**John Torpey** 00:03

Welcome to International Horizons, a podcast of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies that bring scholarly expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues. My name is John Torpey, and I'm director of the Ralph Bunche Institute at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Today, we examine the relationship between populism and technocracy as structuring poles of contemporary politics. In order to explore that issue we're fortunate to have with us today Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, the Associate Professor of political theory at the City College of New York and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Carlo maintains affiliations with the Center for European Studies of the Institut d’Etudes Politiques better known as Sciences Po, and with Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, perhaps better known as SIPA. He's the author of two books on the role of religion in democratic politics and societies, one of which is called *What is Christian Democracy? Politics, Religion and Ideology* on Cambridge University Press, and most recently a co-edited volume called *Ideologies and the European Union* published by Routledge. He's also co-authored with Christopher Bickerton of Cambridge University the forthcoming book, *Techno Populism: The New Logic of Democratic Politics* which is the subject really of our discussion here today. Thank you so much for taking the time to be with us, Carlo Invernizzi Accetti.

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 01:41

Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

**John Torpey** 01:43

Great to have you. Thanks very much. So let's start with this term "technopopulism". What do you mean by that? I think most observers would see technocracy and populism as opposites. But you argue in this book that there's a deep affinity between the two. Could you please explain?

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 02:04

Yes. So we started writing this book, really, in the aftermath of the previous economic crisis -- the great crisis, which started in 2008 in the United States, but really reached its peak in Europe in between 2011 and 2012 -- reflecting on some of the effects that that crisis was having on the politics, in particular, of European countries. And something that several observers at the time were noticing is that both the reaction to the crisis and, if you will, the reaction to the reaction of the crisis, were restructuring politics in Europe in a particular way. Because the reaction to the crisis, the way in which the crisis was dealt with, was very technocratic. [For instance,] the European Union -- famously, the Troika -- [was] imposing technocratic austerity measures in many countries, particularly of the South, [in which] was said to have generated a populist counterreaction. That's what I'm calling the reaction to the reaction.

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 03:13

And thereby, we had a politics in Europe that was increasingly on one hand, technocratic, and on the other hand, populist. And it was said that this opposition between technocracy and populism was replacing the opposition between left and right as the structuring poles of European politics. And we had many examples of that at the time in Europe. So for instance, in Italy, my country, you had Mario Monti, the technocrat imposed from the European Union, and then The Five Star Movement and Grillo as a populist reaction. Something similar in Greece with the Papademos, a technocratic approach from the European Union, and Syriza as a populist reaction. And then again, in France, you had the famous struggle between Le Pen, far right populist, and Macron, often seen as a darling of the European technocrats.

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 04:05

An interesting thing that all of these actors had in common was that they all presented themselves as if they were neither left nor right. This was perhaps most stark in the case of the French election of 2017, where both Le Pen and Macron initially ran on the same slogan: "ni droite ni gauche" (neither left nor right.) So this all seemed to confirm the thesis that left and right are fading in Europe and populism, and technocracy are replacing them as the new structuring poles. However, what we noticed was that actually the relationship between populism and technocracy is a little bit more complicated, because they're not just opposite of each other. We started noticing that some of the so called populists, such as The Five Star Movement in Italy, had some surprising technocratic features. And some of the supposed technocrats had some surprising populist features.

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 05:12

So for instance, The Five Star Movement in Italy, which is clearly a populist party; it ran against the establishment, it ran in the name of claiming to represent the people, the famous slogan: "uno vale uno" (everybody is worth one,) and against the elites. It also has, strangely -- if you dig a little bit in their discourse -- a deeply technocratic conception of politics, based on the idea of solving problems. Grillo, the founder, one says "politics is like plumbing, there are problems and we have to fix them, and politicians are like plumbers that we hire to fix our problems." So [this is] a conception of politics oriented to problem-solving. But even more deeply than that, this idea of a very important concept for The Five Star Movement was this idea of "collective intelligence."

