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**To cite this article:** Norma Rossi (2023): Populism without a people: neoliberal populism and the rise of the Italian far right, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, DOI: [10.1080/13569317.2023.2196241](https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2023.2196241)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2023.2196241>



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Published online: 03 Apr 2023.



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# Populism without a people: neoliberal populism and the rise of the Italian far right

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## ABSTRACT

While populism is often understood as a reaction to neoliberalism, this paper investigates neoliberalism as a host ideology of populism. Building on Wendy Brown, I argue that the populist, Italian 5 Star Movement (5SM) conforms to neoliberalism's normative reason. Rather than democratic, this form of neoliberal populism unravels the collective and political body of the people, reducing it to an uninformed mass to be directed by technocratic means. This has profound implications as my reading of the relationship between 5SM and the far-right party Lega shows. As 5SM's neoliberal populism is unable to express a 'people' it functions as a propulsive force for the racialized 'people' the Lega deems to express. In this way, the 'authoritarian freedom' informing neoliberalism implies that inadvertently neoliberal populism fosters support for far-right parties.

## Introduction

The pervasiveness of neoliberalism and its logics, practices and effects attracted the attention of International Relations (IR) for at least two decades.<sup>1</sup> This 'neoliberal turn' also touched commentaries on populism, where populism is generally seen as a reaction against the neoliberal policies of mainstream parties.<sup>2</sup> Havertz is indicative, claiming that amid neoliberalism's triumph 'rage and resentment against the established order are on the rise. In many countries, this fundamental opposition takes the form of populism'.<sup>3</sup> In general, populist parties from left to right, are seen as a form of 'radical revolt' or 'insurgency' that challenges the neoliberal politics of systemic parties.<sup>4</sup> This view is not limited to the study of domestic politics but also has been highly influential in IR. For example, Mair<sup>5</sup> and Krastev<sup>6</sup> understand the rise of populism as a reaction against processes of neoliberal globalization and European integration, studies on transnational social movements identify the recent emergence of 'backlash politics' as a direct reaction against neoliberal policies<sup>7</sup> and, similarly, drastic changes in foreign policy, such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, have been read as populist responses to the neoliberal international order.<sup>8</sup> As Terragoni states, the opposition between populism and

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neoliberalism is central for understanding the very concept of populism, as it has become 'synonymous with a plebeian revitalization of democracy against neoliberalism.'<sup>9</sup>

Scholarship on 'neoliberal populism' shows, however, that the dynamics between neoliberalism and populism are more intertwined and complex than a simple opposition would presuppose. Indeed, while populism is effectively tapping into the discontent created by neoliberal economic policies, at the same time, its rise has often strengthened neoliberalism.<sup>10</sup> Especially, literature on neoliberal populism in Latin America has been examining the mutual enabling relationship between populism and neoliberalism.<sup>11</sup> For example, De La Torre shows how the adoption of populist discourses by Latin American leaders was combined with the actualization of neoliberal economic policies.<sup>12</sup> The case of Latin America is not an isolated one; Pauwels' analysis of Forza Italia and Lijst Pim Fortuyn shows that neoliberal populist parties claim to protect the people from corrupt elites while simultaneously enacting neoliberal economic reforms.<sup>13</sup> This conjunction of populist discourses with the promotion of neoliberal economic policies is also evident in the UK and the US.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Filc analysis of Argentina and Israel shows that populist leaders enforce neoliberal policies with the support of those parts of the population most damaged by these.<sup>15</sup> Similarly Özdemir exposes how populism has been instrumental to Erdoğan's strengthening of neoliberal economic policies while 'maintain[ing] popularity among the poor' and weakening opposition to authoritarianism.<sup>16</sup> This literature shows how so-called 'neoliberal populists' 'unite the upper-class beneficiaries of neoliberalisation with lower classes.'<sup>17</sup> As Freedon puts it, 'populism is often seen as an ideology of the dispossessed, and it may indeed recruit them, but it is not articulating their political agenda.'<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, populism and neoliberalism can be mutually reinforcing especially with regard to right-wing populism.<sup>19</sup> Their synergies have been increasingly observed at the ideational level, as right-wing identity politics and neoliberal policies have been mutually enabling.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, though neoliberalism claims to be 'colour-blind' or 'post-racial', Saull argues that in the UK neoliberalism's supposedly a-political and technical criteria of inclusion and exclusion enable the marginalization of non-white racial groups in the economy and act as a force multiplier for far-right populism.<sup>21</sup> The centrality of this dynamic to further the understanding of the intertwining of neoliberalism and populism(s) has been noted also by studies on Germany,<sup>22</sup> Hungary,<sup>23</sup> France<sup>24</sup> and the European Union.<sup>25</sup> As Konings argues, 'Neoliberal populism is the elephant in the room.'<sup>26</sup> Indeed, a burgeoning scholarship is increasingly investigating how neoliberal populist parties rise and perform in office.<sup>27</sup>

This article advances the knowledge of the neoliberalism/populism entanglement by focusing on the ideational-discursive component of neoliberal populism, specifically investigating neoliberalism as a host ideology of populism. To do this, I adopt a discursive-theoretical approach to populism<sup>28</sup> and understand populism as a specific discursive ideational phenomenon.<sup>29</sup> Contrary to 'content-based' approaches to populism, such an approach posits that populism 'should be regarded as a distinct ideology' where we find a narrative of a struggle between 'a people' and 'an elite' at its core.<sup>30</sup> Populism, however, is a 'thin' ideology' as it does not possess 'the same level of intellectual refinement and consistency as 'thick' or 'full' ideologies such as Marxism or Liberalism.<sup>31</sup> As a thin ideology, populism can 'cohabit with other, more comprehensive ideologies.'<sup>32</sup> This is especially relevant for populism in defining the very identity of the

