

Neo-Populism: Applying Paul Taggart's *Heartland* to the Italian Five Star Movement and League parties

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Abstract: In the early 2000s the British academic and expert in the field of populism, Paul Taggart, conceptualised the heartland – which he defined as ‘a version of the past that celebrates a hypothetical, uncomplicated and non-political territory of imagination.’ The idea is that populists envision this return to an almost utopic, laborious, morally pure, and culturally homogenous ‘place’ where professional political administration is not completely rejected but certainly kept at a minimum. Applying Taggart’s heartland to leaders and parties allows us to build on an efficient comprehension of specific uses of populist dialogue, as well as their general discursive styles and political narratives. Those who have capitalised on the current populist zeitgeist (a term Cas Mudde often uses), such as the American President Donald J. Trump, have mobilised masses by implicitly calling for a return to the heartland with slogans such as ‘Make America Great Again’. However, Trump is not the only politician who has discursively framed the concept of heartland in the twenty-first century. Interestingly, the heartland can also be applied to ‘right-wing’ national-populists and ‘left-wing’ techno-populists in Italy. The League, believes that with their involvement, their country can return to be a safer, more stable, hard-working, producerist society. Similarly, the Five Star Movement pressures the elites for a more virtuous, honest, and transparent way of doing politics through the digital web and direct democracy practices. Those values are the ones that shape their idea of heartland. This piece untangles the two distinct versions of heartland that exist within the *forma mentis* of the two Italian populist parties, compares them, and contrasts them in the hope of contributing to the already existing literature that has presented little evidence so far on how Taggart’s relevant concept can be identified in populist discourse, monologue, and ideology. Also, some advice is given on how to deal with the new populists worldwide in a way that involves dialogue that is both constructive and inclusive.

Keywords: Heartland, Populism, Nation-statism, League, Five Star Movement, Territory.

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Introduction

The scope of this piece is to elucidate not only the role that heartlands play in allowing political figures to frame the particularistic idea of ‘the people’ through monologic exchange but also populism itself. However, this task will be carried out with the premise that providing the reader with an exhaustive taxonomy of populism is not necessary, given that sort of work is readily available elsewhere (See Margaret Canovan 2004; Cas Mudde 2017; Pierre A. Taguieff 1995; Marco Tarchi 2015; Kurt Weyland 2017; etc.). Moreover, the theories exposed in the next few paragraphs are consciously non-empirical, in the sense that they are yet to be tested using a psychometric or gradational instrument, but the strength of my methodology resides precisely in the fact that it is both open-minded and open-ended. In fact, specifically, this approach involves an analysis of how the Five Star Movement and League have managed to discursively and ideologically formulate their corresponding heartlands. In the humblest manner, I must stress this pursuit is both interesting and essential, mainly because it has never been done academically before. The speeches I use in this article are taken by statements made at rallies, in blogs, party newspapers, and parliamentary proceedings. All the material I have collected to produce this piece has been made easily accessible by Five Star Movement and League politicians (mainly MPs) who have openly expressed their opinions (in the form of speech as both ‘monologic expression’ and ‘dialogic confession’) from 1994 onwards.

The article relies on a *synthesis* (Creswell and Creswell 2015) between *theoretical exploration* and *discourse analysis* in order to address the social reality of two Italian populist organisations that have used what Ronald C. Arnett (2012, 105) refers to as ‘petite narrative’ to communicate their *raison d’être* to an audience within a monologic framework. Taggart’s idea of heartland is tied to a wider context (where the perspectives of relevant authors such as Ronald C. Arnett, Adam Ferguson, Nadia Urbinati, and others are also taken into account) to ultimately address whether constructive approaches to populist agents are possible in order to make the case that if we are unwilling to hear and legitimise monologic exchanges, then it becomes virtually impossible for dialogue to be heard. In worst-case scenarios, the failure to embark on dialogue (and the delegitimisation of populist monologic demand *a priori*) results in the further weakening of the social fabric of already polarised post-modern liberal democracies in which paramount tenets like freedom of expression and freedom of association seek to be redeemed (Arnett 2012, 113). In this paper, an analysis of the ideology of populism and the idea of heartland will take place before assessing structural design, methodology and qualitative potential of the research. As

academic journal. With a keen interest in political science, involving both academia and journalism, Varriale has also been active in British political circles that address issues concerning freedom of speech, individual rights, and national identity. All things considered, he wishes to pursue a future academic career somewhere in Britain or continental Europe.

already hinted earlier, examples of how heartlands have been, until now, constructed discursively through monologue and an interpretative discussion on whether it is possible and sensible to engage with a more 'mature' populism will also be provided prior to the conclusive remarks.

Making sense of how heartlands are naturally built-in populist dialogue obviously also contributes to a fairer comprehension of the 'ideology', 'discursive style', 'performative act', 'mentality' or 'political strategy' of the populist phenomenon. So far, a limited amount of literature has been produced to attempt to somewhat expand on Taggart's *heartland* conceptualisation; among those we find the scholars Duncan McDonnell (2006, 126-132) and Aristotle Kallis (2018, 285-302). Unfortunately, it seems that they have largely failed because they decided to work vaguely around the concept, treading far too lightly and with extreme care, perhaps because deep down they feared it would be intellectually impossible to discuss populist nature by relying on a populist trait that only Taggart acknowledges completely. Unsurprisingly, even Taggart himself – apart from briefly touching upon the examples of 'Middle America' and 'Middle England' – carefully avoids distinguishing between different American or European heartlands belonging on either side of the political spectrum (Taggart 2002, 97). Thus, it is time to take on the challenge, and shed some light on 'right-wing' and 'left-wing' populist heartlands in Italy. In any event, before this is properly done, I urge the reader to make the best out of the next few lines I provide on ideological populism which will set the basis for the body of this work and also hopefully motivate further investigation in the future.

Making Sense of Populism

In Taggart's own words, 'the concept of the heartland allows us to see the commonality across different manifestations of populism, while at the same time allowing each instance of populism to construct its own particular version of the heartland' (Taggart 2002, 98). Both the League and the Five Star Movement construct their own particularistic version of heartland, usually with monologic performances that derive from their leadership. In the former case, this constructivist task has been carried out by Matteo Salvini, while in the latter it has been done by Beppe Grillo, Luigi Di Maio, Alessandro Di Battista and other medium to high-ranking members of the party. Populist monologue is not just a means used to protect and promote a given worldview (one that reflects a populist *mentalité* defending the identity and sovereignty of 'the Italian people' with an emphasis on what Arnett correlates to an attachment to 'local soil' – especially in the League's case) but it is actually embedded in the personalist and paternalist-style performance of these communicative agents. Hereby, the existence of monologue in the discursive-performative acts of the Italian (neo)populists, their appeals and those of their vociferous supporters need to be heard and seized as they are an opportunity to open dialogue. They certainly unwittingly

