, p. 90) rather than threats and violence. Cross-cutting this vertical axis of (dis)trust is social trust operating horizontally, with generalized social trust—the wager that even strangers mostly share our norms and expectations—facilitating the productive channeling of political conflict. In contrast, *generalized distrust* especially toward institutions and political elites is "one of the most corrosive forces within the politics of democratic countries today" (ibid: p. 81).

Democracy's broken promises and the abyss of meaninglessness

A lot has been written about the correlation between declining generalized trust and the perception that liberal representative democracies underperform, or perform poorly—either in general terms such as stability, justice, or effectiveness, or with respect to specific phenomena such as socioeconomic inequality, unemployment, marginalization, physical insecurity, corruption, pandemic policies, rising energy prices, or, especially for younger generations, climate change. If the desirability of democratic rule depended largely or wholly on performance criteria, the failure to "deliver the goods" could be seen as a powerful indictment of democracy's capacities as well as explanation of the observed "crumbling of confidence" (Ringen, 2022). Moreover, to the extent that contemporary representative democracies have taken on the technocratic/expertocratic mantle (Vibert, 2007; Friedman, 2019; Bertsou and Caramani, 2020; Heath, 2020), failing to perform would seem doubly pernicious.

We however wish to draw attention to a less conspicuous aspect of democracy's broken promises, one which is more in line with Bobbio's (1987) early analysis as well as the contemporary debate on the dwindling or missing responsiveness of liberal democracies to citizen input, itself a symptom of a crisis of democratic political representation (Mair, 2013; Roberts, 2019; Chambers, 2024, Ch. 9). For focus on democracy's performance leads to a puzzle: on the one hand, numerous scholars have concurred that populism can be fruitfully interpreted as a reaction to the expansion of technocratic rule (eg Müller, 2016; Mounk, 2018; Kosar et al., 2019; Urbinati,

2019; Fukuyama, 2022). On the other hand, empirical data show that societies employing reason and science more extensively in policymaking are safer, healthier, and generally better off (e.g. Pinker, 2018). Comparatively speaking, the technocratic shift, triggered by a desire for efficiency and evidence-based policy, has brought about undeniable benefits for liberal democracies in areas such as public health, environmental sustainability, and economic management. Given the broad electoral and non-electoral support populist political forces enjoy, it seems puzzling that dozens of millions of people would stubbornly refuse to give up mistaken views and related political attitudes about their democracies' performance and their own wellbeing. There thus must be, we want to suggest, another mechanism at play which better explains the swing to populism.

Our suggestion is to focus attention on deeper layers of the psychological and more broadly cognitive equipment of democratic citizens (Reykowski, 2020). We have already alluded to the distrust decision-making elites in liberal democracies must hold toward the masses. While this is a systemic feature of a functioning democracy, the slide toward a pathological state of the relationship always looms. As expertise becomes the primary mode of legitimate knowledge due to the growing complexity of governance, citizens come to be routinely seen as ill-equipped to engage meaningfully in policy debates, further widening the gap between them and the decision-makers. In turn, policy elites guided by technocratic logic remain out of touch with the public's everyday concerns and emotional realities (or at minimum are being perceived as such). This threatens to "cut the policy elites loose from democratic control," resulting in a "quasi-guardianship" (Dahl, 1989, p. 335) by experts who might not be even seeking such a role. The travails of governance in the EU, including the problem of its democratic deficit, are paradigmatic in this regard (Sorace, 2018); another textbook example is the place of central banking and monetary policy which tends to operate as if democracy did not matter (Downey, 2024; cf. Tucker, 2018).

The unintended consequence is citizen alienation (Pyszczynski et al., 2010), or the feeling of disconnection from decisions that fundamentally shape their lives, as these decisions are filtered through technocratic institutions that prioritize formal education and scientific evidence over common-sense rationality of lived experience (Busso, 2014). Thus, while technocracy *qua* rationalized response to the overwhelming complexity of modern governance might generally succeed according to a variety of criteria (Rosling et al., 2018; Pinker, 2018), it may leave individuals feel powerless and detached from the very system that governs them. In other words, it turns democratic citizens into Dostoevsky's piano-keys.

