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# Introduction

## THE WIDESPREAD INSECURITY THESIS

IN 2019 THE popular Italian magazine *L'Espresso* investigated the “curious case” of Montesilvano, the seaside town with circa fifty thousand inhabitants where “everyone” had started supporting the right-wing populist party of the moment, Lega.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, it was not the first time that Montesilvano had been described as the new center of populism. Just a few years earlier, the town was considered the bastion of another populist party, the Five Star Movement, which got over 36 percent of the votes in both the national elections in 2013 and the European elections the following year. Fast-forward to the national parliamentary elections in September 2022, and the winning party in Montesilvano was the latest right-wing populist party on the rise, the Brothers of Italy, which went on to lead the country’s right-wing populist coalition.

Montesilvano is a microcosm of what has been happening in domestic politics in Italy, where, even by Italian standards, populist support has been extremely volatile over the last decade. If political scientists had wanted to investigate the party offer to try to understand if there were any special factors that explained Montesilvano’s frequent electoral swings and shifts, they would not have found any, as the city presents a rather typical history of local politics. The Democratic Christian Party dominated for over forty years, until the early 1990s; since then, there has been a fragmented, unstable, and changeable political landscape, with a high diffusion of clientelism that is common in medium-sized cities in Southern Italy. Despite the political shifts, support for the populist party of the moment has been a constant in Montesilvano, almost as if the positioning of the party within the left and right divide was unimportant and what

[1]

mattered was simply picking the newest diversion from the status quo. In addition to populism, there has been another constant in the city: a generalized social malaise that pervades its inhabitants—a feeling familiar to me, as I lived in Montesilvano for the first eighteen years of my life.

While Montesilvano is not in the poorest region of Italy, it embodies the decline of lower-middling areas. Montesilvano is in Abruzzo, culturally and historically in *Mezzogiorno* (Southern Italy), a part of Europe that is notoriously plagued by negative economic growth. Abruzzo has one of the highest rates of food insecurity in Italy, with a staggering 29.6 percent of people experiencing or being at risk of experiencing food poverty.<sup>2</sup>

The year 2016 is generally taken to signal the beginning of the contemporary populist wave or the Brexit/Trump momentum—or, perhaps more accurately, the year when the Anglo-Saxon media started paying attention to it. At that time, I worked in the Tees Valley in the UK, and I passed by Hartlepool almost every day to go to work. To me, the economic inertia of this deindustrialized town, the insecurity that characterizes the lives of people in the Tees Valley, and the preference in this area for antisystem politics, in the shape of Brexit, all felt incredibly similar to Montesilvano.<sup>3</sup> Hartlepool experienced a decline in its socioeconomic conditions during the 1980s and 1990s as an effect of the closure of the British steel industry and the general passage to a postindustrial economy. Even before Brexit, the Tees Valley had been at the center of journalistic and sociological interest due to the potential political implications of what might occur there. In the early 1990s the American investigative journalist Tony Horwitz wrote a long piece on joblessness and low-wage jobs in Hartlepool titled “British Society Is Mired in Class-Consciousness, Apathy and Under-Achievement. The Future Looks Bleak,” which offered a rather gloomy vision of what local communities were experiencing as a result of deindustrialization.<sup>4</sup> The 2016 referendum led to a renewed interest in the enduring precarity of these areas. A staggering 70 percent of voters in Hartlepool supported leaving the European Union (EU), which prompted *The New Yorker* to dedicate another long report to the deprived “pro-Brexit coastal town.”<sup>5</sup> This article, like much of the media coverage of the recent rise of populism around the globe,<sup>6</sup> strongly suggested a link between individual insecurity from the cost-of-living crisis and populist support. Despite these connections being widely acknowledged and discussed in public commentaries, social sciences lack a general theory that explains the political repercussions of widespread insecurity among the population. Intrigued by the fact that the same social malaise pervades the streets of Montesilvano and Hartlepool, I began to investigate the

underlying social dynamics and the mundane experiences of insecurity that are found in these areas as in the rest of Europe.