create a dialogic possibility. If one dismisses once and for all the superficial notions that give a pejorative meaning to monologue – as Arnett (2012, 107) correctly advises – one can finally strive to treat monologue as the first step towards dialogue which brings revelatory content to the table by involving different persons with different worldviews and narratives (ibid., 106). The League and the Five Star Movement were chosen as a focal point of discussion and related to heartlands because they embody a visibly populist *weltanschauung*, and both appear to have as an objective the creation or re-creation of a place (e.g., for the League the heartland is a ‘place of the past’) without political conflict or great division. Other parties and movements in England, France, Spain, and elsewhere (some of which will be named in the coming paragraphs) have a strong populist political identity; however, their pursuit of Anaximander’s (610–546 BC) One, which Arnett reminds us is a ‘place of origin that we cannot see or touch’ (2012, 76) and somewhat descriptively relatable to the nostalgic idea of a monolithic territory of imagination, is much harder to identify in their discourse. The two Italian neo-populist parties instead have throughout the years coherently attempted to give their own meanings to their ideal society through attachment to certain rituals and myths elaborated throughout their discursive/monologic patterns. On the right, the annual ritual of the League’s Pontida ceremony is a way of concretely giving shape to the heartland in the collective imaginary of its adherents, where the myth of Alberto da Giussano – a twelfth-century local hero who defended Northern Italy from the imperialist Frederick I – is still very much indulged in (Lauria 2020). On the left, the ritual is instead the citizen participation on the web through Rousseau, which is a Five Star official website where important policy-decisions are made through the supposedly egalitarian practices of e-democracy (Urbinati 2018). The prevalent populist myth is that of what Urbinati calls the ‘myth of objectivity’ because Grillo’s monologues often centred on the prospect of overcoming ‘partiocracy’ to create a non-partisan democracy by relying on the expertise of citizens who will resemble a crypto-technocratic and non-political task force (ibid). Therefore, whether the heartland exists or not is of no importance, it serves the purpose of building a petite narrative which Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) deciphers as ‘fundamental to human identity’ (Arnett 2012, 116).

That being stated, we cannot develop a significant academic-level understanding of heartlands (and the populist monologic expression that comes with its conceptualisation) if we do not first understand populism, at least in its broader sense. The reason why populism is still a contested concept when looking at it from its ‘supply-side’ – rather than ‘demand-side’ where Roger Eatwell (2018) and Matthew Goodwin (2018) have enrichingly discussed all the causal and societal factors – is because scholars such as Mudde, Laclau (2005), Ostiguy (2017), Tarchi (2015) and Weyland (2017) disagree on whether it is a thin-centred ideology, performative act (or simply a ‘way of doing politics’), mentality, discursive style, or political strategy. I

myself now overlook these disagreements and prefer to treat it instead as an ideology that does not necessarily have to be separated from its fixed discursive and strategic elements.

For example, if one were to take an all-encompassing view on contemporary populism, it could possibly be defined as a polymorphous ideology with an anti-elitist ethos that heavily relies on antagonistic discourse and a set of particularistic strategies to get its message across to its potential supporters and perennial opponents. Whenever I must 'unpack' this definition I begin by stating that populism is truly of polymorphous (or 'chameleonic' as Taggart prefers) character. Its recurring ideological themes, which are generally anti-elitism, 'un-politics' (another term Taggart uses in 2018), sovereigntism, anti-globalism, producerism and reformism, and all those leitmotifs, can be sporadically adopted by both left-wing and right-wing formations. It must be recognised, however, that anti-elitism is its primary component, being central to its ethos. There can never be any successful populist message without the attack on a parasitic class of elites that does not belong to the heartland of 'the people' (Taggart 2012). Having said that, it must also be considered that it is widely accepted that there are very many different forms of populism (Gidron and Bonikowski 2013, 3–5). Political scientists originating from distinct schools of thought have treated populist phenomena as very disparate from one another, from Le Pen's Front National, through Grillo's Five Star Movement, all the way to Berlusconi's Forza Italia and Tsipras's SYRIZA (ibid.).

All populist leaders (regardless of whether they are right or left leaning) use colourful, direct, and unmediated language that is often more antagonistic than agonistic towards opponents (Engesser, Ernst, Esser and Büchel 2016). Additionally, they are also usually brought together and categorised as 'populist' because they are more consistent than mainstream actors in discursively appropriating the term 'the people' to reach out to their electorates (Council of Europe 2017). What renders populism polymorphous, though, is that it does not have a well-defined set of economic and social values (Taggart 2003, 13). Some populists can be more economically and socially liberal than others. Berlusconi in Italy and Borisov in Bulgaria are perhaps liberal-populists but perhaps more socially conservative than those populists found in the left-leaning Italian Five Star Movement, Greek SYRIZA and Spanish Podemos (Zankina 2016, 182–199). Alternatively, leaders like Le Pen, Farage and even Trump, have distinguished themselves for their even more staunchly anti-immigrationist and anti-globalist territorial sovereigntism and are economic reformists who wish to re-evaluate forms of protectionism (Fratzcher 2020, 1–2). Le Pen, Farage and Trump are not less populist than Berlusconi, Grillo and Tsipras but they perhaps better fit under the marker national-populists (Goodwin 2018). The former are different from the media-savvy techno-populists of the Five Star in Italy, or the environmentalist

and egalitarianist democratic-populists from Podemos and SYRIZA (Bickerton 2018). In truth, after the financial crisis of the last decade the free marketeer and classically liberal populist variation has declined into irrelevance. The new populist tag has been appropriated either voluntarily or involuntarily by anti-immigrationist and protectionist national sentimentalists in Europe (Hedetoft 2020, 1626).

In summary, populism is a truly polymorphous ideology, that in the last two centuries has been both right-wing and left-wing. According to Canovan (1982, 544–552), it has also been both agrarian and political. In the former case, it has presented itself in the shape of anti-political protest movements, some examples would be the Narodniki, Occupy Wall Street, and rural movements of peasants scattered across Eastern Europe (Taggart 2002, 47 and Mudde 2014, 600–629). In the latter case, it has been occasionally adopted by ‘insider-outsider politicians’ of the recent age, namely the Silvio Berlusconi’s, Pim Fortuyn’s, Ross Perot’s and Donald Trump’s. Almost all populist leaders have been criticised for using antagonistic discourse, being hostile to the press, hostile to the independent organs of representative democracy, demonising perennial opponents (especially transnational institutions) and scapegoating certain minorities. They have certainly used people-centric political strategies such as the call to mobilise against a self-serving elitist caste, victimisation, and personalisation through media to get their message across to their potential supporters in a time of crisis. What we learn from demand-side literature on populism, guided by Eatwell (2018) and Goodwin (2018) in their works, is that when distrust for professional politics and the establishment meets socio-economic and socio-cultural deprivation populist movements and parties become a viable option for the lower strands of society (2018, 20–25). Once again, this article does not wish to expand so much on textbook populism and its characteristics or how provocateurs and charismatic leaders have successfully launched their offensive against political and financial elites, but one of the objectives is rather to explain how they have managed to discursively construct the narrative of the heartland. Taggart’s heartland is important when studying populism because it is essentially a sub-theme of the already present and prevalent themes. The heartland is principally correlated to the populist attachment to the values of anti-elitism, ‘un-politics’ (not anti-politics but scepticism towards elitist political professionalism), sovereignism, anti-globalism and producerism. In the next section, it will become clear why.

