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# Populism

Issue 5  
June 2022

Newsletter of the Populism Specialist Group  
Political Studies Association

from the **squares**  
to the **pandemic**

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# Editorial

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Political Studies  
Association



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Last year marked the 10-year anniversary of the emergence of the proto-populist movements of the squares. As the populist moment of the early 2010s fades away, and with the pandemic signalling the end of one era and the beginning of another, we are called to reflect upon the trajectory of populism during the past decade: What did populism look like then, and what does it look like now? What are the consequences of institutionalisation? Where are populist politics heading to? The 5th issue of *Populism* is dedicated to this theme and, through the various contributions and interventions that it hosts, seeks to reflect upon these questions.

On page 3 the reader can find an overview of our past events. These include the conference *Populism, Protest, and New Forms of Political Organisation: Ten Years after the Movements of the Squares* that we jointly organised with DVPW Populism Group Initiative in September 2021 in Berlin, and our participation in the Annual International Conference of the PSA in York in April 2022. On page 2, you will find our group's news and announcements including a Call for Papers for our 6th annual workshop entitled *Populist Politics in the Post-Pandemic Landscape* that will be held in Brighton in September 2022. This issue hosts two interviews with our keynote speakers in the Berlin conference, Cristina Flesher Fominaya and Paolo, who reflect on the transformations of populist politics over the last decade, their victories and setbacks but also challenges in the post-pandemic era. You will find these interviews on page 6.

This issue hosts six reviews of books that have been published in late 2021 and make significant contributions in the continuously growing literature of populism. Francesco Melito reviews Kim's *Discourse, Hegemony, and Populism in the Visegrád Four*, Adrià Porta Caballé reviews Biglieri and Cadahia's *Seven Essays on Populism*, Sophia Hatzisavvidou reviews Prentoulis' *Left Populism in Europe: Lessons from Jeremy Corbyn to Podemos*, Anton Jäger reviews Gerbaudo's *The Great Recoil: Politics after Populism and Pandemic*, Juan Pablo Ferrero reviews Paodan's *Anti-Neoliberal Populisms in Comparative Perspective: A Latinoamericanisation of Southern Europe?* and Lazaros Karavassilis reviews Carlos de la Torre and Trethep Srisa-Nga' *Global Populisms*.

On page 22 you will find our publications alert with suggested books and articles published between the last issue and this one. Finally, I would like to thank Andy Knott and Thomás Zicman de Barros for helping me out with the last stages of this issue.

The Editor,  
Giorgos Venizelos

# Announcements



## Call for papers

Populist politics in the post-pandemic landscape

**6th Annual Populism Specialist Group Workshop**

**22 – 23 September 2022**

**University of Brighton**

**(In-person event)**

At the dawn of the COVID-19 outbreak, pundits rushed to announce the death of populism. However, reality suggests that populism remains a salient feature of contemporary politics. It wasn't just that incumbent populists survived the pandemic, but emergent populists have capitalised upon this opportunity, articulating classic but also novel political demands. This highlights the relevance of populism as well as its critical and reflexive study – and through focusing on its encounters with those topics already explored but also with emergent ones.

In contributing to the burgeoning field of populism studies, we welcome cross-disciplinary theoretical, methodological and empirical proposals that are related, but by no means restricted, to the following themes:

- Anti-populism and populist hype
- Pandemic politics
- Environmentalism
- Feminism
- Class
- Nationalism

## How to submit your paper proposal

Please send a 250 words abstract in PDF form, including your paper title, name, email and affiliation to Giorgos Venizelos ([george.venizelos@sns.it](mailto:george.venizelos@sns.it)) by the 1st of June 2022. Please indicate 'Populism workshop' in the subject line.

We will notify applicants by the 1st of July 2022.

There is no participation fee but presenters should sort out their accommodation and travel themselves.

We strongly encourage junior researchers, researchers of the Global South, women and minorities to submit their proposals.



# Activities

## Populism, Protest, and New Forms of Political Organisation: Ten Years after the Movements of the Squares

Report from our Berlin conference



For most of us, the joint conference of the DVPW Populism Group Initiative and the PSA Populism Specialist Group that took place in Berlin between the 8th and 10th of September 2021 was the first opportunity to meet in-person after almost two years of online events. It is true that many could not make their way to Germany and participated with valuable contributions remotely, but the possibility of informal discussions and exchanges that an in-person event promotes reminded us of the importance of this kind of interaction.