In this book I advance two arguments: first, that socioeconomic insecurity has steadily increased in Europe, albeit presenting itself in different ways across countries and security regimes; and, second, that this increase has created the basis for support for populism. To understand the relationship between insecurity and populism, I propose a conceptually nuanced and empirically evidenced understanding of both. With the emergence of the post-Brexit populist momentum, research on populism stopped being a matter for political science alone and became (or returned to being) a subject for the entirety of the social sciences, with special issues and ad hoc analyses appearing in sociology, economics, human geography, and social policy, among others.<sup>7</sup> Sociological research has produced rich accounts of the cultural environment and cultural values that predominate in communities supporting populist right politics, particularly in the United States.<sup>8</sup> However, the tools and instruments used in research on populism have remained anchored in classic political science research, which tends to rely on an economic conceptualization of insecurity rather than utilizing a socioeconomic understanding of it.<sup>9</sup> This book attempts to reverse this trend. Conceptually, my work builds on the emerging field of insecurity research, which aims to capture the everyday experiences of people through objective and subjective indicators and therefore helps the investigation of populism by generating a bottom-up understanding of how the insecurity that people experience reverberates into their interaction with politics. In what follows, I will first define what socioeconomic insecurity is. I will then illustrate the implications of using an ideational notion of populism, before highlighting the mutual linkages between insecurity and populism.

### *A Socioeconomic Understanding of Insecurity*

The conceptualization of insecurity I offer in this book is based on the way the term is used in the emerging field of insecurity and precarity studies, which has developed within and beyond sociology. Unlike analysis in the 1990s, which took a macro and institutional approach to risk, contemporary research on insecurity and precarity focuses on microlevel experiences that have both a material and a subjective component. I use the concepts of precarity and insecurity as adjacent terms, preferring insecurity because precarity is often used to refer strictly to precarious job contracts, while insecurity, in the way I define and operationalize it, is a

broader notion, concerned with the ordinary effects of work on people's lives as well as their financial insecurity.

In this book, I investigate the relative loss of security in two areas that are central to people's livelihoods in Europe: work and finances. This focus builds on the existing research on insecurity conducted around the world, which has pointed out that microlevel insecurity is manifested in people's lives through work and via their financial experiences.<sup>10</sup> Work security is not just about having a job and, moreover, one that is secure: It also entails having secure work conditions with respect to work pressure, autonomy, work–life balance, and recognition. Similarly, financial security is not solely based on income levels or the ability to pay for food and the basics: It includes being able to pay bills, cover unexpected expenses, and live without financial anxiety. Individuals have always relied on three major providers to navigate insecurity: their family, the state, and the market. As I illustrate in the first part of the book, it is now harder to gain security through each of these.

The fact that precarity and insecurity are partially based on subjective evaluations does not mean that they have no scientific validity. Indicators of insecurity are empirical and more grounded in the everyday lives of individuals than the abstract and remote economic operationalizations that have been used to explain Brexit, such as trade shocks, macroeconomic indicators of growth, and unemployment rates, which can be imprecisely transposed to people's lives.<sup>11</sup> It is also true that, compared to income-based poverty and social exclusion, socioeconomic insecurity understands social disadvantage to be a more common and multidimensional phenomenon, and hence it is particularly suited to investigate the socioeconomic triggers of widespread social discontent.

My evaluation of the qualitative facets of Europeans' work and financial lives uses a socioeconomic understanding of insecurity. Such a conception moves beyond the focus on indicators that measure quantifiable aspects of people's lives, such as income or wealth. The issue of whether the insecurity of populist voters is only perceived or real lingers in the debate: Is insecurity objectively experienced, or are individuals feeling insecure because of their subjective feelings? This question underpins different methodological, but also moral, views of insecurity. A perspective that is purely economically based and is therefore measured through metrics that are defined objectively, such as income, wealth, and unemployment, is in opposition to an approach that leaves it to respondents to express qualitative opinions about their lives, which is generally considered subjective. Do we only trust purely numeric and economic measures (e.g., income, job

contract type), or do we also include measures of quality of life that allow people to express their own opinions? Using the latter approach enables us to capture elements of people's work and economic lives that inevitably require a personal evaluation on the part of respondents.