Making Sense of Heartlands

When Taggart (2012, 1) tells us that the heartland is ‘a version of the past that celebrates a hypothetical, uncomplicated and non-political territory of imagination’, he is essentially telling us that this is both a pre-ideological and post-ideological component of populism. In most of his work, and certainly in his milestone text from 2002 which he simply named ‘Populism’, he pushes forward the idea that populist

themes can vary (Taggart 2002, 10–22). Either way, while Taggart (2003, 7,13) is certain that these themes include elements of quasi-religious leaderism, a lack of core values or 'empty heart' (the only element in the author's framework that we do not fully recognise as we acknowledge that heartlands manifest a set of general populist values) and a predisposition for conspiracy, at the same time he really emphasises that the populist rhetoric of 'the people' does not derive from a deep-rooted loyalty to the republican principle of democracy but rather from their attachment to the heartland (Taggart 2002, 95). Populists really do believe that the heartland is the territory that the 'pure' or 'virtuous' people inhabit (Marquand 2017). Nonetheless, this imaginary heartland needs to be constantly evoked for electoral reasons too because it allows populists to build what Kallis (2018, 296) calls the *panegyric redemption* narrative. Panegyric redemption is part of a political performative act (or *Bordieuan habitus* for the more classic scholars) that allows them to identify their friends and foes because, as already stated, populists have potential supporters and perennial opponents. When they come out openly on the political scene, in the most theatrical but also unmediated way possible, arguing in favour of border restrictions, economic protectionism, redistribution policies, and large-scale tax cuts, it becomes very clear who they are reaching out to and who will support them or not. Undoubtedly, just as the pioneer of the political-strategic approach Kurt Weyland (2017, 55) suggests, populism aims to become a mass political movement, somewhat of a 'catch-all party' which is ironically the definition that Robert O. Paxton (2004) gave to 1920s fascist organisations. This can sometime lead us into erroneous analogies. Significant differences between the fascist and mainly Hitlerian *heimat* ideal and the heartland (more common among non-fascist and sometimes anti-fascist populist organisations such as the League and Five Star Movement) will become evident in the next few paragraphs.

In the heartland there lives a hard-working producerist community of homogenous people who just want to 'get on with their lives,' a phrase that the English politician Jacob Rees-Mogg –who is sometimes accused by journalists of being a pin-striped populist – uses often (The Economist 2018). The archetypical populist expects to find himself in a peaceful and protected environment where they do not have to deal with displaced immigrants, the lazy unemployed that sponge off the welfare system, and other social groups that live alternative lifestyles (Taggart 2002, 94). Accordingly, these out-groups could be a threat to the homogeneity and safety-net of the heartland. Studies have shown that the 'silent majority' populist voter feels aversion towards those who he perceives to be different from him and beyond his comprehension, such as 'rowdy' feminists, dangerous beatniks or punks, 'bossy' intellectuals, overprivileged aristocrats, eccentric 'fat cats' and others who they find unpleasant or immoral (ibid). Taggart (2003, 9) explains that populists mobilise only when they feel their own heartland is under threat, usually in times of crisis. They are indeed likely to protest when their quiet and serene heartland – which he compares to the Hobbits' Shire

from J.R.R. Tolkien's literature – is put under threat by the out-groups I mentioned above (Taggart 2018). More importantly though, those who represent the real threat are the internationalist elitist cliques which operate in a shadowy manner and conspire against the heartland and its people behind closed doors (ibid). It is mainly for this reason that old-guard populists like Umberto Bossi from the old Northern League spoke against the politics carried out in the 'corridors of power' (Bossi and Vimercati 1992, 187).

Taggart is very clear when he delineates that populists are obsessed by the fact elites are constantly and consistently trying to intoxicate the heartland (Taggart 2003, 16). A heartland which seems to be predominantly composed of ordinary working men and women – artisans, craftsmen, fishermen, peasants, other *petit bourgeoisie* tradesmen, and so on. At the same time, it would not be too far-fetched to say that what makes the heartland different from a utopia is not so much that it draws inspiration from the past (rather than the future) but because it is perceived as something that has already existed and is according to its proponents both credible and desirable (Taggart 2006, 269–288). According to populists like Trump, the endgame is to 'Make America Great Again' meaning that America was once 'great' and can indeed return to being great once the elitist utopic vision involving cosmopolitan and progressive values is scrapped and replaced with a monolithic form of nation-statism (Taggart 2018). The populist heartland can never resemble what Kallis describes as a 'post-modern nation state' (Kallis 2018, 289). Forbye, there are invocations of heartlands on both left and right (Taggart 2018). An example on the right would be when the League's sustainers gather at the Northern Italian town of Pontida to celebrate local folklore, consume local products, and drink pints of beer while chanting against the detached politicians that rule from Roman institutions (Bagnoli and Cerantola 2019). The closest one can get to an example on the left is when the Five Star supporters (the *grillini*) mobilise at the annual *Italia a Cinque Stelle* event and call for an all-Italian egalitarian e-democracy, and political decisions are made in a simpler, quicker, and unmediated fashion (Natale and Ballatore 2014, 118–122). In a potentially left-wing heartland (just like in their rightist counterpart) there is individualism, privacy, liberty, worker flexibility, and above all else the homogeneity that comes with equality. In a truly egalitarian and anti-elitist society – promoted by the Five Star – '*uno vale uno*' as their guru Beppe Grillo claims, and everyone's opinion is worth the same (Movarelli 2016, 213–221).

It should be clear by now that heartlands are more prevalent amongst national-populists to the right of the spectrum. This is especially due to the fact that even though 'left populism is down but not out' – as the writers Giorgos Venizelos (2020) and Yannis Stavrakakis (2020) both point out – the recent rise of populism has actually been mainly a re-territorialisation of politics very popular on the right. This sovereignist

backlash is a direct reaction to cultural and economic globalisation which is seen by populists as a large-scale elite-driven project and therefore anathema to the heartland (Kallis 2018, 287–289). The opposition to the European Union's integration project is a perfect illustration of this attitude (Taggart 2003, 11–12). However, one must consider that the key to understanding heartlands is also in their lack of strict racial boundaries and in their tribal crypto-libertarianism. For evident reasons, inhabitants of this heartland will always be sceptical about politics as a legitimate way of solving internal conflict. For the most utopic populists, of course, there can be no conflict in the heartland, as it is so homogenous, stable, and virtuous that 'common sense' (Rosenfeld 2011) is enough to resolve small quarrels among the people.

Taggart might or might not agree with the following point I shall make – but after extensive reading on the subject – there is still unfortunately too much room for confusion between populist heartlands and fascist *natural homelands*. The Hitlerian concept of *heimat* (homeland) of the *blut und boden* (blood and soil) obviously draws inspiration from the nineteenth-century German *volkish* romanticist movement (Kaes 1992). While agrarian populism also borrows part of its character from the *volkish*, given many of them idolise the bucolic nation as much as fascists and diverse pan-Germanic nationalists, we cannot ignore the fact that the *heimat* is actually a forcefully racially purified and homogenous state (rather than land) but also a far too politicised idea to be a populist heartland. After all, the idea of the '3000-year Reich' that developed directly from the Fuhrer's oppressive psychology was meant to link Germans with glorified historical European figures like Charlemagne, the Holy Roman Empire, and Bismarck (Paulus 2017, 2–3). Fascists are elitist and expansionist, while populists are anti-elitist and isolationist (Eatwell 2017, 365–380). Apparently, the populist ethical nationalist slogan is 'taking back control' but not 'let's take control and rule over others'. Hitler's *heimat* and Mussolini's *patria* were ardently and purposely political visions. The occupation of the state carried out by fascist parties and their encroachment on individual freedoms does not fit well with what the generally anti-statist, libertarian, and reformist populists want (Tarchi 2015, Table 2.2). Populists only reinstate hard borders, perform deportations, put up walls, push for militarisation policies, or mobilise in protest, when they feel under threat. This usually occurs in times of crisis such as when external powers have infiltrated the heartland (e.g., EU or World Health Organisation elites), when they perceive immigrants are coming their way, or when they believe that a significant change that does not have popular consensus will negatively affect the heartland (Taggart 2003).