‘people’ – populism’s crucial signifier.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, populism is unable by itself to define the identity of the ‘we’ in the name of whom its politics can be formulated – i.e. the people.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, populism needs to host a ‘thick ideology’ which provides the interpretative ideological framework to define the identity of its people as well as their adversaries – the elite.<sup>35</sup> This host ideology can come from across the political spectrum, which implies – following Stanley – that studying populism demands examining the ‘ways in which populism inflects with contextually hospitable “full” ideologies’.<sup>36</sup>

Conceptualizing how neoliberalism operates as a host ideology of populism, requires considering neoliberalism’s ideational component and necessitates going beyond a focus on its economic policies. This approach does not assume an artificial separation between the material and ideational components of neoliberalism. However, as Guardino claims, the distinction between neoliberalism as a set of political-economic choices and neoliberalism as a specific discursive-ideational formation is crucial for grappling with its relationship with populism.<sup>37</sup> The work of Wendy Brown<sup>38</sup> provides an entrance. Brown’s analysis shows how dismantling the demos in favour of market-driven mechanisms is constitutive of the neoliberal rationality of governing. This observation – read in conjunction with Mudde’s understanding of populism – highlights an inherent ideational tension structuring neoliberal populism. While neoliberalism aims at dismantling the collective subjectivity of the people, seen as an impediment to market freedoms,<sup>39</sup> populism sees the people as an intrinsically moral entity, which it elevates to the highest normative principle guiding political action.<sup>40</sup> As Quiroz puts it; ‘Under neoliberal premises, the appeal to the people becomes an oxymoron.’<sup>41</sup> This tension has often led neoliberal populist parties to be labelled as incongruous leading to ‘a highly dismissive attitude to the phenomenon of neoliberal populism.’<sup>42</sup> Instead, in line with Blühdorn and Butzlaff’s recent call, examining the constitutive tension within neoliberal populism implies understanding the relationship between these two phenomena as part of a wider discursive transformation of the meaning of democracy, its values and subjectivities.<sup>43</sup>

I evidence the importance of focusing on neoliberalism as a host ideology of populism via an analysis of the Italian Five Star Movement (5SM). 5SM originates from a blog launched in 2005 by comedian Beppe Grillo and web entrepreneur Gian Roberto Casaleggio. The blog ([beppegrillo.it](http://beppegrillo.it)) began as a communication platform beyond and against the mainstream media aimed at promoting political activism ‘from below’.<sup>44</sup> In 2009 5SM became a political party, pleading ‘to overhaul the traditional way of doing politics’.<sup>45</sup> Its main pillar was to exercise a form of ‘web-based direct democracy’<sup>46</sup> enabling 5SM’s electorate to not just directly select local and national MPs but also to decide how elected MPs should vote. After electoral successes at regional (2012) and general elections (2013), 5SM became the strongest political party in the 2018 general elections.

While it is generally argued that 5SMs host ideology is difficult to identify due to the party being ‘eclectic’<sup>47</sup> and its ideological position ‘atypical’,<sup>48</sup> ‘polyvalent’,<sup>49</sup> ‘flexible’<sup>50</sup> or even ‘lacking’,<sup>51</sup> my analysis shows how neoliberalism functions as 5SM’s host ideology. I advance this claim by focusing on the party’s online platform *Rousseau*. This platform is not a mere technical tool for the movement, rather it is a key feature. Its CEO – Davide Casaleggio – defines *Rousseau* as ‘the architecture of participation to promote democracy from below’.<sup>52</sup> As 5SM

operates almost exclusively online,<sup>53</sup> Rousseau has been an essential feature of 5SM's to appeal to a 'people' without any geographical mediation.<sup>54</sup> For this reason, Rousseau can be understood as a privileged site for examining 5SM's ideology, which, as my analysis shows, reveals that neoliberal rationality informs 5SM's populism. Specifically, I show how it disarticulates a collective identity of 'the people' by reducing it to an uninformed mass to be directed by technocratic means. The effects cannot be underestimated, as I show via an analysis of the relationship between 5SM and far-right populist party *Lega*. Both parties formed a coalition government between 2018 and July 2019. By focusing on a key concern of this government – migration – my analysis shows how 5SMs stance on this issue inadvertently advanced *Lega's* far-right, nativist understanding of 'the people'. This case, thus, illuminates how the rise of far-right populist parties is an unintentional 'Frankenstein' of neoliberal rationality, an unwanted, yet powerful political implication of neoliberalism.<sup>55</sup>

This article's contribution is twofold. First, it speaks to the growing literature investigating the relationship between neoliberalism and populism and their mutually constitutive dynamics. It does so by advancing the conceptualization of neoliberal populism from an ideational perspective, which shows how neoliberal rationality can inform populist parties regardless of their political economic approach. This line of inquiry is complementary to the focus of existing literature on neoliberal populism on the co-penetration of neoliberal economic policies and populist communication strategies. Second, it contributes to understand how neoliberal populism – so understood – interacts with far-right populism. Regarding this, my analysis of the interaction between 5SM and *Lega* shows that, even if inadvertently, neoliberalism as a host ideology of populism has the implication of enhancing support for far-right populism. This implication supports a growing scholarship showing how neoliberalism operates as a gateway for far-right populism.<sup>56</sup>

The analysis unfolds in three steps. First, I focus on conceptualizing neoliberalism as populist host ideology by analysing the link between neoliberal rationality and the ideational construction of the 'people'. This is done by bringing into conversation Brown's reading of neoliberalism and Mudde's ideational approach to populism. The following empirical analysis focuses on the case of Italy. Italy has been chosen as it is considered a 'political laboratory' of populism long before the current populist surge<sup>57</sup> but the success of 5SM has been understood as symptomatic of the current populist earthquake.<sup>58</sup> The first part exposes neoliberalism as a host ideology of 5SM and how it unravels the demos. I show this through a discourse analysis of statements made on the *Rousseau* platform. This analysis reveals that rather than empowering the people, 5SMs neoliberal rationality dismantles the people in favour of a form of 'top down managed' direct democracy.<sup>59</sup> The second part shows how a dismantled demos empowers the nativist understanding of the 'people' found in far-right populism through an analysis of the dynamic between 5SM and *Lega* on the issue of migration. The analyses of parliamentary debates and public discourses on this issue shows how 5SMs neoliberal populism fuels and legitimizes an approach to migration that advances *Lega's* nativist definition of the people.