### *Understanding Populist Support as a Process*

From the beginning of this century, there has been a steady interest in populism both in the public debate and in academia. Since 2016, however, the interest has boomed. There have been twice as many mentions of populism in the news, and the number of academic articles with “populism” or “populist” in the title or abstract has also doubled.<sup>12</sup> Populism continues to be studied not just because it is an overlooked or unexplored field of research per se—indeed, it is now a rather crowded field—but because it permits academics to uncover and discuss the various underlying and overlooked causes of an ongoing social dissatisfaction that manifests as populism, which academics failed to predict. Therefore, since 2016, research on populism has become the way to investigate the geography of discontent and address the grievances of the working class. In other words, this research has carried a certain moral urgency in highlighting the social problems that can result in political discontent.

The term “populism” is in itself controversial. Depending on which side of the debate one is on, populism can be a negative term, almost an insult, or a euphemistic expression employed to underplay the rise of ethnonationalism.<sup>13</sup> Populism is helpful due to its capacity to capture not just its right-wing expression, but all directions of antiestablishment sentiments. In this all-encompassing conceptualization, populism denotes the centrality of the people to politics and the belief that politics is characterized by an opposition between the people and the economic, intellectual, political, and media elites.

Instead of focusing purely on voting patterns or parties' agendas—which results in a rather static understanding of populism—I aim to delineate the process behind its rise. When examining the concept of a populist outlook or viewpoint in addition to the notion of populist voting, populism appears to be more dynamic and less black-and-white. What is helpful about understanding populism as a set of beliefs rather than a fixed behavior (“if you vote X, you must be populist”) is that it allows us to move past the idea of populism as a rigid everlasting phenomenon and enables us to investigate the process that made populist voting more prevalent in this historical moment. Do we believe that the current political status quo does

not serve its purpose? Do we think that populism is the product of winner-takes-all politics and entrenched inequalities? Seen through these lenses, people-centrism and anti-elitism are more commonplace than they might appear, and we could all, potentially, partially or totally adopt a populist viewpoint.

Furthermore, a sociological examination of populism looks at other expressions of antiestablishment politics, such as nonvoting and shifting between nonvoting and voting for a populist party. In this historical dimension, the popularity of populism becomes circumstantial and a key element in understanding the crisis of the European project and the decline in established party politics across the continent. Despite the noise that it generates in every national and EU election, populist voting is not the full or sole form of social unrest in Europe given the considerable rates of nonvoting and the political mobilization of those who are not entitled to vote, such as migrants.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Missing Links Between Insecurity and Populism*

Having introduced my definition of insecurity and the understanding of populism used in this book, I will now clarify the links between the concepts. At first, explanations of the post-2016 populist momentum revolved around what scholars labeled the “it’s the culture, stupid!” (or the cultural backlash) argument. For example, the very influential work by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart found that populism emerged from the cultural clash of those who hold traditional and conservative views regarding migration and societal diversity, and that, through populist right support, express an opposition to progressive ideas in respect to migration, multicultural diversity, gender roles, and LGBTI+ rights.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, earlier socioeconomic explanations of populism put forward by several scholars theorized that the post-Brexit populist vote represented a protest by a neglected working class affected by material hardships, unemployment, and a decline in their material conditions.<sup>16</sup> Empirical analyses showed inconclusive evidence for the theory of the economic left-behind, indicating that populist voting did not seem to be associated with extreme socioeconomic disadvantage, such as being unemployed or being a recipient of welfare benefits.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, when it has been investigated through objective economic measures, such as income, wealth, and employment status, precarity has not been effective in explaining the rise of the right-wing populist vote.<sup>18</sup> In the words of Sheri Berman, “despite the plausibility that individual economic setbacks

and/or insecurity would lead voters to support populists, the evidence linking individual economic grievances to populist voting is not particularly strong.”<sup>19</sup>

This led part of the scholarship to conclude that the grievances voiced by individuals voting for populist parties were mostly post-material cultural concerns (e.g., on gender equality, multiculturalism, and LGBTI+ rights), rather than based on material issues or socioeconomic changes in individuals’ conditions.<sup>20</sup> It also led to the emergence of another strand of literature. As it became apparent that populist voting was not explained by indicators used to measure the disadvantage of left-behind groups, the work that I and my colleagues authored in this period suggested that the rise in populism was representative of a decline in the conditions of the intermediate segments of the population (i.e., the squeezed middle) and also indicated that socioeconomic disadvantage was spreading to the point that it was being experienced by multiple social groups.<sup>21</sup> The focus on the political behavior of the squeezed middle was accompanied by a change in how disadvantage was investigated, from a static type experienced by left-behind groups to a more commonplace and dynamic experience of insecurity that also affects the declining intermediate classes.<sup>22</sup>