The main topic of the conference was the tenth anniversary of protests movements that started in 2011. It was a good opportunity to construct overviews of how politics has changed since, but also of the impacts for political theory and the challenges for the future.

The event had two keynotes. In the first day, Cristina Flesher Fominaya presented a general outline of the ten years since the outburst of protests such as the *Indignados*. She discussed how these protests impacted and inspired left-wing populist movements, and how to evaluate the limits of party-movements, notably in Spain. Paolo Gerbaudo, who was the keynote speaker on the second day, discussed the challenges of populist parties today. Building on his previous research on digital parties, his presentation fostered a debate on the future of these organisations in a post-pandemic world.



Williames Sousa Borari presenting from the Amazon

The organising committee is to be applauded, as the two keynote addresses combined very well with the various panels of the conference, which also raised important debates on how theory and empirical studies articulate. Already in the first panel, inspiring presentations by Arthur Borriello and Andy Knott, for instance, invited us to move beyond formalism and think of practical conditions and organisational strategies fostering populism. Mark Devenney and Emmy Eklundh, in their turn, presented fruitful reflections to think of radical democratic populism beyond fantasies of sovereignty and closed identity. As I read it, in one way or another all the presentations that followed somehow dialogued with these main topics, discussing both practical aspects participating in the success or failure of protest movements and left-wing populism all over the world and the challenges of a radical democratic mobilisation.

The collaboration between the PSA Populism Specialist Group and the brilliant colleagues in Germany has set the template for future projects elsewhere in Europe and beyond.



*Thomas Zicman de Barros*



Post-conference drinks in Berlin

## Report from the PSA Annual Conference in York: Politics from the Margins

The 72nd PSA Annual International Conference in the quaint city of York marked a long-awaited return to in-person participation through its hybrid format after the 2020 conference had to be cancelled altogether and took place exclusively online in 2021.

Consequently, on 11 - 13 April 2022, more than 900 participants, of which 500 attended in-person, came together at the University of York and in the digital sphere to present their work revolving around the conference theme 'Politics from the Margins'.

The PSA Populism Special Group also benefited from the in-person conduct, resulting in a vibrant conference feeling and fruitful informal exchange between and after the panels. With a total of 8 panels and 37 speakers from all over the world and the cooperation with three other special groups (Left Radicalism; Rhetoric, Discourse & Politics; Women and Politics), the Populism Special Group offered a colourful programme that paved the way for productive and thought-provoking discussions.

Thereby, the presentations showed a myriad of novel angles to grasp the gist of the phenomenon of populism. Accordingly, some panels provided a new thrust to the long-lasting debates circling around populism and nationalism, the Populist Radical Right, Left-Populism as well as the rhetoric of populism. Others broke comparably new ground by critically engaging with the use of the term populism in discourse and the ambivalent relation between Populism and Feminism. Besides the variety of the topics, the enthralling panels covered a rich mixture of abstract-theoretical contributions and empirical investigations.

Altogether, the exciting panels indicated to me that the ostensible saturated field of populism research still harbours a plethora of new, interesting avenues. The great interest in the presentations and topics was reflected in the large audience, which ensured a full panel room throughout the conference and raised the tongue-in-cheek demand for a lecture hall for the Populism Group at the next conference.

On a personal note: Besides the thought-provoking research, I was especially amazed by the outstanding atmosphere in the Populism Specialist Group.



The Populism Specialist Group's panels attracted a lot of attention as the rooms were constantly packed.



The PSA Conference was my first ever in-person academic conference, and I was duly nervous before the days in York. However, this insecurity dissipated very quickly thanks to the members of the group, some of whom have known each other for a long time, but who nevertheless welcome new faces with open arms. So, what I found at the conference was a supportive, encouraging, and welcoming environment that enabled productive debates among the participants. This informal exchange was flanked by the daily get-together of the populism group in the aftermath of the conference. In fact, the vivid exchange thus did not stop at the gates of the university but found its way into the pubs of York as well. I am convinced that these stimulating debates triggered by the panels and the informal exchange will be continued at the upcoming PSA Populism Specialist Group workshop in Bristol at the end of September as well as next year's PSA Conference in Liverpool.