## Neoliberalism as a host ideology of populism

How would neoliberalism as a host ideology define its people? To tackle this question, this section makes three analytical moves. First, I draw on Brown's Foucauldian inspired analysis of neoliberalism, providing an entry into how neoliberal rationality disentangles the collective subjectivity of the people by inscribing morality in the marketization of all aspects of life, including politics.<sup>60</sup> Second, I expose how Mudde's approach conceptualizes the people as an intrinsic moral entity, whose identity is defined by its host ideology. Third, bringing these two perspectives into conversation, I argue, reveals the constitutive ideational tension of neoliberal populism.

There is no settled definition of neoliberalism.<sup>61</sup> It has been analysed by different theoretical traditions, including Marxist 'economicism', the social democratic critique inspired by Polanyi, and the subjectivity-oriented inspired especially by the work of Michel Foucault.<sup>62</sup> While defining neoliberalism in different ways, these critiques all see it as 'profoundly antidemocratic'.<sup>63</sup> Neoliberalism's hostility towards democracy is almost a 'commonplace';<sup>64</sup> key aspects include the privileging of technocratic means of (international) governance through unelected institutions,<sup>65</sup> the use of exceptional legislation to undermine parliamentary processes of decision making<sup>66</sup> and the erosion of 'the conditions for a broader democratic culture' by neoliberal norms, specifically through the re-crafting of citizenship in terms of market-like relations.<sup>67</sup>

While a far-reaching engagement with this literature is beyond the scope of this contribution, this article builds on the centrality of the latter dimension in Brown's Foucauldian inspired analysis of neoliberalism, which understands it as a 'political rationality' of governing, underpinned by 'a normative form of reason'<sup>68</sup> that 'while foregrounding the market, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy; it involves *extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action*'.<sup>69</sup> This rationality is not limited to regulating the economy but aims at reshaping all aspects of societal, political and cultural life through the normative principles of economy and the market.<sup>70</sup> In this logic, the market becomes a 'principle of veridiction',<sup>71</sup> 'a new standard of truth'.<sup>72</sup> So understood, 'neoliberal reason' can also be disjoined from neoliberal economic policies so that also social and political movements 'that understand themselves as opposing neoliberal economic policies may nonetheless be organized by neoliberal rationality'.<sup>73</sup>

Neoliberalism can thus be understood as a form of political imagination where the market and market-like relations define individual subjects and their relations.<sup>74</sup> As Queiroz puts it: 'neoliberalism views individuals as free separate persons – self-contained and self-sufficient maximizers of their exclusively private ends'.<sup>75</sup> This implies a rejection of any external human limit to individual liberty, especially in the name of a collective subjectivity.<sup>76</sup> This point is important for understanding why neoliberalism aims at discarding the collective subjectivity of the people in a democratic setting.

To grapple with this issue, neoliberalism must be understood in conjunction with a long historical tradition of liberal thought that is sceptical of the democratization of politics. Indeed, liberal thinkers from Mill to Tocqueville feared the risk of 'mob-rule', which harboured the risk of 'the demagogic manipulations of the masses by a charismatic leader leading to dictatorship'.<sup>77</sup> Yet, while sceptical of the people, liberal democratic politics are configured as a balancing act between the exercise of individual liberty and

its necessary limits to ensure the sustainability of collective societal life in a democratic setting.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, in liberalism, fearing a tyranny of the majority coexists with the fear of unrestrained individual freedom so that liberal democracy advocates a system of checks and balances to mediate between individual liberty and collective life.<sup>79</sup> In contrast to this, neoliberalism rejects any form of collective ‘correction’ to individual freedom and sees the ‘collectivist impulse’ of liberalism as conducing to totalitarianism.<sup>80</sup>

Emerging out of the European interwar experience, which saw the rise of fascism, neoliberal thought, sees ‘public restrictions on individual liberty – issuing from a collective ... as intrinsically and inherently constituting despotism.’<sup>81</sup> Accordingly, neoliberalism ‘removes the concept of “the people” from its ideological corpus’.<sup>82</sup> Its political rationality of governing is based on dismantling the people and rejecting the realm of society as constitutive of this collective subjectivity engaged in democratic politics, which it sees as a threat to individual freedom.<sup>83</sup>