Thusly stranded, citizens struggle to find meaning in the democratic process, which gives rise to a growing sense of epistemic insecurity—a situation when "an individual perceives the world as incomprehensible and unpredictable, and, as a consequence, loses cognitive control over reality" (Reykowski, 2020, p. 171). Heine et al. (2006) to whose work the concept of epistemic insecurity refers point out that the need for meaning, in the sense of relationality to the self, other people, and the world as a whole, is so fundamental that it may overshadow concerns regarding material conditions. To avoid the "abyss of meaninglessness," individuals seek compensatory sources of meaning—a process known as fluid compensation—that may manifest in manifold ways, from

resignation on public matters and civic participation (Siaroff, 2009), to subscription to partisan tribes that provide a sense of identity (Fukuyama, 2018), to support for political leaders who promise to bring back the good old "orderly" days. Distrust of agents, forces and structures which seem to threaten the newfound refuge for meaning is then but an expected corollary. Moreover, as Reykowski (2020) and others (e.g. Teymoori et al., 2017) have observed, the outlined dynamic feeds into a vicious cycle: the less impact citizens feel they have on the outputs of democratic politics, the more susceptible they become to distrust and disillusionment. All this, we think, accounts for the discrepancy between subjective attitudes regarding liberal democratic performance and the comparative success these regimes objectively achieve.

Commitment problem, meaninglessness, and the hidden logic behind populist trust

The shifting of attention to the psychological side of democracy's broken promises helps us see the contextual ground in which populism has germinated and thrived. However, it is not obvious why populism's eschewing of reason and expertise in favor of emotion, hyperbole, and authenticity has secured widespread assent of the disillusioned many rather than simply provoking yet another skeptical response. As we are to argue, these characteristics not only cannot be easily waved off as merely reactionary (irrational, impetuous, wanton…) impulses, but may in fact hold the key to the very success of the populist phenomenon. To shed light on the populists' ability to establish trust with their supporters, we propose to view it through the prism of the counter-intuitive dynamics of what Frank (1988) called the *commitment problem*.

In a game-theoretical context, the commitment problem refers to the challenge of credibly committing to a future course of action when one may have incentives to renege on that commitment later. The conundrum is this: behaving and being known to behave as a rational agent—for instance, by avoiding actions that are costly or irrational with regard to self-interest—can sometimes undermine trust because it fails to credibly signal commitment to actions that may require harm or self-sacrifice at some future point (Schelling, 1981). Conversely, a willingness to engage in seemingly irrational or costly actions can serve as a credible signal of commitment and thus establish trust. Frank (1988) proposed that emotions evolved in part as *commitment devices* to help humans credibly bind themselves to future actions and to one another in a way that purely rational means could not achieve. This allows for many benefits that would be otherwise untenable, such as greater cooperation, credible deterrence, and establishment of relationships based on trust, especially when institutional mechanisms fail to facilitate these.

A striking example of the commitment problem is evident in cultures of honor that emerge under conditions of lawlessness (Nisbett and Cohen, 1996). In such environments where formal legal institutions are weak or absent, the instinct for revenge serves as a crucial deterrent against aggression (McCullough et al., 2013). By credibly signaling a willingness to retaliate—regardless of personal cost—individuals deter potential aggressors,

thereby maintaining social order (Leung and Cohen, 2011). While such actions may seem irrational at first glance, there is compelling logic working in the background that protects against predatory violence within contexts lacking reliable institutional safeguards.[7] Obviously, in societies with effective law enforcement and legal institutions, personal vengeance is unnecessary and counterproductive (Eisner, 2003; Pinker, 2011). However, when institutional trust erodes and legitimacy is questioned, individuals may resort to personal and costly signals of commitment once again (Tyler, 2006). This illustrates the critical role of societal context in understanding behavior that might otherwise appear irrational.