*Dominik Schmidt, graduate student in the Master's program 'Political Theory' at the Goethe-University Frankfurt and the Technical University of Darmstadt.*



Post-conference drinks in York



# Conversations

## 10 years after 'the squares': participation, institutionalisation and the right-wing backlash

Interview with Cristina Flesher Fominaya



You keynoted the conference 'Populism, Protest and New Forms of Political Organisation: Ten Years after the Movements of the Square' that we co-hosted with the Populism Group of the German Association of Political Science. The 'event' of the square movements sparked a lot of research with respect to protest tactics, organisation and political vision. What is the state of the art now, ten years after the Indignados? What new research themes have emerged?

Ten years is a good amount of time to reflect back on what was such a convulsive and profound political experience. The movements of the squares mobilised the participation of millions of people, not just during the encampments but in a sustained trajectory of mobilisations for several years afterwards. Scholars have tried to make sense of what happened in the intervening years, and of course there have been new developments following the original 'events' such as the development of new political parties or the resurgence of older ones. Three main themes of scholarship that emerged since focus on *origins*, *dynamics* and *outcomes*. My book *Democracy Reloaded* addresses all three aspects for the 15-M movement. It traces the evolution of that movement, starting with a genealogical approach to its origins, evolution and consequences. One clear aspect of these movements has been their preoccupation with democracy, not just in terms of prefigurative experimentation but as a central issue. This is an ever more present concern in the context of the pandemic and the role of disinformation and misinformation in weakening the ability to respond effectively to the threats the pandemic poses, as well as increasing polarisation.

Ramon Feenstra and I are editing a special issue

entitled '15-M and Democracy 10 years on' for *Social Movement Studies Journal* (2022). The contributions express well some of the key research themes that have emerged: the legacy of 15-M on mutualism in the context of the pandemic; the biographical consequences of 15-M; the political economy of participation and a reconsideration of some of the 'failures' of participation and engagement with labour/capital; and an analysis of the unintended consequences of the movement in increasing repression and criminalisation, something I have also been writing and speaking about since 2011. The experience of municipalism as a result of the movements is another area of research, as is the important resurgence of feminism and feminist economics; the collective learning produced by the movement; the generation of social capital as a result of the squares experience; and the role of the movements' media ecologies in forging a legacy in civic engagement and communicative practices.

Of course, research into movement-parties which have not really been studied much since the 80s and 90s, is another key area of inquiry that emerged since. There is now ever more work on right-wing parties and their relationship with right-wing movements, which is an indirect outcome of the movement of the squares as well. So, this gives you some sense of the burgeoning field of research that has been stimulated by the movements of the squares.

## 'I think we need to distinguish between parties that have strong relations with movements and 'movement-parties'

To me, the most important impact of the movements lies in the resignification of democracy and its recasting as a central problematic rather than a naturalised notion that is taken for granted. These movements emerged from a global financial crisis, but we are now in a world where cascading crises are challenging us profoundly. Our ability to address them is tied intrinsically to the robustness and ability to innovate of our democracies.

Political parties that arose after the square movements' experience, such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos

in Spain, sought to represent grassroots claims in mainstream political arenas and bring about progressive social change. But, as we have seen, their trajectory in power was quite disappointing. Is the institutionalisation of social movement claims the very name of contradiction? Is institutionalisation necessarily detrimental for such projects, or can we perhaps think of successful experiences in other parts of the world?

I think we need to distinguish between parties that have strong relations with movements and 'movement-parties' which are the consequence of these movements and are studied as self-contained political actors. Most research does the latter, but we should be doing more of the former, although it is very challenging methodologically speaking. For the most part, movements are movements and parties are parties, with fundamentally different logics of collective action, but of course, that doesn't stop people trying again and again to forge new forms between them, with some interesting results.