Brown’s work specifically exposes how neoliberal rationality pervades and undermines the *demos* – i.e. the collective subject of democracy – and instead conceives of democracy ‘as a market place’.<sup>84</sup> Processes of political debate, deliberation and confrontation are thus reshaped in terms of a market of competing entities whose value is defined by market logics. The result is the disintegration of ‘the very idea of the *demos*.’<sup>85</sup> While rejecting the *demos* as the constitutive element of democratic political life, neoliberal modes of reason elevate the market to the dominant normative principle, an intrinsically moral space in which progress and liberty can flourish. Through a reading of Hayek, intellectual pioneer of neoliberal thought, Brown argues that neoliberalism sees markets and morals conjointly as the ‘foundation of freedom, order and development of civilizations’ and ‘both are organized spontaneously and transmitted through tradition rather than political power’.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, as Hayek argued ‘the market is the basis for liberty precisely due to the way in which abstract equivalence “disembeds” the individual from societal contexts that deny his autonomy’.<sup>87</sup> Only the combination of morality and market, therefore, produces ‘liberty and spontaneous order’ while its opposite, society and democratic political life, become ‘demonized’.<sup>88</sup> Following Brown, morality finds its realm of spontaneous and organic realization in market rationality. This translates into a normative commitment to negate and dismantle the people because the ‘*demos*’ is seen as an artificially created form of collective subjectivity interfering with the natural order created by the neoliberal ‘markets-and-morals’ project.<sup>89</sup> In contrast to liberalism, therefore, ‘neoliberalism removes the sovereignty of the people, along with its decisional majority rule, from democracy.’<sup>90</sup> Neoliberalism and illiberalism, hence, share their opposition to democratic liberal politics, although from opposite ends. The former opposes its excessive collectivism, the latter its solipsism.<sup>91</sup>

Mudde’s discursive ideational approach to populism allows us to understand what this neoliberal normative commitment to dismantle the people implies for neoliberal populism.

Differently from Laclau, who defined populism as an ‘empty signifier’,<sup>92</sup> Mudde claims that attributing an inherent morality to ‘the people’ is the distinct discursive and ideational characteristic of populism.<sup>93</sup> From this standpoint, the opposition between people and elite becomes the central ideational, rather than structural feature of populism as a ‘thin ideology’.<sup>94</sup> Populism, thus, ‘considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the



corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonte generale* (general will) of the people.<sup>95</sup> Here, ‘[the] essence of the people is their purity, in the sense that they are “authentic”, while the elite is corrupt, because they are not authentic’.<sup>96</sup> Yet this moralization of the people characterizing populism does not provide clear metrics for defining the identity of such a group.<sup>97</sup> Instead, the people ‘are always indeterminate’ and their identity must be constructed.<sup>98</sup> For this reason, populism needs a more robust ‘host ideology’ to construct the identity of ‘the people’.<sup>99</sup> In other words, the host ideology serves the purpose to answer the question – Who is part of the ‘we’ – the people- and who is not?<sup>100</sup> The host ideology is therefore core to the discursive and ideational analytical approach to populism, suggesting that populist movements should be classified according to the type of host ideology they adhere to.<sup>101</sup> From this perspective, left-wing populist movements define their people following a class-based transnationalist agenda,<sup>102</sup> while right-wing populist movements define their people through nativist lenses.<sup>103</sup>

At the heart of neoliberalism as a host ideology of populism we thus find an ideational constitutive tension. On the one hand, neoliberalism does not have a *demos* because it does not have citizens but only individualized human capital as the core characteristic of neoliberalism is the belief in the inherent morality of market logics and the economization of all aspects of human life.<sup>104</sup> On the other, and in a specular way, following Mudde, populism’s presumption is that the people is a moral entity; a supposed homogenous group with the intrinsic ability of ‘doing the right thing’.<sup>105</sup> This moral entity relies on the host ideology to give it a collective identity, which is, however, precisely what neoliberal reason rejects. While the people is a crucial element in populism’s ‘moral universe’, neoliberal rationality is based on dismantling the people as a collective political subject and (re)inscribing morality to the natural order of the market. In the next section I turn to 5SM for an empirical illustration of how this constitutive tension between populism and neoliberalism affirms and denies the collective subjectivity of the people.

## Demos or ants? ‘the people’ in 5SM

5SM defines itself as post-ideological, claiming to transcend the political right-left spectrum.<sup>106</sup> Going beyond the ideological struggles of the traditional parties, 5SM suggests occupying a sort of middle ground, focused on finding competent solutions to real-world problems.<sup>107</sup> Yet, rather than accepting this connotation, it is essential to further investigate 5SM’s insistence on a ‘competent resolution of practical problems’ as a structuring characteristic of this party.<sup>108</sup> Indeed, the claim to occupy a neutral, a-political ground beyond ideological debate is a key characteristic of neoliberalism’s economization of the political sphere, as studies on the governing of migration,<sup>109</sup> organized crime<sup>110</sup> and economic crisis<sup>111</sup> have shown.

In what follows I show how neoliberal rationality informs the host ideology of 5SM by focusing on the party’s online platform, *Rousseau*. This platform, managed by Davide Casaleggio, son of 5SM cofounder Gianroberto Casaleggio, serves 5SM members in exercising direct democracy. *Rousseau* is stipulated as being anti-elitist, being these Eurocrats in Brussels or the corrupt national political class, because it allows members themselves to directly make politics. The role of this information technology embodies a sort of ‘technological utopianism’<sup>112</sup> through which ‘people empower themselves as



active subjects'.<sup>113</sup> Yet, despite implementing direct democracy, the platform is informed by a neoliberal rationality aimed at dismantling the demos and expressing a form of 'antirepresentational representation'.<sup>114</sup>

I develop this argument in relation to the materiality of the platform, the processes through which decisions are made, and most importantly, through the underlying political thought shaping the rationale informing the platform. This section considers each aspect in turn but places emphasis on the latter by investigating the laws and the knowledge distribution that *Rousseau* presupposes and produces.