The reactions of Five Star and League leaders Beppe Grillo and Matteo Salvini who gathered crowds to oppose immigration during the refugee crisis are demonstrations of these populist attitudes. However, they only react when their own heartland is under threat and unlike a lot of totalitarians do not try to sympathise with the causes

and fights of others. Neo-fascists want to internationalise racial politics; militias of far-right men from all over the world have not only intellectually but militarily involved themselves with the projects of Milosevic and the Kosovo war, not to mention their operations to support communities like those of the white Boers in South Africa and the Karen people in south-east Asia (Sempione 2018). Neo-communists have instead zealously backed Palestine, Venezuela, and Cuba and are obviously ideologically predisposed towards internationalism given their main aim involves uniting workers worldwide and solidarising with those whom they consider to be oppressed (Hetland 2019). Those behavioural patterns are inconceivable to populists: the heartland cannot exist within a totalitarian nanny-state, and their political causes are temporary at most. A fascist state aims to forge new men and new elites that will find a common destiny for a new nation (Eatwell 2017, 365–380). Populists instead ideally think there is no real necessity for elites in the heartland and commoners know best to apply their *common sense* during times of important decision-making (Tarchi 2015, 76–77). Once the immigration problematics are solved, taxes or welfare are dealt with properly, and the heartland returns to being prosperous and free from corrupters, the leader can retrieve himself (Tarchi 2015). In the next section, we briefly discuss the methodological approach used so far and throughout the entirety of the paper, which will then allow us to look at specific and differing versions of heartland in detail.

Research Design and Methodology

Layna Mosley (2013) confidently exposes the idea that the political world is a reality. In fact, it is a reality that is ‘socially made’ (ibid.) by several communicate agents with varied political identities. In our case, we know that the League and the Five Star Movement promote their *weltanschauung* through a monologic expression in which the return or an arrival at a *crypto-utopic* (but not entirely utopic) heartland is central. As we have seen, their petite narrative is generally inspired by a mixture of anti-immigrationism, anti-partyism, productivism, justicialist reformism, sovereignism and a version of post-modern personalised popularism (i.e., Five Star direct democracy through ‘horizontal’ web practices). This populist narrative is in a way a dwelling from which they welcome other (political) guests into the possibility of future dialogue (Arnett 2012, 114). Dialogue can only occur, though, if one is willing to acknowledge their monologic confession by keeping in mind a series of non-negotiable terms that should have become evident from the theoretical exploration in earlier paragraphs:

1. Even if the heartland is a territory of imagination, it is fundamental because it is constructed through the collective consciousness of ‘the people’.
2. The heartland is an un-politicised space where a community functions due to its inhabitants’ successful use of common sense, which is sufficient to resolve day-to-day problems given it is a place of great homogeneity

- (civic, cultural, or ethnic bond).
3. In a heartland 'the people' have a right to their individuality and have the right to be free from the corrupting nature of the political sphere.
 4. A heartland is a producerist community of hard-working persons defined by labour and shared sacrifice.
 5. The heartland should and will be defended by intruders and outsiders who interfere with its economic, popular, and territorial sovereignty as well as its general well-being.

For a theoretical exploration or framework to be solidly finalised it is essential to tie it to further investigative methods that serve the purpose of moving away from theoretical abstraction and generalisation. An efficient way of doing so, would be to construct a methodology which relies on synthesis between background theory and discursive analysis. The advantage of this or any *qualitative* multi-method process resides in the fact that any classification related to populism or to the distinctive traits of the heartland can further prove its great ability by moving away from its purely theoretical and taxonomic quality. What is needed is a better application that involves the identification of recurring monologue directly relatable to Taggart's conceptualisation within discourse. It is precisely for this reason that discourse analysis provides a greater heuristic qualitative potential and stands out as part of our methodology.

Structurally, the *first* step undertaken in this piece has been treating populism as a kind of ideology and evaluating its narrative ground (heartlands being an important factor if not central component of this narrative ground) through theoretical exploration. The *second* step is using discourse analysis to identify and interpret the 'heartland ideal' within samples of politician conversations, speeches, media, and published party literature (Hodges, Kuper and Reeves 2008, 571–572). Eternally inspiring subjects like Michel Foucault (1926–1984) have used discourse analysis in the past to study madness, keeping in mind that the word 'discourse' goes back to the fourteenth century and derives from the Latin root of *discursus* meaning 'conversation' (ibid., 570 and Drid 2020, 21). Furthermore, in the contemporary era Hormuth (2009, 147–165) insists that discourse analysis enables researchers to reconstruct and describe the actual communicative processes and this is essential if we want to comprehend and acknowledge new social realities that make authentic use of monologue that will be needed to create dialogue which builds much needed bridges amongst communities.

From Hodges, Kuper, and Reeves we learn that 'discourse analysis is about studying and analysing the use of language' (2008, 570). This means that this form of analytical method is not desirable but actually almost compulsory within a wider research design

or intellectual framework that aims to untangle the hidden (or less hidden) meaning of common populist wording such as ‘the people’, ‘the silent majority’, ‘national sovereignty’, ‘detached elite’, ‘homeland’, ‘territory’, ‘true democracy’, ‘community’ and others that exist within populist speeches. Regardless of whether they come in the form of monologue or dialogue, it is beneficial for us to investigate what interaction they have among themselves and also their relevance given they hold the important role of keeping vivid the imagery of the heartland which upon psychological construction requires a political, stylistic and monological performance of its own.

In short, the next section will employ *critical discourse analysis*, also known as Foucauldian analysis (ibid., 571) by using samples of written or oral language/texts and dates pertaining to the League and the Five Star Movement as sources of data to identify the ‘uses’ of those texts in particular social settings where institutions (the two parties) or individuals (parliamentary representatives from the parties) have produced this language or texts (Ibid). It will allow a macroanalysis of how discourses (in all their forms) construct what is possible for individuals and institutions to think and then say as confirmed by Hodges and colleagues (ibid.).

League and Five Star: A Heartland of the Past and a Utopia for the Future?