Research on populism has not completely neglected insecurity. For instance, the political theorist Albena Azmanova defined the current political momentum as “precarity capitalism”—a term she coined to stress how the current political climate is characterized by the “universalization of insecurity, which is now afflicting the majority of the population, almost irrespective of employment type and income level.”<sup>23</sup> In the empirical research on populism, however, insecurity has been investigated as an economic process, rather than being studied in the way I have defined it, namely, as a socioeconomic phenomenon experienced by individuals. As mentioned earlier, scholars who have investigated populism in relation to *economic* insecurity have found that a number of macroeconomic processes are associated with populist voting, such as trade shocks, public cuts at the local level, and economic crises. Influenced by economic framings, economists and political scientists have perceived the emergence of new social cleavages between the winners and losers of globalization and have interpreted populist voting as a reaction by the losers, who represent the populists’ primary constituency.<sup>24</sup>

The studies focusing on economic processes have found important trends, but the explanatory process linking macroeconomic phenomena (i.e., loss of GDP, trade shocks, and globalization) to populism is macro,

abstract, and remote and misses a connecting element that relates to individuals. The Brexit voters from Hartlepool mentioned earlier would not have been attracted to the populist sentiments of Brexit because they felt they had lost from globalization or due to the macroeconomic effects of trade shocks. Presumably, they would have voted for it because something in their individual conditions had changed *as a result* of macroeconomic changes in globalization and trade. Furthermore, the direction that their discontent had taken was deeply connected to their cultural framings, as well as the political options that were presented to them. Instead of considering just macroeconomic conditions, I use an integrated understanding of how economic, cultural, and political shifts occur in people's lives. Insecurity is deeply connected to the political sphere because the European social model that emerged after the Second World War was never about economic growth per se. Rather, it has always been about the balance between a moderate level of growth and a relatively good quality of life, comprising good working conditions and financial stability, for the majority of Europeans.<sup>25</sup> Endorsed by established parties, this implicit European social pact—which lacks the economic ambition of the American Dream but guarantees a certain level of security for large portions of the population—has come under threat. Populist parties have offered new political scripts that restore and underscore the importance of the main security providers (the family, the state, and the market) in sustaining socioeconomic stability. In addition, they have proposed new political solutions to address insecurity: The radical populist right have argued in favor of closing borders, while the radical populist left have campaigned for the redistribution of wealth by taking resources from the elites.

### *The Consequences of Using Insecurity to Explain Populism*

I argue that using an approach centered on insecurity has three major implications for the way we investigate populism. First, it provides a more nuanced notion of what social disadvantage means in relation to political preferences. Second, rather than maintaining a distinction between cultural and economic explanations and using either one or the other, it integrates them, thereby positioning opposition to migration among the forms of status threat emerging from insecurity. Finally, it highlights insecurity's potential to divide people and to bring them together.

## INSECURITY AND INEQUALITY: POPULISM BEYOND THE WORKING-CLASS VOTE

Investigations into the recent rise of populism have been highly influenced by the political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset and his analysis of the rise of authoritarianism, which, he argued, was politically driven by the culturally authoritarian, yet economically liberal, working class.<sup>26</sup> However, the recent turn to populism has features different from those that Lipset analyzed, and the empirical research conducted to understand the recent populist rise did not find class voting to be a clear explanation for populist support; instead, it found a more complex class profile comprising traditional left-out segments and a portion of the middle class, whose economic and social position has been declining.<sup>27</sup> This generated an interest in examining not just class cleavages but also shared experienced and common social factors across classes that could become aggregators of political support.