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 06:04

They are one of the first so-called online parties. And their idea was that the internet could be a way of harnessing the expertise of all the citizens in order to solve problems more effectively. So this online platform that they have, "Rousseau", is seen as a way of taking expertise from different people across the country to produce more effective and competent solutions. And so here we have the figure of this idea that "everyone is an expert." This idea of the citizen expert as the more competent problem solver than the experts themselves. Grillo once famously said: if we go to government, we'll put a housewife with three kids at the Ministry of Finance, because she knows better about economics than these supposed economists. This figure is a mix; as a populist and as a technocratic element. It's an argument about expertise.

**John Torpey** 07:02

It's very Gramscian in a sense that everybody's in it. According to Gramsci everyone's an intellectual, as a result of having a roadmap of their own lives. Is that crazy?

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 07:15

No, I happen to think that Gramsci had still an ideological approach to politics. An idea that there is a conflict between values, a conflict between classes, whereas I think an important feature of both, populism and technocracy, is that they claim to stand for the interests of the whole. The populist claim to represent the people; technocrats claim to represent the general interest and the truth. And in techno-populists -- and this is the category and getting to -- a party like The Five Star Movement is understood as techno-populist because it makes us both features. So in that sense, I think it is very different from something like the Communist Party, which is a party founded by Gramsci, which didn't claim to stand for the people; claimed to stand for a particular section of society, like the working class and opposed to another section of society. So I think that, actually, my idea was not very Gramscian, actually. It's it's pretty different from how politics was done in the middle part of the 20th century.

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 08:28

Another example we take is Macron, who's often considered a technocrat, but has a deeply populist approach to politics in that, first of all, obviously, his embodiment model. His party initially was called "En Marche", which [has] the initials are Emmanuel Macron. And he is the embodiment of his party; "La République En Marche!" is Emmanuel Macron. And so this embodiment model, this highly leaderistic aspect, and the fact that he ran against the establishment; against the parties [makes it techno-populist]. So in Emmanuel Macron, I think is more similar to The Five Star Movement in that he also makes his populist and technocratic elements, not through this figure of the citizen expert, like you have in The Five Star Movement, but through the figure of the people's doer. Macron is this figure that represents, that stands as a doer, the person who can solve problems for the people. And this leads us to the concept of "techno-populism."

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 09:35

We see all these parties mixing and matching populist and technocratic elements, like The Five Star movement, like Macron. So the main thesis of our book is this: that the real difference today is not between left or right or between populism and technocracy. What politicians today compete on is the different ways of mixing and matching both, populist and technocratic elements. Macron is what we call a form of techno-populism from above; this leader who is also a doer. And The Five Star Movement is techno-populism from below; the citizens, experts, coming together on the web to solve problems. So those are the real differences. The real differences in politics today is how different politicians mix and match both, populist and technocratic elements. That's what we call the new logic of today's politics, "techno populism." How everybody is becoming increasingly a techno-populist in as much as they mix both, populist and technocratic elements, and as such, are different from the ideological politics of the past.

**John Torpey** 10:47

So could you say a little bit more about "Podemos" in Spain. How does "Podemos" fit into this, you make an argument in the book that Podemos, which seems to have rather strong -- what we probably would call -- populist roots, actually fits into this techno-populist category.

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 11:04

Absolutely. Podemos, too, is another example of techno-populism for us in as much as it has a clearly a self-consciously populist identity. Some of its founders are academic disciples of Laclau and thought of themselves as articulating a populist project against the technocratic elites in a way that is not too dissimilar from Syriza -- and to some extent, also, The Five Star Movement -- but also has a deeply technocratic appeal. For instance, I mentioned that they were disciplines of Laclau; many of its founders were professors. It was initially called "El Partido de Profesores" a party of professors, who had this very pedagogical approach to politics; the calm explanation of solving problems. Again, another common discourse that they use is this idea of common-sense; Podemos is a party of common sense of, of common-sense solutions to practical problems.

