Has the Weberian disenchantment with the world finally freed people from the illusion that democracy is a panacea? For the past decade, once the glory and triumph of the western model over the socialist regimes had evaporated, we have been able to observe the numerous manifestations of popular misgivings about political participation and democratic institutions. Democratic malaise (Dahl 1998), the politics of resentment (Betz 1994, 1998a, b), political anomie, and protest movements are among the most frequent manifestations of this disillusion in many western democracies. Both electoral turnout and opinion polls testify to the endurance and extension of the problem. Nor have the new democracies which emerged from the collapse of the socialist systems escaped this general phenomenon of disillusion as shown by the return to power – in sheep’s clothing – of former communist party officials. These challenges to democratic governance vary according to the specificity of each national polity, but share some common features such as the decline of electoral support for political incumbents, a marked increase in electoral abstentionism, the volatility of the electorate, the growing fragmentation of the party system, the emergence of ad hoc social movements unrepresented by traditional political organisations, and the emergence of single-issue and/or radical parties.

Over the past ten years these phenomena have been extensively studied and documented on a case-by-case basis or in a more comparative and systematic way (see, for example, Dalton and Küchler 1990; Klingemann and Fuchs 1995; Held 1993). However, there has been some difficulty in making sense of these new manifestations of democratic malaise. Do they really constitute a challenge to democratic institutions or is it merely a transitory and recurrent problem of adaptation or adjustment? How should we classify these new social movements,
actors and organisations? And should we analyse the transformations taking place within the party systems as simple conjunctural adjustment or as major political, ideological and institutional realignments?

These questions have been made more complex by the emergence, or rather the re-emergence, of the concept of populism as an empirical reality and an academic issue. For a long time, the word had a rather circumscribed application and was mostly applied to North American political movements advocating the power of the people against the corporate ‘fat cats’ and corrupt political parties. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was loosely extended to a completely different phenomenon, that of political mobilisation as the mixture of relatively formal electoral politics and charismatic leadership found in less developed countries, the archetype of which was Perónism in Argentina. The concept was again stretched by applying it to dictatorial regimes in the Third World where elections effectively ‘rubber-stamped’ dictators with the semblance of popular legitimacy. With this extension, both the concept and the word lost most of their heuristic utility and were generally used as a convenient label to designate unfamiliar or unusual forms of political mobilisation. This qualification was often applied retrospectively, for instance to political movements such as General Boulanger’s campaign in late nineteenth-century France, or to the Mouvement Poujade at the end of the Fourth Republic. This eclectic collection of situations, phenomena and data have led many observers and analysts to believe that there is no such thing as ‘populism’, but, rather, a mix of extremely heterogeneous situations which can be analysed according to type, but which cannot be reduced to any form of comprehensive unity. Ionescu and Gellner (1969) and Canovan (1981) reached more or less the same conclusion – the extreme difficulty, not to say, impossibility of coming up with a definition or an approach capable of subsuming the differences. Since these early and stimulating studies, however, the landscape has changed. First of all, populism has returned both as an empirical reality and as an academic concern. In addition, the concept is no longer used to describe, almost exclusively, Third World countries governed by charismatic leaders, but has increasingly been applied to situations in Western Europe. Although populism is still the favourite concept used to designate the Chavez regime in Venezuela for instance, it is increasingly associated with European leaders, movements or parties, which has meant that the new approach is much closer to the North American tradition than was previously the case.