The League and the Five Star Movement at first sight give the impression of being very different to each other. However, they share more than meets the eye (Panebianco 2020, 1). Their scepticism towards independent bodies and transnational institutions led by techno-managerial elites is mostly what brings them together and has allowed them to form for a brief period a very flexible and very populist coalition that oscillated between national conservatism and welfare chauvinism (ibid). Their anti-systemic origins have, of course, been lost through processes of institutionalisation that have taken many years, especially in the former case, but still moderately influenced their behaviour during their governmental phase and ultimately resulted in a generalised form of anti-elitism. On occasion this has led them to re-politicise systems that have been previously de-politicised by neoliberal elite-actors while at the same time paradoxically calling for more individual freedoms and economic liberties through flat taxation (Galbo 2020, 51–63). What has been consistent throughout their legislative era together, however, has been their absolute dedication to the re-territorialisation of politics (Agnew 2019, 1). On many occasions, Salvini (30 July, 2020 and *la Repubblica*, 24 February, 2018) has told his multitude of admirers that ‘the defence of the homeland is a duty’ and that he will be ‘loyal to his people’. Similarly, back in 2007, Grillo wrote in his blog that ‘once borders were sacred, but recently politicians have desecrated them’ (www.beppegrillo.it, 7 October, 2007). Both are examples of this new form of re-territorialisation. While the League’s heartland was epitomised by a British documentary (Channel 4, ‘Face to face with Matteo Salvini, Italy’s far-right

Deputy PM, 2018), in which the interviewer spoke to medium ranking members of the party (and Salvini himself) during the Pontida celebrations, that showed how many Italians are still keen to protect their local towns from immigrants, the EU and central government encroachments – applying the heartland concept to a bubbly movement like the Five Star one – are definitely more complicated.

Starting from the League, one must note that the old charismatic strongman Umberto Bossi, whom Salvini later replaced, made a very provocative statement and theatrical manoeuvre in 1996, when during a Pontida rally he called for the secession of the northern Padania region from the rest of Italy. At the time of that infamous speech the theme of the heartland was already noticeable in the discursive patterns of high-ranking members of the party. Bossi's televised secessionist statement in the late 90s cannot but be understood as a form of monologue because it rallied a minoritarian segment of highly perceptive *northerners* behind an exclusivist sentiment. While Adam Ferguson in his old essays spoke of 'rude clans' and 'rude nations' as territorially isolationist peoples with an attachment to their local soil juxtaposing them to the supposedly more civilised, commercialist, and cosmopolitan world order, he thought of the division that existed within Scottish highlanders and the rest. This idea of his is, after all, not so distant from the militant wing of Bossi's early Northern League. With anti-southern, anti-immigrant, anti-establishment, anti-statist monologic exchanges, they managed to first construct and then reflect a narrative that at least to them represented a political reality. They were defending their own localist way of life and their community in what they saw as a heartland under threat of foreign influence. At Pontida, in front of his crowd of supporters, Bossi clearly stated a centralised and bureaucratic colonial regime in Italy was *oppressing* Northern Italian locals with its economic and political authoritarianism (Bossi 1996). Once again, Taggart's idea that the people of the heartland are being *infiltrated*, *oppressed* or *threatened* by an outsider or even 'alien' force recurs (Taggart 2002, 73–98). In more recent times, the monologic discourse of League politicians is filled with explicit or implicit references to heartlands. One illustration would be Salvini's constant reflection that immigrants are 'bringing war to our homes' (*'la Guerra ce la portano a casa'*) (Stefano Venturi on Facebook Watch 2020). Another would be Maroni's speeches such as, 'Rome is the home of politics conducted in corridors, in the drawing rooms of the elite: it is the hushed politics of hidden plots. Pontida is the exact opposite: it is the revenge of ordinary people' (McDonnell 2006, 128).

The League's main priority as a territorially localist, regionalist, federalist, and sovereignist party has been protecting the groups of petit bourgeois and entrepreneurs that make up the base of its electorate. These groups, supposedly unlike immigrants and fat cats, are very much part of the heartland according to League politicians like Matteo Salvini, Roberto Maroni, Daniele Belotti, and Maurizio Borghezio. The

message is clear: evil nests in the corridors of power, not in the heartland. In such uses of ‘monologic confession’ (rather than ‘dialogic confession’) communicative engagement is situated within an environmental, historical and social narrative (Arnett 2014, 75). This allows us to see things for what they are; when dealing with monologue originating from the League or Five Star Movement, scholars have to keep in mind that those two political formations have been shaped by the environment and time they have experienced: post-crisis Italy. Italian politics has been extremely volatile for the last twenty to thirty years, as low growth, high unemployment, and general economic stagnation sparked by the last recession of 2008 and consistent corruption scandals from the 1992 ‘Bribesville’ (*Tangentopoli*) have directly played in favour of anti-system and anti-establishment forces coming forward and they understandably call for change through monologic demands (Verbeek, Zaslove and Rooduijn, 197–222). Urbinati, unlike the author of this piece, is cautious in labelling the Five Star Movement as ‘populist’ (for a number of reasons we shall not delve into here) and prefers to associate Casaleggio’s and Grillo’s strange political creature to ‘*gentismo*’ – a word that translated to Italian comes closer to ‘popularism’ than to populism. He also reminds us about the need to understand the monological anti-establishment argumentation of these phenomena by considering the centrality of their environmental, historical, and social narratives (2015, 1 and 2018, 1–3). Urbinati postulates that Italy is ‘an interesting crucible of an epochal change in representative democracy, a party system that has reached the line separating it from factional politics and populism’ (2018, 2). One cannot but agree with Urbinati once recognising that post-Crisis Italy is the only context in which the Five Star Movement or Salvini’s *new* nationalist League can be situated.

With the League’s rise right after the Bribesville scandal and the Five Star grandiose electoral showing during the recession in post-Berlusconi Italy, monologue has not yet ‘clenched truth in its fist’, as Arnett notices (2014, 88), but instead housed the sentiment of many people and forged a new political identity that demands attention from others. The civil, and civic, positive form of dialogue that not just Arnett but many others have called for cannot occur without ‘a respectful honouring of what matters to another’ (ibid.). For instance, protesting political professionalism matters because through the lens of their ideology, the mainstream political establishment is always seen as corrupt. Anti-establishment ideology is really the backbone of populism (Urbinati 2018). In the heartland, values such as those of being virtuous and honest are understood as values that only exist among ordinary people (Tarchi 2015, 76–77). Salvini often makes claims that *honesty* is a value which has been long forgotten, and only a party with an army of ordinary working men and women can bring back honest politics to the Italian sphere. This is done especially by getting rid of the *corruptori*, the corrupt self-serving elites that have infiltrated and intoxicated Italian politics and subsequently the heartland itself (Palermo Today, 14 July 2020).

Those allegations can be very vague, however, and it is not always evident who the corrupters specifically are. After all, Salvini did refer to a restoration of what he likes to call the 'politics of the heart', which sounds like a quasi-religious purification and moralisation of politics which perhaps finds its roots in a distant Germanic ideal of a producerist work ethic. His peculiar politics are manifested as he shouts to a Milanese crowd after winning elections:

From today onwards there will begin a process of ten years of construction, of beauty, of labour and honesty that I will bring from my *heart*, in the name of autonomy, of federalism, of the scents of the beauties reflected by the 8.000 towns that compose this country. Before doing so at an institutional level I shall do it here with you, I will do so pouring my *heart* out in front of you. (Salvini, 24 February 2018)

In a few phrases, Salvini has essentially exalted what a typical populist considers to be all the moral values of *the virtuous people* belonging to the heartland. Perhaps, what he was trying to do overall was to give a whole new aesthetic meaning to the ideology of populism which, unlike fascism, has so far never been looked at as an 'aesthetic experience' (Robert O. Paxton 2005).