First, the nature of *Rousseau* reflects the neoliberal rationality of dislocating the site of political decisions from the public into the private. A first aspect to note is that the platform itself is a corporation. The materiality of the platform, therefore, responds to the neoliberal logic of an economization of political life and the physical penetration of the market into the political sphere. Granting large corporations the ability to finance elections, as pointed out by Brown, is 'the ultimate icon of popular sovereignty in neoliberal democracy'.<sup>115</sup> From this perspective, corporations are allowed to invest in the 'capital' of the 'marketplace of ideas - i.e. speeches, to orient consumers' (i.e. the electorates) choices.<sup>116</sup> Yet, *Rousseau* modifies this logic by creating an alternative political platform to the existing institutions of the state. Indeed, on the platform, politics is *owned* by a private company that hosts it rather than trying to influence it from 'outside'. The platform thus becomes a tool of governing the public sphere. This indicates not simply the permeation of the market into the public sphere but rather 'the absorption of public or political concerns into markets'.<sup>117</sup> As such, *Rousseau* dislocates the site of politics and the processes of policy making from the public to the private sphere.

This is explicated directly in the second aspect – the processes through which decisions are made. *Rousseau* is a specific form of marketplace – a social network. Such networks, as Accetti and Bickerton argue, are underpinned by a specific 'technocratic claim'; that 'the Internet will lead to a more "effective" solution of common problems by mobilizing new forms of "collective intelligence"'.<sup>118</sup> Yet, simultaneously this has the effect of removing debate and decision making from the different forces represented in Parliament by reducing the legitimate voices to those only found on the platform. Moreover, it dislodges a key principle of democratic representation – the right of MPs to vote in free conscience. On numerous occasions, 5SM's MPs who exercised the right to free conscience and voted against the line expressed by the platform, were accused of breaking the contract between party and people and became subsequently expelled.<sup>119</sup> Moreover, 5SM's MPs must subscribe to a Code of Conduct stating that 'MPs commit to always cast the confidence vote to a government in which the movement is part of the majority'.<sup>120</sup> These practices correspond to an 'economic contractarian account of political representation' in which MPs 'stand to deliver the outcomes their supporters purchase'.<sup>121</sup> Terms such as 'contract' and 'Code of Conduct' are expressions of 5SMs neoliberal rationality as these displace political discussions about values with processes that regulate the conduct of individuals.<sup>122</sup> The materiality of the platform and its decision-making processes are, however, expressions of a more profound and pervasive neoliberal rationality underpinning *Rousseau*. To show this, I examine the writings of *Rousseau's* CEO.

A first aspect to consider are the laws governing the platform to implement and manage direct democracy. In his book *You are network – The revolution of business*,

*marketing, and politics through social networks*, Casaleggio articulates how to organize a social network as a form of self-organization.<sup>123</sup> His approach reflects the views of his father and 5SM co-founder GianRoberto Casaleggio in seeing the web as a ‘as a transparent, unified, coherent entity, with its own logic, laws, [and] agency’.<sup>124</sup> This recalls what Brown observes in relation to market laws, namely that these ‘arise ‘spontaneously’ and ‘knit human beings together independently of intentions’, establishing rules of conduct.<sup>125</sup> In the same way, Casaleggio identifies that ‘the life and the evolution of networks follow exact laws’,<sup>126</sup> that are similar to those functioning within ‘marketing, business, and organizations’.<sup>127</sup> As such markets and networks consist of a mass of individuals who unknowingly respond to pre-existing laws. Knowledge thus becomes key, as those with an understanding of these laws can use it to shape and manipulate the network. Casaleggio is explicit in this, arguing ‘their [the laws] knowledge allows using the networks to our advantage’.<sup>128</sup> The relationship between the few who know and the many who do not is thus central, revealing a crude understanding of democratic principles.

This is further evidenced by Casaleggio commitment to an electorate that is numerous, disconnected and unaware of systemic complexities. We read: ‘It’s necessary that the components are many in number, that they meet casually and that they are never aware of the system’s characteristics in its complexity’.<sup>129</sup> This statement embeds a fractured understanding of the demos, an individualized and unaware electorate. As such it is unsurprising that he compares social network’s to ‘ant colonies’ as ‘an ant must not know how the formicary works, otherwise all the ants would take on the best and least tiring roles, creating a coordination problem’.<sup>130</sup> While exalting the role of the people and direct democracy via *Rousseau*, this perspective reveals a neoliberal rationality that is profoundly sceptical of the people. In this Rousseau is in line with Brown’s thought which identified that neoliberal rationality disposes of the idea of ‘a well-educated public, one that has the knowledge and understanding to participate thoughtfully in public concerns and problems’.<sup>131</sup> That the people’s knowledge of the system is indeed an obstacle was already expressed by Hayek; ‘if we stopped doing everything for which we do not know the reason, or for which we cannot provide justification . . .we would probably very soon be dead’.<sup>132</sup>

Rather than being concerned with the best conditions for deliberative democracy, neoliberal rationality thus reflects the economic question of how to best allocate knowledge to maximize the functioning of the system. This is best captured in Hayek’s seminal article ‘The use of knowledge in society’, where we read: ‘The economic problem of society is (. . .) a problem of how to secure the best use of resources known to any of the members of society, for ends whose relative importance only these individuals know. Or to put it briefly, it is a problem of the utilization of knowledge not given to anyone in its totality’.<sup>133</sup> It is thus a question of how much individuals within the economic system must know for the overall system to work.<sup>134</sup> The answer being that individuals need very little knowledge of anything beyond their relative and individual concerns ‘in order to be able to take the right action’.<sup>135</sup> This is the case even if the actions of individuals are contextualized in broader structures and processes as ‘there is hardly anything that happens anywhere in the world that *might* not have an effect on the decision he ought to make. But he need not know of these events as such, nor of all their effects. It does not matter for him *why*’.<sup>136</sup> The parcellation of knowledge thus becomes the guiding

principle for people to decide and coordinate collective life. This ‘economizing principle’ regulates collective conduct rather than deliberative democracy.<sup>137</sup> Indeed, by keeping the electorate unaware and individualized it liberates the natural and organic laws embedded in the market. This resembles Hayek’s considerations on the invisible forces of the price system, which coordinate economic outcomes and give shape and meaning to individuals and their dispersed actions.<sup>138</sup> Casaleggio’s writings reflect this limited understanding of the role and scope of knowledge in democratic processes.