Our suggestion is that populist leaders leverage this dynamic within the context of generalized distrust by engaging in actions that seem irrational or costly, thereby credibly signaling their commitment to their supporters. In environments where traditional institutions are perceived as generally untrustworthy, such signals help establish trust and foster loyalty among disillusioned individuals. Understanding this mechanism elucidates the populists' ability to establish trust relations and thrive in contexts where the messages by conventional political actors fail to resonate. Seen in this light, the disdain, rejection and exclusion from the "company of the reasonable" that populists and their rhetoric receive from mainstream elites and media enhances their credibility by making the signal more costly in terms of personal or reputational standing. The increased cost only reinforces the perceived authenticity of their stance, strengthening the bond of trust—the Us, excluded by Them—with those who they claim to represent. Recent empirical accounts indicate that it is not all plain talk either, as populists actually (and often irrationally) follow through with their costly commitments (Bellodi et al., 2023). We think this understanding of the logic of commitment goes at least some way toward explaining why populist leaders are able to retain trustworthiness even though they often tick pretty much the same socioeconomic and cultural boxes as those elites which are at their crosshairs.[8]

The context of meaninglessness then introduces a perilous twist to the dynamic. In such circumstances, the commitment problem extends beyond transactional promises to encompass deeper issues of meaning-making, relationships, and identity formation. Here, identities become deeply intertwined and potential betrayal results not just in a transactional loss but in an existential one, threatening an individual's source of meaning, undermining her fundamental understanding of herself and her place in the world (Teymoori et al., 2017), thereby elevating the stakes of the commitment problem. Populist leaders respond to this existential need with credible emotional signaling and by offering not just policy proposals but by embodying a persona and perceived authenticity that supporters integrate into their own identities (Fukuyama, 2018). It becomes a worldview where they *belong* rather than merely a political stance.

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7 Which is not to say that such logic is consciously registered or understood by the actors involved.

8 Another part of the explanation would likely be the "flaunting of the low" strategy as analyzed by Ostiguy (2017)—the deliberate, even proud "raising of the middle finger" in defiance of what is expected in political debate and behavior.

Combining the logic of commitment and the problem of meaninglessness, we obtain an image of populist trust very much in line with the "anatomy of populism" as recognized across the social sciences (Kaltwasser et al., 2017, Part I; Urbinati, 2019; Rosanvallon, 2021, Part I). The rejection by the mainstream and their supporters reinforces the belief that it's Us vs. Them, the authentic but disconnected people vs. the corrupt, disinterested elites. The costliness of the bond certifies that the leader is really there to stand up for the people who he/she not only represents but metonymically *embodies*. The perceived deep trustworthiness of the leader undergirds the expectation that the proposed policies, to the extent that they are discernible from populist rhetoric, need to be implemented directly and without interference from other bodies (which sometimes spills over to deprecatory attitudes toward the separation of powers). And the largely irrational grounds of trust between populist political forces and their supporters connect with the stock of emotions that come with the feelings of misrecognition, not mattering, and "invisibility." Non-specific anger, hatred against the "enemies of the people," and a kind of reverse contempt or "morality of disgust" (Rosanvallon, 2021, p. 43) are typical expressions that function as emotional commitment devices, as suggested by Frank (1988). All this serves the background goal of rescuing meaning and a sense of connection with the world and rebelling against the meaningless abyss of being nothing but a piano-key.

The unanswered desire for belonging highlights the relational pathology between the few and the many. Like the instinct for revenge under conditions of lawlessness, populism may serve for many as a tragic but functional alternative in a context of meaninglessness. With respect to the promise of healing the broken relationship, it is vital to realize that there is a method behind the madness. At the same time, however, we should be aware of where and how populism creates relational pathologies of its own, potentially undercutting—rather than correcting and healing—the very political system which has given birth to it.[9] Our theoretical apparatus provides, we believe, a helpful set of tools for interpretation.

Opponent processing, distrust, and self-correction in democracy

Let us recall the statement which opened this paper: populism and populism-driven generalized distrust are symptoms of relational pathology between the few and the many. Before we delve into the specific ways in which populism intensifies this pathology, let us unpack the situation as it currently stands. A functioning democracy depends upon a healthy, reciprocal relationship between the elites and the masses—a relationship now fraught, perhaps as a consequence of widespread meaninglessness to which populism reacts, yet also exacerbates. Here, once again, the

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9 Replacing liberal representative democracy with an alternative may well be the explicit goal of populist political forces, as Orbán's exaltation of illiberal, national democracy attests. See paradigmatically (Orbán, 2014).

psychological perspective of meaning offers insight into the underlying dysfunction.