In similar fashion to the League, the Five Star Movement envisions a fairer and more honest and labour-driven Italian society composed of civically engaged and duty-bound ordinary citizens (Tintori 2018, 552–554). Hence, they share many political opponents (or *perennial opponents*) with their former coalition partners. Deceitful bankers, arrogant academics, and badly behaved immigrants are not welcome in the heartland of the Italian neo-populists, regardless of whether their host ideology belongs to the left or right of the spectrum. Although in a recent piece on populist foreign policy the Italian academics Fabrizio Coticchia (2020) and Valerio Vignoli (2020) describe the Five Star Movement as being inherently pacifist (possibly given their reluctance towards cooperating with NATO, their criticism of the arms industry and overall American interventionism in the Middle East), this is only partially true. The *grillinis* (a nickname for Five Star members) hold a very Manichean outlook on the world, which is typically populist not only because Cas Mudde (2004, 541–563) suggests so but clearly because of their discursive antagonism towards mainstream politics and their policymaking between 2013–2018. In fact, much of their state-level dialogue with the League was made possible by their agreements over tough immigration measures and staunch defence of the *Ius Sanguinis* (Italian citizenship by blood). When in power, the Five Star Movement has also demonstrated that they can be a ruthless force determined to push an at least partially nationalist/sovereignist agenda (Tarchi 2014, 31–49). This does not mean that the Five Star Movement (or even the League) is a radical anti-systemic force that promotes aggressive nationalist expansionism or anything like that but defining the party as pacifist makes it appear as

a feeble and moderate centrist party, which it probably is not now and most certainly has not been in the past.

The main difference between the discursive and monologic conceptualisation of the League's and Five Star Movement's heartland is that the latter welcomes the coming of a future digitalised society and this appears to be far more utopic than Taggart's heartland allows (Taggart 2018). The Five Star Movement's vision – inspired by the what is known in academic circles as the mid-90s *Californian ideology* of Silicon Valley's Andy Cameron and Richard Barbrook – appears closer to a 'utopia of the future' rather than a 'heartland of the past' (Tintori 2018, 559). It is a given that heartlands are considered accessible and desirable by populists because they represent a society which has already existed. The heartland is perhaps now only a territory of imagination because nation-statism has been defeated by globalisation, but this is not good reason to give up re-constructing the heartland, starting with discourse and performative acts as we have seen with Bossi's declaration of independence in 1996 and Salvini's ode to the beauty of Italian towns in 2018.

As utopic as the Five Star Movement's ideal sounds, it is not so distant from an actual heartland. If we consider that in a heartland ordinary people are naturally inclined to get on with their lives and to work in peace without being bothered by an overly bureaucratic nanny-state and by 'those who do not belong' – who accordingly engage in anti-social behaviour – we can easily relate this to the digital utopia which originated from the Five Star's founders and funders Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio (Musso and Maccaferri 2018, 98–120). The Five Star Movement's request for referendums and elections to be carried out online (also known as *direct e-democracy*), and promotion of *smartworking* is representative of the techno-populist model outlined before by Chris Bickerton (2018). It shares the traits of libertarianism, anti-conformism, and some free-market values that can also sometimes be found on the populist right. Not coincidentally, the League supports direct democracy, relatively free markets (with the occasional protectionist policy that might limit free trade from competitive Asian markets), free speech and generalised ideas of individual liberty as much as the Five Star Movement, with the only distinction that the latter believes this should all be happening online in the near future (Moschella and Rhodes 2020, 1–14). For left-wing populists in Italy, and even in Spain perhaps (e.g., Podemos), the internet might be more of a positive than negative tool in tackling authoritarian state bureaucracy, xenophobia, and capitalist monopolies given 'the people' will be finally able to choose for themselves what to buy and not to buy and whose ideas to follow and not to follow as online everyone's opinion is worth the same (Musso and Maccaferri 2019, 98–120). While pragmatically it is likely that the negative aspects of web democracy trump the positive ones, mainly for transparency reasons, it makes perfect sense for a strange creature like the Five Star Movement, which mixes so

many ideologies together (e.g., libertarianism, environmentalism, sovereignty and socialism), to envision its own peculiar heartland. Its own heartland is therefore a place of the future, a territory of imagination that is at the same time non-territorial because it ideally all takes place online. Nonetheless, Five Star voting patterns in parliament have somewhat conflicted with the key tenets of leftist emancipatory ideologies. Grillo's group has often voted in favour of limiting immigration and defending Salvini's security decrees that involved strict border control, and all those actions are certainly not in line with the politics of the progressive left that many of their supporters online claim to support.

At least in theory, egalitarianism and anti-globalised capitalism are central to the Five Star Movement's heartland or utopia, however one prefers to view it (Tintori 2018, 152–159). Also, with Roberto Biorcio or Nadia Urbinati, one could say that 'anti-partyism', also plays an important part in giving the movement its identity, and for years the Five Star managed to bring ordinary people that did not previously have party affiliations into the Italian parliament (Biorcio 2014, 37–53 and Urbinati 2015). The overwhelming majority of them have never been career politicians; they had ordinary jobs (like the ones found in the heartland) before joining the movement and winning their mandate in 2013 for the first time (ibid). The grillinis have brought to their movement people as different to each other as construction workers, teachers, musicians, fishermen, accountants, and the unemployed. This is typical of a protest, anti-systemic and anti-partyist organisation. This all leads us back to the digital web: it was thanks to these new forms of social media, their blog, and their online party operator *Rousseau* that Grillo's invention took off, bringing together people from very different backgrounds and giving the opportunity to women and ethnic minorities to be more represented (Deseriis 2017, 47–67). As Marta Musso and Marzia Maccaferri (2018, 99) point out, 'the M5S (Five Star Movement) built its image of not being a party precisely *because* it operates on the web rather than through offices, congresses, and the other standard tools of Italian parties.' Still, it would be daring and far-fetched to assume that the Five Star Movement's own heartland is only online. Nonetheless, it would be hard to completely cast aside this possibility.

In kindred fashion to the League's, the Five Star Movement's more utopic heartland is clearly constructed through discourse. Grillo's fondness of equality and appeals to the 'virtuous people' are evident when he suggested that he wants a mother with one salary and four children to be mayor of a city (Tarchi 2014, 41). The former comedian maintains that ordinary men and women from the heartland would be able to administer a city and that it would be desirable to have a president who was once a manual labourer, or possibly a teacher, or even an electrician (ibid). In addition, he has said that he is guarantor of the Movement and he will always be in charge of 'checking who comes in' (and perhaps who goes out too given he has suspended several of his

own) and this can be interpreted as the populist wanting to avoid having those alien to the movement and to the heartland *infiltrate* and corrupt this safe, virtuous and pure space (Italian Chamber of Deputies Channel on YouTube, 2014). What Grillo's movement truly wants is to differentiate themselves from the other Italian mass parties and to distance themselves from the external pressures of the European Union, which their MP Daniele Pesco (June 2015) identifies as a great threat to the heartland because it is 'strictly tied to finance, banks, big powers, to this absolute technocracy' (Gianfreda and Carlotti 2018).

The obsession with maintaining their movements and parties clean from corruption is another recurring theme for populists. This is probably because by their own standards populists view themselves as a moral force for good in the world. They are convinced that they are the 'real democrats', not their opponents (Jan-Werner Müller 2017). This is an example of the Manicheanism intertwined with a quasi-religious self-defining feature of which Taggart (2018) has spoken. Akin to Ferguson's (1767) 'rude clans' (but in a different century and hence a completely different historical context), the Italian populists will go to war to protect their pure heartland against foreign powers that pressure them with occult private interests if they must. Taggart was also not wrong when he identified the fact that a lot of populists see politics as an ultimate necessary *war* to be fought before returning to the peace (Taggart 2018).