Insecurity is helpful in analyzing the social basis of populist support because it has the capacity to capture common conditions and wider processes of inequalities, rather than focusing on crystallized class cleavages.<sup>28</sup> Not everyone who is affected by generalized conditions of work or financial insecurity will be equally affected by them, and the impact of insecurity is unequally shaped by the resources that people can access to navigate insecurity. As both the traditional working class and emergent service workers experience elements of precariousness, this can drive them toward a shared sense of being part of the people, a mass of individuals coming together around similar insecure conditions and in opposition to those who contribute—in their understanding—to make them insecure, be those migrants or the economic elites.

## INTEGRATING CULTURAL AND MATERIAL EXPLANATIONS

The tendency to separate cultural and economic explanations of political processes is well-known in sociology. For instance, the sociologist Michèle Lamont once stated: “Political scientists ask the question: ‘Is it culture or the economy?’ To me it is about both.”<sup>29</sup> The dualization Lamont is referring to—which has strong roots in Lipsetian political sociology—resurfaced during the most recent analyses of the populist momentum, particularly in the influential cultural backlash theory mentioned earlier.

Although its application has been challenged, Norris and Inglehart's theory remains extremely influential among political scientists and economists, especially in the way it investigates culture in isolation from the material aspects of people's lives, and it continues to be replicated in numerous studies on populism.<sup>30</sup>

From the cost-of-living crisis to growing work insecurity, material concerns are highly visible in Europe and elsewhere. In his last monograph, even the late Ronald Inglehart, the main theorist to support the idea that politics has become postmaterialist (i.e., no longer concerned with material issues), dedicated an entire chapter to the role economic insecurity has played in the rise of right-wing populism. While denying that insecurity would be "the proximate cause of the Populist Authoritarian vote," Inglehart—reproducing the common Lipsetian separation between the economic and cultural spheres—admitted that *economic* insecurity "plays a crucial role earlier in the causal process, helping explain why the Populist Authoritarian vote is much stronger today than it was 30 years ago."<sup>31</sup> As I explained earlier, insecurity is not purely an economic variable that precedes a series of cultural variables that are detached from people's material realities, but rather a concept that integrates cultural and economic aspects of their lives. The sharp division between a selected number of cultural attitudes and investigations that focus solely on economic insecurity is at odds with current cultural sociology, which has introduced a number of influential reference frameworks (such as recognition, symbolic boundaries, and social status) that are built on the interactions between the socioeconomic structure around people and the resonating cultural frames.

An example of this distinctive way of treating the cultural and the economic is how the literature on populism uses attitudes toward migrants as purely cultural variables,<sup>32</sup> in opposition to how cultural sociologists themselves discuss migration in relation to the rise of neoliberalism, material concerns, and wider divisions between insiders and outsiders.<sup>33</sup> Although associations have been found between opposition to migration and populist right support, attitudes toward migration have not explained if and how populist support increased in Europe at a specific point in history. Furthermore, the proliferation of antimigration attitudes does not help to explain another aspect of populist support: namely, the parallel rise in Europe of left-wing populism, whose enemy is the economic elites, rather than migration. To use technical terminology, the cultural backlash theory considers migration attitudes not as a product of the outside world (exogenous variables) but as endogenous variables that are separated

from the socioeconomic conditions experienced by individuals, making the explanatory process behind populism circumscribed and based on a restricted understanding of how antimigration attitudes are formed. Instead, as I will illustrate in chapters 1 and 4, culturally based evaluations of race, ethnicity, or deservingness intersect with a generalized climate of socioeconomic insecurity, determining whether oppositional frames are directed against the economic elites or against someone with a different skin color, accent, or economic position.

### INSECURITY AS A UNIFIER OF CONDITIONS AND A DIVIDER OF POLITICAL SOLUTIONS

A paradoxical aspect in the new politics of insecurity is that, in principle, rising insecurity leads to a harmonization in the condition of individuals that is, nonetheless, often expressed in divisive terms through the use of out-group framings. As I will show in chapter 4, populist parties' agendas are not simply oppositional. These parties also plan to restore security through the two actors that have been absorbing the rise in market-based insecurity: the state and the family. Hence, a typical right-wing populist agenda endorses a strong role for the state in combating the threat of citizenship status via migration, but also in taking action against undeserving citizens, because both threaten access to limited economic resources. Right-wing populists also typically support traditional family structures because of the role these play in upholding conservative values and because they wish to reestablish the family as a crucial provider of security in highly insecure times. Therefore, support for the family and opposition to migration are not disconnected from the socioeconomic realities of people's lives.