Meaning, as Heine et al. (2006) point out, is inherently relational, emerging from the connections and mutual relevance of diverse entities. Vervaeke and Ferraro (2013) deepen this perspective with a process theory that views meaning maintenance as a dynamically realized relevance—a quality that enables entities to continually adjust, striving for "fittedness" in a way analogous to biological fitness (see Vervaeke et al., 2012) across diverse contexts of the world as well as different temporal scales of life. Crucial to this process is the principle of *opponent processing*, where competing forces remain in constructive tension to foster context-sensitive adaptability. As the "no-free-lunch" theorem (Wolpert and Macready, 1997) suggests, the inherent biases within any single strategy necessitate a range of complementary approaches, with opponent processing enabling the dynamic tension required for adaptive, context-sensitive relevance realization, or meaning maintenance.

This resonates strikingly with the structure of democracy, defined by its ongoing negotiation of dualities, with the elite–masses relation as one of the most vital and inherently tensioned. This duality mirrors, at least in part, the balance between *abstraction* and *particularisation* discussed by Vervaeke et al. (2012), where elites often operate within broader abstractions while the masses engage more directly with particular lived realities. When the constructive tension between these poles is disrupted—whether through dominance of abstraction (e.g. threat of ideology) or unchecked focus on immediate concerns and passions (e.g. mob rule)—a relational pathology emerges. For democracy to function effectively, it depends on a reciprocal respect between the elites, who offer abstract yet structured solutions to societal issues, and the masses, who anchor these abstractions in the concrete realities of everyday life. Once this relational balance breaks down, each side loses what it would otherwise gain from the other—elites risk drifting away from practical realities, while the masses may find themselves without coherent frameworks to tackle complex issues, slipping into meaninglessness as the world around them is shaped in isolation from their lived experiences.

Notice that for opponent processing to be effective, it must remain flexible—opposing yet interconnected. This fits aptly with the trust–distrust dynamic discussed above, where both elements are essential for sustainable democratic decision-making. In comparison to alternative modes of arriving at collectively binding decisions, democracy is best equipped for monitoring its own effectiveness and thus for institutionalized self-correction—the "ongoing process of selecting, implementing, and maintaining effective institutional arrangements"—under conditions of cognitive uncertainty and normative disagreement (Knight and Johnson, 2011, p. 12; cf. Krastev, 2013). Democratic distrust then functions as a primary impulse that sets the self-correcting mechanisms in motion.

In Popperian terms (Popper, 2011, *passim*), distrust undergirds democratic *fallibilism*, that is, the idea that nobody should be entrusted with unchecked power because humans are fundamentally fallible when confronted with the complexity of the world, easily err in their decisions, and fall prey to age-old

temptations and psychological weaknesses.[10] In fact, the practice of science itself as a high (according to many, the highest) mark of epistemic achievement that has enabled the exponential development of modern society is *constituted* by a preliminary but dogged rejection of all authority and established truths, even scientific ones (Deutsch, 2011, Ch. 1).[11] And we know from experience and history that humans have been wrong about almost everything they believed in, though occasionally, they stumbled over a satisfying or perhaps correct solution. Democratic distrust then indirectly conditions people for the ubiquity of failure in political judgement and/or performance.

Crucially, all this happens within the confines of particularized, first-order distrust. The trouble with populist rhetoric and policy is that it misdirects this desirable kind of distrust against the institutional framework as such (Rosanvallon, 2021, p. 42), denigrating its impartiality, inclusiveness, and effectiveness—in effect, its trustworthiness. As a substitute, direct personalized— that is, particularized—trust in populist leaders *and only them* is offered. In other words, while creating strong but exclusive bond of trust toward charismatic leaders who claim to represent the will of the people against elites, populism simultaneously spins the wheels of generalized distrust, the stock of which has been already accumulating over time.