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 12:13

So, especially in its early phase, we described Podemos as a techno-populist party in a way that's similar to The Five Star Movement and to "La République En Marche!" in France. But as it developed it moved back towards a more traditional social-democratic left-wing identity. And this leads us to qualify our thesis a little bit in that we say that this new techno-populist logic that governs European politics today, where populism and technocracy are domain structuring poles, does not entirely replace the traditional left to right division, but actually super imposes itself upon it. So today, we have two logics that work in Europe, the traditional left-right division, and then on top of it, the new techno-populist logic, where parties compete in terms of both, how they mix and mash populist and technocratic elements. And "Podemos" is a good example of how the two logics coexist in an uneasy way with each other, because we call it a form of left-wing techno-populism.

**John Torpey** 13:28

So, we've been talking so far about this as a phenomenon at sort of the European level, but the three countries that you focus on, as far as I can tell, are Spain, Italy, and France. Is it a coincidence that we're talking about the three principal Catholic or, historically Catholic countries and Latin, in culture, so to speak? Is this something that's happening outside of those countries?

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 13:53

Yes, well. I would say yes. Actually, my co-author Christopher Bickerton, who is based at Cambridge, is from the UK. One of our important cases is actually the UK. And here we we go back a little bit in time and we think that one of the early manifestations of this techno-populist logic -- anthe important transition, let's say, out of the more traditional ideological conflict of the past and into this contemporary techno populist logic -- of actually Tony Blair and New Labour; the so-called Third Way. We see Tony Blair as one of the earliest embodiments of this logic, in as much as Blair had precisely both populist and technocratic elements. So famously, he removes references to the idea of appealing to a part of society to the working class, in the discourse of new labor and appeal to the people. The discourse of the people in Tony Blair is pervasive: Diana's funeral was called the people's funeral, the dome that was constructed in 2000 in London is the people's dome. So this is a very populist rhetoric of like "this New Labour that breaks with the old shackles of the past and is innovative is anti establishment."

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 15:16

So there's a populist component to Blair, but also a deeply technocratic element. His famous slogan was, "What matters is what works." He presented himself as: "it's not left or right. It's this Third Way. And what matters is what works," "I give effective solutions to solve the people's problems." So I think [this happens] even in Northern European, primarily, Protestant countries. This is a logic which I don't think is only Southern European. We describe it as a European logic. Then it also travels outside of Europe, even though that's not the era we focus on. In Latin America, Carlos de la Torre has been writing on many Latin American figures who also mix and match populist and technocratic elements, like Rafael Correa in Ecuador. This a populist who was also a professor giving PowerPoint lectures instead of like rallies. So yes, our claim is not that this is exclusively a Catholic or a Southern European phenomenon.

**John Torpey** 16:33

What about the United States? We've just been through a period that would certainly be called populist under Donald Trump, however catastrophic; that ball played out catastrophicly. And I wonder, does this sort of discussion that you're developing apply to the United States particularly? I'm not sure I see it.

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 16:56

So in the United States is not one of our cases. But while we were developing the book, we certainly saw many links and many possibilities of the concept to travel. Of course, the 2016 election was very much framed like an opposition between populism and technocracy. We had on one side, the "arch-populist" Donald Trump, who claims to stand for the people, against the swamp. Whereas on the other hand you have this supposedly expert "policy-wonk" who was incapable of appealing to the people, Hillary Clinton, but would have done effective policies. So this was a classic frame that was applied to the 2016 election, and in my opinion continued in the framing of the Trump presidency. Very much throughout the Trump presidency you had the idea that the best way the Democratic Party criticized Trump was on technocratic grounds; on the grounds that he undermined truth. You think of the New York Times campaign "truth, truth truth" against this incompetent, ignorant, populist movement. And this is even more clear in the case of the pandemic, the way in which Trump's reaction to the pandemic was framed was very much expertise versus populism. This, "Trump is incompetent because he only cares about popularity and is not taking care of science." Here too, I think it's actually a little more complicated than than a simple opposition between populism and technocracy. Because if you look a little more carefully to Trump's discourse, it's actually not simply populist.