Cultural frames are important in understanding the direction of political discontent. People express their insecurity in an oppositional way because opposition between "us" and "the others" is embedded in the current political script. Policies, mainstream political discourse, and even songs encourage individuals to compete to earn a life free from insecurity. The opposition between "us"—the people—and "the others," which is constructed at the individual level, is also present at a country level. For instance, while the widespread insecurity experienced by Europeans is making the continent more homogeneous than it used to be in respect to living conditions, deservingness and merit are often evoked to establish out-group dynamics between the productive countries of the North and the "lazy" countries of the South.<sup>34</sup>

## *Chapter Outline*

The first part of the book aims to illustrate the rise of socioeconomic insecurity in Europe, discussing how it is connected to economic, political, and cultural shifts. Chapter 1 establishes socioeconomic insecurity as a central concept in political sociology and describes the components of the new politics of insecurity. The chapter presents the sociological definition of insecurity used in the book, clarifies its links with the emerging sociology of insecurity, and discusses how this notion helps us to expand our understanding of socioeconomic disadvantage. The remainder of the chapter discusses how the new politics of insecurity emerges from the integrated effects of socioeconomic, cultural, and political security shifts.

In chapter 2 I illustrate how insecurity has increased across security regimes. I present a systematic review of the qualitative evidence of the rise in insecurity in the selected case studies and then show how insecurity affects the lives of individuals in Europe, using analyses of European datasets. The chapter identifies and discusses two shifts that have served to make insecurity a widespread and ordinary experience in Europe: the increase in work-related insecurity since the 1990s, and the exacerbation of financial insecurity since the 2010 crisis. The chapter concludes by questioning the compensatory role that welfare states play given the wide diffusion of work and financial insecurity across regimes.

Chapter 3 analyzes how political economic shifts have resulted in a microlevel rise in insecurity. First, the chapter presents the secular economic shifts that have occurred in Europe, such as changes in macroeconomic trends and the effects of the 2010 economic crisis. Second, it examines the current evidence on how the changes to national and European welfare-state interventions—centered on individual incentives and reducing the use of passive income support—have indirectly led to work and financial insecurity.

The second part of the book examines in more depth the conceptual and empirical links between insecurity and populism. Chapter 4 illustrates the microlevel mechanisms that pull insecure individuals toward populism and away from supporting established parties, presenting an integrated conceptual framework that considers the mediation of cultural frames. Through closer examination of the case studies, the chapter looks at how insecurity has entered welfare-state politics. It analyzes how mainstream parties have stopped incorporating socioeconomic security in their discourse and agendas, and how populist parties have exploited this gap to propose new political offers to address insecurity.

Chapter 5 presents the findings from multiple cross-national studies of work and financial insecurity that I have led, which have tested new indicators of insecurity either through ad hoc online surveys or by matching existing probability-sampling datasets. After showing how the notion of social disadvantage expanded to the squeezed middle, the chapter presents the empirical associations between populism, in the shape of an outlook and voting behavior, and insecurity.

In chapter 6 I discuss the responses to the rise in insecurity during Covid-19, arguing that this was a missed opportunity to change how policies address it. I then argue that although insecurity is not able to aggregate political support into a single class of voters (the precariat), it still influences politics in several ways. The final section offers a prescriptive list of ways that parties could address insecurity by intervening in the family–market–state nexus and hence influence how individuals can use family, state, and market sources to navigate insecurity. The epilogue summarizes the main arguments of the book and discusses the implications of the findings for research and political debates.

Empirically, this book employs a mix of quantitative and qualitative analyses, which I have conducted with the support of my research teams since 2016. I look at nine European countries, offering a qualitative analysis of their security regimes (chapter 2) and examining their political responses to insecurity (chapter 4).<sup>35</sup> These case studies contain a variety of populist sentiments in the shape of support for radical populist right (RPR) and radical populist left (RPL) parties; the justification for the case study selection and the details about the empirical analyses are provided in the methodological appendix. I present quantitative analyses of European datasets on an even larger number of European countries to find generalizable patterns concerning work and financial insecurity (chapter 2) and to investigate the association between insecurity and populism (chapter 5).

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