Whether a by-product or a deliberate strategy, populist political forces thus capitalize on a vulnerability built into the dynamic which makes liberal democracies successful in the first place. Instead of healthy tension between generalized trust and particularized distrust, we get a pathological combination of emotionally subsidized trust toward particular persons and generalized mistrust of "the system." We surmise it is this switching between building trust and exacerbating distrust which may co-explain the ambiguous perception of populism as both a threat and a corrective to liberal democracy, and populist political forces as both democracy's saviors and poisoners.

Another play on distrust: populist meaning-making and public justification in liberal democracy

Populism addresses a real need, offering the disenchanted many a sense of belonging and purpose in an alienating world. Yet it does so by entrenching a narrow collective identity that frames dissent as betrayal. Populist movements often deploy emotional commitment devices that resonate amid generalized distrust and meaninglessness, binding followers to a shared identity that resists compromise. This vision, though meaningful for those within, leaves little room for the diversity of views and negotiations that are essential to democratic resilience. Populism's appeal, then, can be seen as a powerful response to the gaps in contemporary liberal

democracy, but one that risks undermining the openness and adaptability essential to democratic life in exchange for the rigid certainty of exclusionary solidarity.

Moreover, the proposed collective identities and corresponding policies are presented as incontestable (for "the people" cannot be wrong about its interests and identity), closing in turn the opportunity for legitimate political dissent. In other words, they are *imposed*, as much as rationalized technocratic policies are. This is in line with populism's anti-pluralistic, anti-representational and radically majoritarian attributes. In the name of "the people," populism imposes a certain way of partitioning of the world upon everyone, grouping actual and potential dissenters as enemies of the people—in effect *prohibiting* the reproduction of particularized distrust. While the hatred and other emotionally charged attitudes are primarily directed at the elites—the corrupt politician, the insulated technocrat, the frivolous billionaire—, they have horizontal ramifications for social trust, too, for the policies and perhaps identities those few propose and pursue will have numerous supporters among the citizenry.

The major undesirable consequence for liberal democracy should now be easy to see: such imposition cripples democracy's self-corrective mechanisms which critically depend on the existence of a multitude of perspectives. Institutionally, democracy's self-correction has been formalized in the idea and practice of legitimate opposition (Habermas, 1996, 170ff.; Webber, 2017) whose primary venue is the parliament—that is, the major representative institution which mediates between the will of the many and the reason/expertise of the few. Because populism is suspicious of both representation and mediation, it undermines the process of (a)mending the pervasive collective misframing of the world.

Our final point is that the populist way of approaching politics also precludes public justification of collectively binding norms— that is, securing their normative legitimacy. Without entering into excessive detail (cf. Vallier, 2022), let us conceive of the idea of public justification (PJ) as requiring that collectively binding and publicly enforceable norms (such as laws) produced by state authorities be acceptable—in a sense specified by a given conception of PJ—by a great majority of citizens. This is a quintessentially liberal criterion of legitimacy which refers to fundamental moral equality of human beings *qua* addressees of state directives, which should translate to their status as citizens. Put simply, it prohibits the unilateral imposition of such norms. Yet we have seen that the populist promise seeks to do basically just that. In this sense, it is unashamedly anti-liberal (a claim many populist leaders now proudly wear on their sleeves). There is again a layer of (dis)trust here, because only the awareness that others obey norms and institutional rules because they have sincerely internalized them, rather than because the norms have been imposed upon them, can equip these others with trustworthiness—the quality that anchors our empirical expectations that they will reliably comply with the norms/rules. Trust, as we noted earlier, then constitutes the belief that these others will comply and thus confirm the expectations. To drive the point home, it is only publicly justified norms that secure compliance via internalization. This is why public justification is indispensable for normative legitimacy, insofar as citizens' equality matters.

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10   The fallibilistic imperative in turn grounds the value of political equality, for under the grand scheme of things, we are all roughly equally fallible. We discuss this point in more detail in Ruzicka et al. (2025).

11   To avoid complications arising from the notion of a scientific paradigm, we take it that paradigm changes (or replacements) confirm the foundational distrust that fuels scientific inquiry. Cf. Schurz and Kornmesser (2014).