## **'I don't agree with those who argue that the trajectory of these parties was disappointing.'**

I am not sure I agree with those who argue that the trajectory of such parties was disappointing. In Spain, the fact that they governed the major cities of the country at all was a miracle given the stronghold established parties had had up until that point. City governments under Manuela Carmena and Ada Colau, for example, demonstrated incontrovertibly that it is possible to have an explicitly feminist agenda that transforms the lives of citizens for the better. They instituted important changes in urban policies (e.g. public space/environment/social welfare and energy provision/participatory innovations) and showed that a progressive agenda can be implemented successfully while massively reducing public debt and increasing transparency. They have also had an important influence on city governments elsewhere and in international forums.

Of course, many movement actors want and expect their every demand to be immediately implemented. For this reason, movement-parties will always be

doomed to fail, not least because heterogeneous and complex movements like 15-M rarely, if ever, have a unified or clear set of demands, so you can never please everyone. Movements thrive, in part, precisely because of their indeterminacy; and new movement-parties are supported with such enthusiasm, in part, because of their initial indeterminacy: everyone can imagine and 'hang' their own particular issue and vision on to the new yet to be created party. Once the party formalises policy, many people will be disappointed.

Cases like Syriza are very different. Syriza didn't emerge from the squares but rode the wave of energy generated in the squares to gain electoral benefits. Such types of movement-parties have a firmly established party logic prior to this, which is much less elastic and open to change and experimentation. Institutionalisation of parts of movements can have a negative effect in co-opting leaders or sucking energy from movements to formal political arenas. But this can also be because movements have already reached an impasse or ran out of steam by that point, leaving some people looking for new options to realise their goals; while others retreat back into more submerged movement spaces. Meanwhile, new actors and movements bubble up and the cycle continues.

The anti-austerity protest cycle is now closed but we of course observe other issues, and struggles, emerging. In recent years, 'climate change' has assumed a central position in political discourse. Greta Thunberg, Extinction Rebellion but also big businesses articulate distinct visions of environmentalism which, sadly, confirms its importance. Are we likely to observe climate action? What are the prospects and obstacles?

Environmental movements have been fighting climate change in some form or other for a long time now, and they always come up against the same issue, which is the dependence on major energy

## **'When in power, it is possible to have an explicitly feminist agenda that transforms the lives of citizens for the better'**

companies and the massive power they wield over political decision makers. Consumer changes and lifestyle changes are all very good and important for many reasons. But it will take fundamental rethinking and shifting of priorities to tackle climate change. 15-M argued that real democracy means placing life over capital. Sadly, our world is still governed by a logic that places capital over life. There has been some forcing of a shift in priorities in the context of the pandemic, but the threat (and reality) of climate change has not yet provoked this change. I would like to be hopeful, but if you look at the increased criminalisation of protest in current UK legislation passing through parliament, much of which is deliberately targeted against climate activists, it is difficult to see those kinds of government taking any kind of meaningful action. They would rather spend their energies silencing dissent from people trying to save the planet. Of course, the UK is not at all exceptional in this regard, but is just one current example.

## **‘governments spend more energy silencing climate activists instead of trying to save the planet’**

While most commonly social movements are seen as a leftist thing, we have recently observed the proliferation of right-wing protests. Donald Trump’s supporters, for example, stormed into the Capitol in January 2021. This was an unprecedented event in US politics. During the pandemic we witnessed anti-vaxx and no-mask protests, backed by the right and clashing with the police. Where are right-wing grassroots politics headed organisationally, in terms of wider appeal etc.; is this a new development?

Social movement scholars have long ignored (for the most part) right-wing movements, for understandable reasons. As I argue in my book *Social Movements in a Globalized World*, we no longer have that luxury. There is a real burgeoning of the literature on right-wing movements, and this is very welcome because many of them pose such a threat to democracy and well-being. We need to understand them better. They are very effective at recruitment, mobilisation and especially disinformation for political purposes. The pandemic has provided stark evidence of how these

## **‘the pandemic has provided stark evidence of how these movements can literally pose a threat to democracy and life through the propagation and mobilisation of no vax and conspiracy-drive movements.’**

movements can literally pose a threat to democracy and life through the propagation and mobilisation of no vax and conspiracy-drive movements. It would be overly simplistic and empirically wrong to categorise the no vax and conspiracy theorists as ‘right-wing’, but right-wing actors have played a key role. I have an article coming out in *American Behavioral Scientist* called ‘Mobilizing During the COVID-19 Pandemic: From Democratic Innovation to the Political Weaponization of Disinformation’ that addresses this issue in terms of its impact on democracy. I also show, however, how the movements of the squares generated democratic innovation that has helped address the challenges of the pandemic. The pandemic brings these differences into stark contrast in a fascinating way. At Social Movement Studies we are editing a special issue on mobilising during the pandemic that should be out hopefully in 2022.