The statements from Grillo and Gianluigi Paragone MP below serve as my final examples of the points I have made above:

The challenge of the future is between sovereignty and negative internationalism, which is eroding most of the social rights and social achievements obtained at the national level during the past years...In this great battle between sovereignty and negative internationalism, the traditional 'left' has betrayed its own historical electoral basis and thus it is necessary that other actors, post-ideological, put on the helmet and step down into the trench (Grillo, 14 June 2014).¹

...And therefore, from warlike rhetoric we have turned to mild language, that warlike rhetoric we used against the financial establishment, the fiscal compact, the great international deals decided upon by lobbyists, and against that European Stability Mechanism which now with your mild language (of acceptance) you will allow Italy to be captive of, given Europe has already intellectually corrupted all of you with its deceptions (Paragone, 10 September 2019).

1 The statement made by Beppe Grillo (2014) was also reported in a piece by Arthur Borriello and Nathalie Brack. (See 2019, 842 for further reference.) The full source is also readily available in the Works Cited section of this paper.

On Populism as Monologue: To Engage or not in Dialogue?

A monologue is usually defined as a speech given by a single entity in a narrative (www.literaryterms.net). As a rhetorical device traditionally used in theatre it is commonly used to speak *at* people rather than *with* people (ibid.). Contemporary populists embody this monologic tendency. However, this top-down leadership style is often combined with petite narratives (and other themes which we have briefly touched upon earlier) such as a possible return to a homogenous community of origin, a heartland. This call for a return to a closed community and secure territory appears as a reasonable offer and it is especially successful with disenchanted voters in times of economic hardship and widespread social and cultural malaise. However, experts like Cas Mudde (2019) have for a long time tried to argue that populist success is not only determined by financial crisis but also by the fact that parties with such anti-establishment ideological proclivities are perceived as the only ones still speaking up for certain sectors of the population (Mudde, YouTube, 2019). Populist electorates, like far-right ones, are mainly *male* and *white* and European communities that are still politically motivated by an attachment to small government, local roots, nationhood, ethnic and cultural identity, some of which still have a bucolic and paleo-conservative understanding of the cycle of life (ibid.). In one way or the other, as we have seen in the paragraphs above, the heartland reflects most, if not all, these traditional values. Potentially, even if some populists speak *at* 'the people' rather than *with* them (especially characters like Beppe Grillo, who still determines most of the agenda-setting for his sustainers on Rousseau) and frame their political agenda monologically, recent global events clearly have shown that there *is* a demand for populist politics (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). Populism is a reality, a reality that is first national then local. Undoubtedly, one must learn to acknowledge the local (that local that carries the meaning of a nostalgic imaginary of a heartland through the self-perception of a compact rural community) even if such acknowledgement, as Arnett states (2014, 73), does not necessarily mean approval.

Therefore, before concluding, I think it is useful to share with the reader a few thoughts on how not only scholars but also politicians, public intellectuals, pundits, and policymakers in general could deal with confrontational populism and use what R.C. Arnett (2009), J.C. Fritz (2009) and L.M. Bell (2009) define as 'dialogic theory' (Holba 2009, 546) or even *communication ethics literacy* to start to engage only with mature forms of populism that are more likely to be democratic rather than

competitively authoritarian.² Arnett and colleagues suggest that in an ‘era of difference’ monologue needs to start to be viewed as something that can potentially be positive because when there is an invitation to communication or a *dialogic starting place* (which there can certainly be in monologue) this opens up the possibility for dialogic exchange (ibid.). Still, as populism is most certainly not a passing phase in the Western (and not only Western) political sphere, it is important that anyone civically oriented and with a keen interest in improving cultural and social relations understands that one must have a ‘thick skin’ and remain somewhat stoic and pragmatic when debating populists. One way to do so is to consider Martin Buber’s (1878–1965) advice and to reconcile monologue with dialogue, insisting that it is *more* ethical to recognise difference through ‘communication ethics praxis’ and invite someone with a different view to communicate openly (ibid., 546). This helps to create an environment of openness, understanding, and change rather than a hegemonic power structure that does not benefit anyone in the long term (ibid.).

One can perhaps reconsider some of the classic literature on dialogue by Arnett and colleagues (2009) in order to relate to their theory of a ‘pragmatic lens’. Since the authors acknowledge that there is ‘no *one* way to the ethnical engagement of the other’, being pragmatic is key, and this also comes with recognising that populist politics might have some valid arguments (ibid.). Strictly pragmatically speaking, those who identify as ‘populist’ and say they speak in the name of ‘the people’ are not merely alluring to citizens tormented by irrational fears but are often also addressing relevant issues that have been shown to be relevant to the majority of voters belonging the proletariat and middle classes scattered across the globe (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018, 25). One must keep in mind that in an era where economic and cultural globalisation has shown its weaker sides, and where nation-statism, re-territorialisation politics, and the overall re-articulation of heartlands appears to be a future possibility, we absolutely cannot afford to ignore or censor populism (Kallis 2018, 286). It would be deeply damaging to the social fabric of democracy to delegitimise opinions that are becoming more and more popular by the day. Giving a fair hearing to populists and attempting to build bridges of dialogue is a necessity if we want to strengthen Western, secular, liberal democracies.

Other commentators, such as the expert Jan Werner Müller (2017) have already hinted that there are ways in which moderates from all over the spectrum (irrespective of whether they reside on the conservative right or liberal left) can engage in constructive dialogue with populists. This is obviously nothing but healthy for democracy. While

2 ‘Competitive Authoritarianism’ is a concept enabled by Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser in their recent work *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* published by Oxford University Press in 2017, where they discuss populism’s relationship with democratisation processes.

I certainly agree with Müller that deliberately choosing to ignore and not debate with populists is almost as bad as censoring their rights of speech, I would also add that challenging them when they claim that they and only they represent 'the will of the people' (or *volonte general*) is a good step forward but is not enough (ibid.). Of course, populists are not the only 'real democrats' (as they often claim) and they do not hold a monopoly in popular representation given there is hardly even a suitable and homogenous idea of 'the people' as analysts like Robert A. Dahl (1982) and others have countlessly demonstrated. It is important to let populists know that if they want to participate in the game of democracy they need to play by the rules and their political message needs to prove to be 'mature'. We can only debate, negotiate and recognise as part of the political game those mature populist forces that do not hold that they are the only ones that represent 'the people'. Unfortunately, as Arnett again asserts, 'dialogue is not possible with everyone' (2012, 118). In politics, actors which claim that after winning a referendum or an election they are entitled to 'full powers' (without checks and balances), those that hold a monopoly on violence, and those who use their media popularity to claim that democratic systems are rigged (without presenting obvious proof) cannot be included in any state-building or community-building activity and dialogue.