Discussion

Pierre Rosanvallon starts his recent book-length treatise on the "populist century" by stating that the term populism "may turn up everywhere, but no theory of the phenomenon has emerged" (Rosanvallon, 2021, p. 1). The statement might be correct or not (depending on what we expect a theory to provide); however, what the French political theorist writes next very much resonates with the argument in this paper: "Populism (…) often serves only to stigmatize adversaries, or to legitimize old claims by the powerful and the educated that they are superior to the 'lower' classes, which are always deemed likely to mutate into plebeians governed by sinister passions" (ibid.). Our explorations of the conceptual links and practical dependencies among populism, (dis)trust, meaning and commitment have been motivated precisely by the cognisance that populism, at its core, addresses a genuine need: it offers a response to widespread feelings of disconnection and meaninglessness in a complex world, providing a sense of belonging and purpose for those who feel overlooked and unrepresented within elite-driven narratives. Yet, as our analysis has shown, populism's approach to trust and meaning departs from the balance that sustains democratic life. While liberal democracy relies on a constructive tension between generalized trust in institutions and particularized distrust of power, populism disrupts this balance by redirecting desirable distrust away from specific political actions or figures and toward the institutions themselves.

On the theoretical-conceptual plane, the relational perspective offers a productive tool of analysis and evaluation. Existing relational approaches (cf. Ostiguy, 2017) could benefit from our emphasis on countervailing processes, forces and social actors that enables us to theoretically capture the logic of functioning of liberal democracies, including the dynamic which propels their evolution. In turn, this logic reveals a set of evaluative criteria for further normative reflection. The former is best captured by the notion of opponent processing via which "competing forces remain in constructive tension to foster context-sensitive adaptability," rendering a cognitive system figure out what is relevant in the complex world and retain fitness with respect to currently unknown challenges that are bound to come. The tensions between the few and the many as well as between trust and distrust are two such opponent pairs; examples from other areas of social-philosophical inquiry include conservatism and progressivism in politics, specialization and diversification in economics, or frame-creation and frame-breaking in cognition (individual or collective). In each case, sliding toward one pole at the expense of the other disturbs the productive dynamic, engendering aberrations and pathologies.

As regards the normative upshot, the relational logic is embedded in the concept of public justification—for the bindingness of shared norms and the resulting policies will always be justified *by* someone (the justification-giver, usually politicians and lawmakers) *to* someone else. Here we connect to important debates in political philosophy, with overlapping but also conflicting voices stressing the relational nature of justification (Forst, 2007), justifiability of common rules in a complex and diverse world (Gaus, 2011), or, as discussed throughout, the central importance of trust in public justification (Vallier, 2020). Despite their seeming abstractness, the concepts of public reason and public justification are then intimately linked to more institutionally bent type of political theorizing. Many have argued that the idea of public reason as well as the practice of public justification can be best embodied by some kind of deliberative democratic setting (Forst, 2007, Ch. 7; Baynes, 2010; Parkinson, 2012; Boettcher, 2020; Kugelberg, 2021); moreover, there are indices that certain deliberative mechanisms such as minipublics or citizen's juries help negotiate obstacles to the cultivation of both horizontal and vertical trust (MacKenzie and Warren, 2012; Warren and Gastil, 2015). But there are more skeptical voices, too (Gaus, 1997; Bohman and Richardson, 2009; Parvin, 2015; Vallier, 2016), some of which understand differently the very nuts and bolts of public justification and call for its "divorce" from public deliberation. A fertile field of research thus opens which links several prominent strands of contemporary political philosophy.

Practically speaking, by construing populism as capitalizing on relational fractures between the few and the many, we aim to contribute to a nuanced response that addresses the phenomena underlying populism's appeal. This perspective invites us to view populism as a reminder of liberal democracy's own relational fragilities; in tun, to mend the relational pathology between the few and the many, liberal democracy must confront the distancing forces that open the abyss of meaninglessness. As Dostoevsky noted, people would sooner curse their fate than accept a life stripped of agency and meaning, even if it offered safety and comfort in return. Democracy made of "piano-keys" would not face a long life expectancy.

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