**Interview conducted by Giorgos Venizelos**

Cristina Flesher Fominaya (PhD University of California, Berkeley) is Professor of Global Studies at Aarhus University. She is an internationally recognised expert in European social movement and politics, the Editor in Chief of the journal *Social Movement Studies Journal* and co-founder of open access *Interface Journal*. She is the author of *Democracy Reloaded: Inside Spain's Political Laboratory from 15-M to Podemos* (Oxford University Press 2020) and *Social Movements in a Globalized World 2nd Edition* (Bloomsbury 2020) and co-editor of *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary European Social Movements* (2020).



## Capitalism is moving from neoliberalism to neostatism

Interview with Paolo Gerbaudo



What does the emergency situation generated by the pandemic teach us about contemporary politics, and what does the post-pandemic political landscape look like?

I think that the 2010s populist moment is fading away, and that it's about time to clarify the nature of its populism and the dynamic it produced. In my book, I argue that what we described as 'populism' indicated not only a strategy but also a structural condition that has forced both left and right to refocus on lower income brackets—on the squeezed downwardly-mobile middle class, and the impoverished working class.

### **'I think that the 2010s populist moment is fading away'**

Contrary to those who see populism as a shorthand 'horseshoe theory' of ideology, where left and right unite in the same cauldron, the 2010s populist moment has been a phase of extreme polarisation, with the right going back to nationalism, and the left reclaiming socialism. In the present moment, it's increasingly clear that populist formations that had tried to escape this divide, such as the Five Star Movement, are now forced to position themselves either on the left or the right.

The populist moment has been decisive in reorganising political space, and populism will be with us for as long as mass democracy exists, but after having saturated that political space it is no longer the main element of distinction among emerging political actors. Now the battle has turned much more towards questions of substance: material demands, class interests, and what kind of coalition can be built.

With the critique of globalisation and the markets, and with the climate crisis, we are witnessing the return of the nation as a central political force. Is this the terrain of the right, or can the left compete here? If so, how does the leftist vision of the nation differ?

This return of the nation is happening regardless of people's views about it. It is the result of the implosion of globalisation, and the fact that that implosion was accompanied by a liberal discourse about the need to overcome the primacy of national sovereignty. Now, as happened during other crises of capitalism, that edifice is crashing down. Global supply chains have been proven to be very fragile, for example, and the risks they entail are now considered unsustainable.

What's more, the US no longer has unrivalled dominance as the only world superpower. The confrontation between China and US will facilitate a tendency towards a renationalisation of some industries and the regionalisation of international markets.

In this context, the left should question the vapid liberal cosmopolitanism that it sometimes embraced during the aegis of globalisation. A true left internationalism starts from place and sense of belonging, and acknowledges that political communities are still organised along national lines, just as governments are still defined by and large as nation-states. Democracy is both *demos* and *topos*, people and place.

### **'A true left internationalism starts from place and sense of belonging, and acknowledges that political communities are still organised along national lines, just as governments are still defined by and large as nation-states'**

It's obvious that when confronted with the chaos that stems from a failing globalisation, people want to reclaim forms of political control and social and economic protection at the national level. Throughout their history, before the neoliberal era, socialist and communist movements have fought for national autonomy and national self-determination—so what's required is a return to what was the standard line for the left until the triumph of market ideology.

*In your work you claim that the neoliberal paradigm is eroding. What comes after it?*

My thesis is that capitalism is moving from neoliberalism to neostatism—that is, toward a model of capitalism where the state is far more interventionist than it was during the golden era of neoliberal globalisation. We saw this during the pandemic: there were levels of state mobilisation in the form of lockdown measures, mass vaccination campaigns, and furlough schemes for workers who would have otherwise been laid off.