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 19:00

There are, bizarrely, claims to expertise being made all the time by Trump. Bizarre maybe, claims to expertise but this feeds into the point I'm about to make. For instance... well, one of the ways in which he came to power [is that] he claimed to have a special competence, a special expertise in making deals; "The Art of the Deal," I'm an expert because I'm not a politician. Because I'm a successful businessman, I have this special competence in making deals. And this is supposed to be the ground and that's how I'm going to get you great healthcare. The same with COVID. Actually, Trump never claimed to ignore science, he claimed to have his own science. He touted the number of bizarre cures, you know, light and then hydroxychlorine. And so, what Trump was doing was not only appealing to his own popularity; he was making his own claims to expertise as well. And as such, had, if I may, a technocratic component. A technocratic component which consists in claiming to be an expert, and to be able to appeal to expertise.

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 20:18

Of course, the answers that liberals or technocrats make to these claims to expertise contained in Trumpist discourse is that's not real expertise; the true science is on our side, [instead] the science he appeals to is phony science. But that in my opinion, merely reveals the weakness of the liberal democratic strategy against Trump -- relying on this technocratic appeals to competence and expertise -- which is that once you start using competence as a political tool, everybody can do it. He has his alternative facts, his alternative science. And then, the whole point of science is supposed to be non-political. If you use it as a political tool, then science becomes inserted into the political discourse, and you get the America's political situation today, which is competing claims to popularity and expertise -- competing with one another -- as the main grounds of politics. So while America is not our case, I see that a lot of American politics seems to revolve around competing claims to embody the people and to have the necessary expertise to realize its will.

**John Torpey** 21:38

Well, there's obviously much that could be said about the American situation. But since you're focusing primarily on Europe, let's stick with that for the moment. And there's been developments you mentioned already; Italy being your own country. There have been some very important recent political developments in Italy. That is to say, the ruling coalition has fallen and Mario Draghi, the former head of the European Central Bank, has been brought in to rescue a government that has been adrift for some time under Giuseppe Conte. Draghi is famous, of course, for having said he would do whatever it takes as head of the European Central Bank, [that] he would do whatever it takes to save the Euro and the European economy a few years back in the middle of the crisis that, as you say, had shifted from the US to Europe. And so he enjoys considerable stature on the Italian and indeed the European stage, and even the international stage. So, I wonder where you think he will lead Italy in the coming period?

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 22:44

Yes. So Italy, as I mentioned, was one of our starting cases. And this is one of the early laboratories of techno-populism, with this initial opposition between The Five Star Movement under Grillo and Mario Monti has a clearly technocratic government. And in many ways, now Italy has come full circle. Has come full circle, because the government to date is perhaps the purist and the clearest example of how populism and technocracy can come together. Because what's happening in Italy now, the bizarre thing is that The Five Star Movement, which began as an anti-technocratic populist party, has now banded together with the technocrats and is one of the main supporters of Draghi government. So the bizarre thing is that Beppe Grillo, just a couple of days ago, declared Draghi -- the arch-technocrat, the head of the European Central Bank, the architect, as you say, of quantitative easing, and of the European response to the crisis -- he said: "Draghi è un grillino." Draghi is one of us, because he wants to solve problems. He's against the elites, he wants to break the parties, and he is going to lead Italy out of the crisis.

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 24:07

And on the other hand, Draghi himself is being placed in this very populist position -- Trump, for instance, tried to inhabit, and Macron tries to inhabit, [the role of] the savior --- the man who comes in to break the deadlock and resolve the crisis. So, again, here you see a clear mixture of the two, if there ever was a techno-populist government, it is the government of Draghi supported by The Five Star movement.