Making sure that while invoking majoritarianism, populists also abide by constitutionalism and do not ignore the rights of the individual that have been won over decades of liberalism is essential (Galston 2018, 5–19). Evidently, while electoral decisions shaped by popular majorities – such as referendums that take place to leave trading blocs like the EU – should be respected and not demonised, populists should be reminded regularly that it is irresponsible to argue that when they come to power democratically, they should rule without intermediate institutions. Superficial anti-elitist and anti-systemic outcries are unrealistic and can be unnerving to the seriously politically engaged person. A society without elites has never existed and populist parties themselves are often a demonstration of this because charismatic populists of the past like Umberto Bossi have been elected by their own party members as Federal Presidents 'for life' (Saita 2019). Correspondingly, the many Beppe Grillos, Jean Marie Le Pens, and Salvini out there have been unquestionably elitist protagonists within their own circles and parties, with major decisions regarding the direction of the organisations not being able to be enacted without their approval. We should also explain to populists that the real issue is not so much the fact that elitism is widespread within political professionalism but more the fact that elites will every now and again attempt to rule without checks themselves. Throughout history, elites have been known to be loyal to private interests and have a proclivity to push forward sectarian agendas in the most non-transparent way. That is not acceptable, and for this reason a lot of what populists say resonates with the lower strands of society.

In defence of some of the more reasonable populist demands, I should stress that it is actually legitimate to complain that in the last twenty to thirty years decisions concerning security, immigration, welfare, and economic reform have been introduced with limited popular involvement or consensus (Spannaus 2019, 7). National parliaments have devolved a significant amount of their power to transnational institutions and this has frustrated the many not the few (*ibid.*). Institutions like the European Union are often overly hierarchical, opaque, and slow due to their own bureaucracy. A democratic deficit that involves a Council and a Commission which is largely unelected needs to be discussed with seriousness before adopting drastic measures. A sensible thing to do, perhaps, would be to consider the possibility of reforming those structures from within, rather than leaving the bloc entirely without a thorough investigation into the matter. However, most populists seem to prefer the second option. I would go so far as to say that the detached elitism we are witnessing globally should be something that not only populists should be worried about but should concern anyone from a liberal background and with a democratic mindset. Once you have unelected bodies which make important decisions at a supra-national level and have overrepresentation from characters like Guntus Oertinger, who openly stated that ‘markets should teach Italians to vote the right way’, it really becomes a problem (Anderson 2018). These sorts of statements made by individuals who are not politicians but technical administrators are not healthy for democracy and actually play into the hands of actual authoritarians who are averse to any cultural and economic vision of Europe, like Putin, Xi Jinping and others who lurk outside the Union.

Populism and people-centric politics need to mature rather than disappear. Being worried about mass immigration, and about the fact that in times of crisis member states act independently without respecting treaties and failing to communicate over redistribution policies and failing to use authoritative action to deal with human trafficking on the coasts of Africa is a legitimate concern. Believing that a population shares a cultural identity in a given territory (a homeland or a heartland) and being proud of one’s history can be positive if the state in question does not pursue a domestic policy that is ardently exclusionary and a foreign one that is aggressive and expansionist. Unfortunately, because of the discursive style populists use and how they phrase their concerns, they often come across as aggressive, simplistic, and antagonistic (rather than agonistic). Their language can be disappointing for centrists and moderates who also want to find a solution to the many problems without having to engage with the theatrical pressures of post-modern democracy.

Moreover, the populist obsession with anti-globalism sometimes results in them advocating for full-blown isolationism, random closures, and unnecessary militarism, and those are all ideas with which one must be very cautious in embarking upon in

a modern and dynamic society. Thankfully, most do not want illiberal tendencies to pave the path for xenophobia and the return of one-man dictatorships in the Western hemisphere. Populists also should be more precise in their speech, be more confident in outlining the differences between illegal mass migration, which does not benefit anyone, and controlled legal immigration which benefits essentially everyone. Dialogue can begin between liberal democrats and populists by placing emphasis on the things that they have in common. For instance, a good place to start with a dialogic possibility would be by encouraging participation and by giving each other communicative ground on the fact that, in a democracy, sovereign popular majorities elect their representatives (something almost everyone agrees on), who in turn have the responsibility of representing their electors by carrying out politics in the most transparent way possible.

A sign of political maturity usually occurs when populist forces stop demonising their opponents and calling them out as illegitimate *a priori*. Furthermore, when populists consider coalitions with mainstream formations in order to put their nation's interest first and work with their rivals to pass bills in parliaments on a case by case (or 'policy by policy') basis this is undoubtedly positive. This has occurred on several occasions in countries like Austria, Britain, and Italy where populists have shown that they are able to use their heads and not only their hearts. After all, the heartland is likely to remain a territory of imagination. I have pointed all of this out not with the intention of arrogantly finding a solution to the complicated problems we face as a society but as a starting point for *dialogue*. As historical events have shown in the past – such as when Obama's tenacity allowed the USA to strike a nuclear deal with Iran to delay military confrontation or Trump's hazardous but surprisingly helpful decision to meet with Kim Jung Un for peace talks – dialogue is almost always possible and is almost always a force for good. Thus, even if in populist monologue, we might find an element of 'provincial primitivism', that does not mean we have to demonise it. Moreover, *civic dialogue* (a concept Arnett utilises with great care) exists with the purpose of comprehending the fundamentality of monologic conviction. Without bringing each other's monologic conviction into the picture it becomes virtually impossible to seek to learn from one another and when this occurs, we can ultimately forget about dialogue all together.

Conclusion

Throughout this article I have shown through both theoretical exploration and discourse analysis that one of Paul Taggart's most interesting and relevant aspects of cultural (or ideological) populism, the *heartland*, can be still used today to distinguish various forms of right and left populisms and can be applied to two in-vogue Italian parties. I have also discussed the relationship that exists between monologue, dialogue and contemporary forms of populism, with the hope of fuelling more rigorous debate

in the future. It is likely, that the only way forward in the study of heartlands is to scrutinise discursive elements belonging to not only populist leaders but populist politicians in general. Those types of politicians will always at some point invoke their preferred version and vision of heartland and they are likely to do that by making use of long monologue. For the League, which is now an essentially national conservative party, we have seen how the heartland is a peaceful rural community where a blurred and unspecified homogeneity is a primary aspect along with the key tenet of freedom. For right-wing populists, freedom is being free from the sphere of influence of the decadent multicultural/metropolitan lifestyle, which they say is today embodied by financial institutions and transnational political bodies. For populists of the left, the critique of multiculturalism and the urban lifestyle is less obvious when present. Rather, I have shown that the heartland concept is more difficult (although not impossible) to apply to the Five Star Movement that envisions a utopia where every political decision-making dynamic takes place on the web. Regardless of whether one chooses to identify this digitalised abstraction as a utopia or heartland (or a somewhat paradoxical return to the future that resembles both), it is important to understand that in the left-wing populist imaginary, homogeneity and liberty are equally important. To them, territorial nation-statism remains a secondary element, and their denouncements of the immigration business, EU, and corporate world originate from a socio-economic standpoint rather than a socio-cultural one. All the agents that Grillo denounces are denounced because they are seen as obstacles to his promised land of e-democracy. In conclusion, and for future reference to those who choose to embark on a similar journey and study populist heartlands I staunchly recommend ethnographic research in which scholars interact personally through direct contact with 'the heartlands' and their inhabitants. Whether field work should take place in the Padanian Plateau of Northern Italy, the rust belt in the United States, or the valleys of the Basque region is entirely up to the political scientist.

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