His key concern is how to coordinate the movement of the people so that ‘the ant colony . . . generates behaviours that lead to a complete organization’<sup>139</sup> In other words, the formicary must be governed by alternative and invisible mechanisms that are managed by the few. Rather than recalling Rousseau’s popular sovereignty, and its essential focus on educating the people to create a truly democratic government,<sup>140</sup> 5SM’s neoliberal rationality does the opposite. Indeed, drawing on Vilfredo Pareto’s theory of the elite, Casaleggio states that the key ‘empirical law’ of any network shows that ‘80% of phenomena are traceable to 20% of individuals’.<sup>141</sup> The people thus resemble a de-politicized mass with the network being tasked to direct it. This specific understanding of the role and scope of knowledge in democratic processes is revelatory of the neoliberal rationality expressed by the platform. Paradoxically, therefore, the neoliberal rationality embedded in 5SM renders its form of populism profoundly marked by its very enemy – elitism. This corroborates existing investigations into how forms of ‘technodemocracy’ and ‘liquid democracy’ are far from guaranteeing direct representation of the people and also erode representative mechanisms and democratic institutions.<sup>142</sup>

So far, I exposed how neoliberal logics are deeply embedded within 5SM. These reveal themselves in the materiality of the platform, its mode of governing, the conduct of the elected and the epistemological and normative assumptions concerning the laws and distribution of knowledge within the network. This makes the movement’s ‘populism’ less concerned with the people as a collective subjectivity but instead renders the people as atomized, mistrusted and unaware individuals. As such it constitutes an inherent friction with populism and its logics of constructing an indivisible collective identity<sup>143</sup> to be mobilized. Put differently, neoliberalism as a host ideology of populism undermines populism insofar as the latter relies on the former to articulate its collective identity – the people. The following section illustrates a key implication of this analysis by focusing on the interaction between the neoliberal populism of 5SM and *Lega*’s far-right populism.

### **Rousseau’s ants shout “Italians first!” – 5SM, neoliberal rationality and migration**

Before showing how 5SM’s neoliberal populism enabled *Lega*’s far-right policies, which I evidence via the issue of migration, it is important to sketch the political context of their interaction and to stress how the previous analysis allows us to understand the different functions that neoliberalism plays in both parties’ distinct forms of populisms.

In the run-up to the 2018 elections, *Lega* and 5SM campaigned in different electoral alliances. While the former campaigned together with *Fratelli d’Italia* and centre-right party *Forza Italia* and their coalition obtained 37% of votes, it did not win enough seats to form a government. Salvini, whose *Lega* won the majority of seats for this alliance (17,4%), then decided to become the junior partner in a government with 5SM (32,7%).<sup>144</sup>

Driving impetus behind this coalition was as shared populist hostility towards EU’s austerity and rules presented as being imposed by an elite of distant bureaucrats.<sup>145</sup> Though both parties being populist, their relationship with neoliberalism is different.

*Lega*, founded in 1991 as *Lega Nord* (Northern League), has historically supported neoliberal economic reforms, for example with its emphasis on tax reduction.<sup>146</sup> From an ideational perspective, however, *Lega Nord* was heavily regionalist, originally defining its ‘people’ through an ideational opposition between hardworking, economically motivated Northern and lazy and corrupt Southern Italians.<sup>147</sup> This changed after Matteo Salvini became leader in 2013. Modelled on Marine Le Pen’s Front National,<sup>148</sup> Salvini moved *Lega* away from its regional focus on Northern Italians and towards a national(ist) party interested in defending all ‘Italians’, while maintaining a neoliberal political economic outlook.<sup>149</sup> Expressed through the slogan ‘Italians firsts’,<sup>150,151</sup> this ‘sovereigntist turn’<sup>152</sup> moved new *Lega* ideologically closer to the already existing Italian main far-right populist party *Fratelli d’Italia* (Brothers of Italy) - direct descendant of the post fascist formation *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI).<sup>153</sup> *Lega* is therefore similar to other populist parties that combine support for neoliberal economic reforms with a far-right host ideology, like Trump’s Republican Party and UKIP in the UK.<sup>154</sup> 5SM, as analysed above, is different. Though neoliberalism, as rationality of governing, constitutes its host ideology it displays ambiguity towards neoliberal political economic policies. As argued by Martinelli, 5SM’s economic political outlook leans towards state interventionism.<sup>155</sup>

The table below illustrate these differences.

Political Parties - Thin/ Host ideology	Thin Ideology Populism	Host Ideology	Political Economy
Lega	‘People versus elite’	Far right – ethnic nativist definition of Italians	Neoliberalism, focused on tax reduction <sup>156</sup>
5SM	‘People versus elite’	neoliberal rationality- technocratic and individualised definition of the demos	State interventionism <sup>157</sup>

The following analysis investigates their interaction specifically focusing on the determining political concern during their time of coalition government – migration. Migration is an especially pertinent issue for investigating how different populisms define ‘their peoples’, as it is a ‘shortcut to the wider sociocultural definition of the borders of the political community’.<sup>158</sup> I treat the issue of migration as a field of study to show how neoliberal rationality operates as 5SMs host ideology and illuminate its effects and dynamics in the interaction with *Lega*. To do this, I draw upon parliamentary debates, statements made by party leaders, as well as the role of *Rousseau* in managing this issue. My analysis reveals that 5SMs response to migration was shaped by neoliberal rationality and disengaged 5SM from the politics of identity at stake in this issue. The effect was profound as it pushed *Lega*’s nativist definition of the ‘Italians’. This is in line with Brown’s argument that neoliberal rationality has set key conditions for the rise of far-right forces in Western democracies.<sup>159</sup> My analysis unfolds in three steps. First, I examine the two parties’ divergent stance on migration, which reveals their respective host ideologies. Second, a snapshot analysis of the parliamentary debate on migration shows how 5SM’s neoliberal rationality was complicit in *Lega*’s approach to the issue. Third, I expose how this translated into public debate.