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 24:36

In terms of where this will lead, I'm happy you asked this question because it enables me to refer to a chapter in our book which talks about the consequences of techno-populism. If it is true that we wrote this book before this government came to power, but if it is [also] true that our analysis holds and what we see is more and more a mixture of public realism and technocracy, we can look at what the consequences of what this would be to try to think about where Draghi will lead Italy. We talk in the book about three main consequences of techno-populism, all of which derived from the features of its core components; populism and technocracy being the main structuring poles of Italian and I claim [of] most other advanced politics and in most other advanced democracies.

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 25:31

So the first consequence we talk about is increasing conflictuality. Because both populist and technocrats claim to stand for the interests of the whole, of the whole of society, the people or the general interest and against the parts, parties particular interests are what technocrats call special interests. They really have no space for recognizing the legitimacy of opposition. Neither populist, nor technocrats can understand that there can be others who disagree with them. Populist represent the whole people: "if you're not one of the people, you must be an enemy of the people," as Trump said. And technocrats, the same, if you stand for the truth, whoever is against you is in error. There is no real space for the recognition of legitimacy of opposition. And when politics becomes structured in terms of these two poles, therefore others, political competitors, become enemies. So you move from adversaries to enemies. There is no recognition of legitimacy and so politics become increasingly conflictual as parties increasingly attack each other's legitimacy, rather than each other's policies. So the more of country becomes techno-populist, the more you're likely to see an increase in conflict, in the bitterness of conflict between them, increasing personalization of attacks and things like that.

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 27:00

The second consequence we talked about is the desubstantialization. By this, we mean that actually, politicians fight a lot today because they don't recognize each other's legitimacy. But they don't fight about very much, because they both claim to represent the interests of the whole, actually, their policy agenda is very similar. There's not much substantive disagreement in fact, as evidence shows, between the policy agenda of something like The Five Star movement, or the policy agenda of something like the PD in Italy, the center-left party, or somebody like Draghi. They all want to serve the interests of the whole, so they don't represent particular sectors of society, which have particular interest, [for instance,] class, or I don't know, a region. Everybody stands for the interest of the whole. So actually, they fight a lot, but they don't fight about very much. There's very little substantive disagreement; the disagreement is more about each other's legitimacy. So first expectation about Italy is increasing conflictuality and decreasing substance to political conflict.

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 28:20

And this leads to a third consequence, which is the last one we talked about and which I expect to happen in Italy, democratic dissatisfaction. And this is an interesting paradox for us, which is the fact that increasingly as politicians claim to represent the people and to be competent at realizing their goals, people hate them more and more. As politicians become more populist and more technocratic, people hate politicians more and more. As politicians claim to be less like professional politicians and more to represent the interests of the people as a whole. We can see this in the start with Blair, and up to today, if there's something everybody can agree is that they all hate politicians. And for us this is tied to the logic of techno-populism, in as much as claiming to represent the interests of the whole rather than grounding yourself in particular interests within society, detaches politics from society. Increasingly, you have a separation of a politics of the whole in the state and a social interest which is increasingly disaggregated from each other and separated from one another. And so you have an increasing separation between politics and society, which leads to increasing dissatisfaction. So we claim that techno-populism is both a symptom of a crisis of representation, but a cause of increasing dissatisfaction as well. So what do I expect for Italy with Draghi? Not much that's very good; we'll have increasingly conflictual politics about less and less, and people will be more and more dissatisfied.

**John Torpey** 30:10

That's fascinating. I thought the issue of the separation of politics from society was one of the very interesting arguments you make in the book. And you've addressed this already to some extent: this question of whether or not techno-populism as a political style is going to replace the old; the very long standing now, distinction between left and right, as rooted in certain segments of society. Could you say a little bit more about how you see that playing out? I mean, is this techno populism fueled by developments in society? Perhaps, the rise of a kind of technical technological society? Is it going to, remove that old left-right distinction from politics?