The issue of migration has been one of the priorities of the 5SM-*Lega* government.<sup>160</sup> Yet, this united stand conceals two different ways of approaching the issue. *Lega*'s longstanding xenophobic approach to migration is widely documented, however, under the leadership of Matteo Salvini the focus on migration was enhanced.<sup>161</sup> Privileging the 'Italian' is central to *Lega*'s politics and shaped its anti-immigration rhetoric. For example, its 2018 programme proclaimed that 'for a "refugee" the State will not commit funds higher than those allocated to an Italian citizen on a 100% disability pension'.<sup>162</sup> Salvini, specifically shapes the issue through the populist lenses of a distinction between the people's friends and enemies, tweeting in January 2019 'who helps irregular migrants hates Italians and will be held responsible in front of the Law and History'.<sup>163</sup> *Lega*'s demos of reference is constructed along a strong nativist interpretation of who belongs to the nation.<sup>164</sup> In this *Lega* mirrors other populist right-wing parties across Europe,<sup>165</sup> which, are all deploying 'ethnic conceptions of nationhood'<sup>166</sup> to define the very identity of collective political community.

In contrast, 5SM has characterized migration as humanitarian emergency, rejecting the identity politics at stake in this debate.<sup>167</sup> Indeed, 5SM claims to be different from other parties on this issue, arguing '[w]e are post-ideological. 5SM wants the phenomenon of migration to be managed not suffered'.<sup>168</sup> A technical management language thus frames their understanding of migration whereas the difficulty of solving it originates from the political contest in the European Parliament where 'the European parties divided themselves up according to ideological belonging without achieving anything'.<sup>169</sup> The issue of migration is thus framed not as a discussion of contesting values and diverging ideas but as a problem of governance and management. This recalls Brown's observation that '[g]overnance replaces a political lexicon with a management lexicon', revealing neoliberalism's 'hostility to politics'.<sup>170</sup> Yet, as I show in the following analysis, the neoliberal approach informing 5SM advanced *Lega* nativist definition of the people.

A snapshot analysis of the parliamentary debate (thereafter PD), for the conversion of emergency decree n.113/2018 into law 840/2018, shows that this neoliberal rationality translated into support for *Lega*'s proposal of its anti-immigration law. In the debate *Lega* and 5SM jointly raised three main arguments in favour of the law.

First the urgent nature of the problem. Here, MPs from both parties remarked that as 'the problem is imperative and urgent' it requires 'a rapid and effective intervention'.<sup>171</sup> The imperative of urgency functioned as a means of justifying the requirement for an accelerated legislative procedure to manage the issue efficiently.<sup>172</sup> This claim of urgency by both parties reflects the way in which neoliberal rationale qualifies political choice through the managerial language of maximizing effectiveness to disqualify possible alternatives as unreasonable.<sup>173</sup>

This de-politicizing appeal to urgency interacts with a second trope; a populist appeal to defend the 'Italians' – a category constructed in antagonism to those accused of profiting from migration. Indeed, both parties agreed to fight the 'business of migration', which advances the economic interests of a minority (including human traffickers and NGOs rescuing migrants at sea) by 'damaging the many'.<sup>174</sup> The supposed struggle between profit-seeking actors and opponents of the 'migration business' re-articulates the populist trope of a corrupt and greedy elite that works against the interests of the people. Both the appeal to urgency as well as the claim to be the defenders of the people work together to allow both parties to articulate their anti-immigration measures as

being ‘in response to the needs of the Italians’.<sup>175</sup> As shown by Joppke for the cases of the UK and the US, this analysis also shows how neoliberalism enables far-right’s nationalist discourse on migration, fuelling a ethnic based (re)articulation of citizenship,<sup>176</sup> while rejecting the accusation of racism.

Indeed, both parties claim that this law is ‘simple common-sense’<sup>177</sup> and introduces ‘transparency’ into the management of migration.<sup>178</sup> Yet, the claim of being colour-blind or race neutral is not an innocent act as it has been key to the way in which the de-politicizing language of neoliberalism has supported the penetration of racialized ethno-centric criteria into policy making.<sup>179</sup> This has been shown in the case of far-right populist discourses in the UK<sup>180</sup> Hungary,<sup>181</sup> France<sup>182</sup> and the US.<sup>183</sup> Similarly, the case of Italy shows how the insistence on common-sense provides the ground for legitimizing racialized logics in the parliamentary debate. For example, in opposing the decree MPs from *Fratelli d’Italia* argued that its measures were not strict enough, appealing to the lack of common sense - ‘this is a word that Matteo Salvini declares often: common-sense. This is not common-sense. We would have wanted to help Salvini . . . [but] more could have been done . . . you should have had more courage’.<sup>184</sup> By articulating their reasons, the Fratelli d’Italia MPs capitalize on the neutral language of the ‘common-sense’ to promote even more stringent antimigration measures and moving the ground of the discourse even further to the right.

Combined, the emphasis on urgency, the claim of fighting against the business of migration and the rejection of the accusation of racism in the name of common-sense, present the antimigration law as an a-political technocratic response to increase the security of the demos. This is a shared theme running through both Lega and 5SM parties’ statements during the debate.<sup>185</sup> By framing the law as a ‘security guarantee’ for the Italians,<sup>186</sup> 5SM supported this exceptionally stringent anti-immigration law promoted by *Lega*, which included measures such as the revocation of humanitarian protections, punitive measures for NGOs saving migrants at sea and measures leading to the criminalization of migrants.<sup>187</sup> In doing so 5SM was advancing far-right *Lega*’s nativist definition of the ‘people’.