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 30:56

Yes. So that's, that's our causal story. How do we explain this rise of techno-populism in society? And to what extent will it replace the old left-right distinction? As as you mentioned, the story is based on this idea of a growing separation of society from the state. So just to recap the main lines of how we see that playing out: we start from a pretty commonsense traditional idea of how democracy was supposed to work. The idea was that democracy is a regime that reflects social divisions within the political sphere. So a classic interpretation of democracy is that parties and divisions represent social divisions. You should take for instance, Lipset and Rokkan see that there are social divisions, for instance, class divisions, or religious divisions, which correspond to political divisions. And therefore, the role of the political system is to translate social conflicts into political conflicts, and then politics becomes an arena for the negotiation, and hopefully the solution of these social conflicts through compromise or democratic procedures of majority rule.

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 32:19

So, democracy works when political divisions reflect social divisions. And this relation is assured by a number of intermediary bodies, traditionally. Bodies that mediate between social divisions and political divisions, the most obvious of which are political parties --which are expressions of classes, or religious groups -- but other intermediary bodies existed as well: trade unions, churches, civil society, and of course, the media is supposed to reflect social views so that they can be heard in the political world. As we all know, all of these intermediary bodies that assure the relationship between society and politics are today in crisis. Parties are in crisis in Europe; membership has been declining for decades. Trade unions are in crisis. Churches are in crisis. The media is in crisis with the rise of social media and things like that.

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 33:18

So there's a crisis of intermediary bodies, we claim, which is driving society and the state apart. It's driving society and the state apart, because what you have is on one side, and increasingly, diarticulated set of interests in society. These intermediary bodies have the effect of taking particular interests, aggregating them together with each other, and making them political. So for instance, a party takes many different constituencies creates a common platform and advances that in the political domain.

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 33:50

As parties become in crisis, as mediating bodies are in crisis, particular interest remain disaggregated. And we have an increasingly atomized society in which groups are not fused with one another, but increasingly separated from one another. So an increasingly atomized society on one hand is separated from a politics which has no link with society. And all that remains to it is the mission of politics in the abstract, which is to create an idea of the general will.

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 34:19

So politics becomes disanchored from society and increasingly tied to ideas of generality, of truth, of the people. These abstract concepts that are disarticulated from social conflicts and ideas of the whole become dominant. So, as society and politics shift apart, you have a more individualized or atomized society, and a politics that's more about the whole -- not unmediated conceptions of the whole, like the people are truth. And that's why you see the emergence of populism and technocracy, we claim, as the main structuring poles of society.

**Carlo Invernizzi Accetti** 34:57

Populism and technocracy are expressions of "politics of the whole" of "politics of generality." These are anchored from basis in concrete interests within society. So, interests are the enemies of populism, the enemies of technocracy; that's what techno-populism does. Whereas previously, democracy was a conflict between parts; one part against another part. And that's a horizontal conflict, left versus right. With techno populism, you get a conflict, which is vertical between the whole and the parts. The whole is good, and the parts are bad. So that's our story of how you're getting in this crisis of intermediary bodies, which is leading to a separation of society from the state, which is leading to a politics of abstract generalities, like truth and the people, in which social interests have no place, and that's what we call techno populism.

**John Torpey** 35:52

Well, it's a fascinating analysis. Carlo Invernizzi Accetti and Christopher Bickerton, the book is called "Techno-Populism, the New Logic of Democratic Politics." And we're grateful to Carlo Invernizzi Accetti for sharing his insights about the rise of technocracy and populism or "techno-populism" in contemporary politics. Remember to subscribe and rate International Horizons on SoundCloud, Spotify and Apple podcasts. I want to thank the Otto and Fran Walter Foundation for its support of our European programming. I also want to thank Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance and Merrill Sovner for helping to produce this episode. I also want to thank Duncan Mackay for sharing his song, "International Horizons", as the theme music for this show. This is John Torpey, saying thanks for joining us and we look forward to having you with us for the next episode of International Horizons.