*Rousseau* had a prime function in this process, as 5SM made use of it to involve its members directly in the process and to legitimize this choice via its commitment to direct democracy. The case of Italian coastguard ship *Ubaldo Diciotti* is illustrative of this process. The ship rescued 190 people in international waters offshore the island of Malta on 16<sup>th</sup> August 2018 and entered the harbour of Catania (Sicily) on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August. Its passengers, however, were denied disembarking.<sup>188</sup> This order came directly from Salvini, then Minister of the Interior. For this reason, the courts of Agrigento and Palermo opened an inquiry and Salvini was investigated on accounts of kidnapping and the abuse of power.<sup>189</sup> Yet, according to the Italian Constitution (Art 96), the prosecution of ministers is subject to parliamentary authorization and can be refused if the alleged crime has been committed in the exercise of their official functions. As MPs from other centre and far-right parties expressed their support for Salvini, 5SM was dealt the deciding hand. The case was particularly controversial because the abolition of parliamentary immunity has been a central demand within 5SM’s populist rhetoric.<sup>190</sup> The decision of the MPs was delegated to the will of the ‘people’ via *Rousseau*. The network decided in favour of Salvini, and consequently, 5SMs MPs voted against prosecution. In this way, the platform allowed both, the MPs and their political leader



at the time, Luigi Di Maio, to eschew any political responsibility for their actions. This has been a running theme for the party as noticed for the selections of its candidates as well as the selection of their policy proposals.<sup>191</sup> In this instance, however, 5SM's approach was not isolated to the party but directly supported *Lega's* actions.

This approach not only advanced *Lega's* anti-immigration stance but also actively disqualified possible alternatives and resistances to *Lega's* nativist demos. Exemplary is the Calabrian town Riace which experimented with a new approach to the integration of migrants which received international praise.<sup>192</sup> Salvini criticized this approach ferociously, with his attacks being compared to 'lynching'.<sup>193</sup> The mayor, Domenico Lucano was subsequently arrested in 2018 on charges of supposedly facilitating illegal immigration.<sup>194</sup> While his arrest led to intense debate in Italy, Di Maio limited his interventions to concerns about the centrality of respecting the rules, which the mayor had supposedly violated.<sup>195</sup> Di Maio thus resorted 'to legalist strategies as a way to deal with public issues', mirroring prior 5SM practices that allow the party to justify its positions 'as obligatory solutions mandated by ... legal reasoning, rather than the product of ideological choices or political compromise'.<sup>196</sup> 5SM's approach thus eschews the terms of the debate, exhibiting the supposedly apolitical, procedural and formalistic rationality at the heart of neoliberalism.

In this section I showed how the neoliberal logics informing 5SM inadvertently supported *Lega's* agenda due to the party's seemingly apolitical and technocratic stance. This analysis must be considered in relation to Queiroz's analysis of the ideational entanglement between neoliberalism and far-right populism. Queiroz shows how in France and Hungary neoliberalism becomes an ideational ally of far-right populism when it contributes to co-authorizing the identity of the(ir) people; who are constructed as individualized entrepreneurs whose liberty is portrayed as challenged not only by foreigners but also by the poor.<sup>197</sup> In these cases, the combination of both ideational components functions as a power multiplier for the neoliberal populist party. Yet, the case of Italy shows also how the rise of far-right populism evades neoliberal control and how neoliberal rationality constitutes an enabling condition to affirm far-right populist policies at the expense of the neoliberal populist party. This is reflected in the evolving electoral dynamics between both parties. A year into the coalition government, during the 2019 elections for the European Parliament, 5SM lost 6 million votes and dropped to 17.07%, while *Lega* increased to 34.33%.<sup>198</sup> This inverted the relations of power within the coalition and initiated the dissolution of the coalition.<sup>199</sup> Various factors explain this outcome, such as 5SMs political inexperience,<sup>200</sup> *Lega's* political opportunism,<sup>201</sup> as well as voter turnout.<sup>202</sup> However, as this analysis exposed, it is also important to consider how the neoliberal rationality informing the host ideology of 5SM works as a condition of possibility for *Lega's* success. Indeed, the specific form of neoliberal populism which 5SM expresses becomes not only a legitimation tool but was also directly complicit in advancing *Lega's* far-right policies.

## Conclusion

This contribution advanced the understanding of neoliberalism as a host ideology of populism. Both phenomena were approached from a discursive-ideational perspective. Read in conjunction these two perspectives highlight the inherent ideational tension



structuring neoliberal populism. Where neoliberalism sees the market as the natural and inherently moral realm for the organic development of individualized and free human conduct, populism attributes an intrinsic moral character to the people whose identity is defined via the host ideology. While the former aims at dismantling the collective subjectivity of the people, seen as an impediment to morality and markets, the latter elevates it to the highest normative principle of politics.

This creates a tension for populist parties informed by neoliberal rationality such as 5SM. While relying on the will of the people, 5SM's neoliberal rationality simultaneously dismantles it, leaving a constitutive void in its populism. The absence of a people, I showed, is due to the neoliberal rationality shaping the host ideology underpinning 5SM's populism, which disentangles its populism from within. This, as I have shown, can also have the unwanted implication of strengthening far-right populism, as 5SMs inability in expressing a people beyond neoliberal techno-democracy directly propelled the nativist people postulated by *Legia*. Ultimately, this helps us to understand neoliberal reason as an enabling condition for the rise of far-right populism.

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## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Malte Riemann and Georg Löfflmann for commenting on the paper at different stages of its development. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and critique of the manuscript, and their insightful suggestions.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.