This was a very instructive moment. It showed that if the state wants to take radical measures, it can. These actions constitute a stark departure from the narrative of political impotence often used by neoliberals as part of their 'There Is No Alternative' discourse.

We are also witnessing the recuperation of Keynesian policies, not only on the left, but also on the right. Regardless of their ideologies, mainstream political leaders like Biden in the US and Johnson in the UK are adopting measures related to deficit-spending, major infrastructure investment, and even industrial policy and planning—ideas long abandoned during the neoliberal era. It's evident that policy-making no longer corresponds to the view pushed by neoliberals, and that neoliberals themselves face

**'The post-neoliberal future will be a capitalist future: capitalism has existed in many ways or forms, and is not tied to neoliberalism as the only viable model'**

an epistemological crisis: they are now unable to explain how society works.

But that shift doesn't necessarily create a better society. The post-neoliberal future will be a capitalist future: capitalism has existed in many ways or forms, and is not tied to neoliberalism as the only viable model. It can also thrive under a regime of state interventionism, as seen in the Chinese model of state capitalism, which many policymakers in the West are now trying to mimic.

The question for the left is how to exploit the political opportunities a more bogged-down and national capitalism offers in terms of demanding higher wages, better working conditions, and more efficient public services. We have the chance to construct a progressive and democratic statism; if we don't, the statism we get is likely to be the corporatist, exclusionary one the right demands.

*The pandemic proved the challenges the left faces in building a potent alternative to alt-right claims for 'freedom' and 'liberties'. How do we tackle that challenge?*

**'anti-vax and anti-lockdown sentiment is the regurgitation in extreme form of typical neoliberal motives'**

As Janan Ganesh has written in the *Financial Times*, the pandemic showed us that many on the populist right, beginning with Donald Trump, were not really authoritarian but rather libertarian. Many who had until then campaigned for national sovereignty and stronger state intervention turned against the state precisely at the moment the state demanded some small sacrifices from its citizens.

To me, anti-vax and anti-lockdown sentiment is the regurgitation in extreme form of typical neoliberal motives: suspicion of bureaucracy; possessive individualism; and a cult of choice that disregards how many phenomena we are immersed in are fundamentally collective.

The measures taken by governments were certainly

# 'The 2010s form of left-wing populism seems to have expired for the time being, but it has not necessarily failed'

extreme, but what would have been the alternative? Ultimately, governments took these decisions not because they wanted to, as argued by former left philosophers turned conspiratorial, such as Giorgio Agamben; to the contrary, they did so because society was faced with a very serious threat—a pandemic that to date has killed over five million people.

What is remarkable about all this is that, despite very vocal dissent by anti-vaxxers, they have been proved to be a tiny minority, with the large majority of the population abiding by anti-pandemic measures. This majority often 'stayed at home' not because of government injunctions, but because of their own fear of getting infected. This is something anti-vaxxers do not want to accept. It is not government that imposed it: it was citizens in their majority that demanded it, and the state complied.

The (left) populism of the 2010s was a response to neoliberalism. Some argue that after Syriza and Podemos, left populism has failed. Should we proclaim its death, or should we expect it to re-emerge in a different shape and with different frames? What does the left populism of the 2020s look like, and what is its future after institutionalisation and normalisation?

The 2010s form of left-wing populism seems to have expired for the time being, but it has not necessarily failed. It sprung from the particular conditions of the early 2010s when people were furious about the financial crisis, and the fact that austerity policies wanted ordinary people to pay for bankers' mistakes. Since mainstream political parties were complicit with the super-rich, that led to a widespread popular outrage reflected in the occupation of public squares, and then the attempt to find new political parties and candidates to champion those popular demands.

This is basically what populism in the 2010s was about. It was a sudden upsurge of popular

contestation cracking the sclerotic political system. And that explosion has had profound effects.

On the left specifically, it has contributed to rising concern about economic inequality, and has made people more aware of the need to take state power. It has also contributed to reviving socialism and giving it a sense of actuality and timeliness that it had long lost. Many of the characters of the new socialist wave—from Corbyn to Sanders, and from AOC to Ilhan Omar—reflect in their way of doing politics the cultural and psychological change that the populist moment brought.

As things stand, we seem to be past the populist moment, and we are witnessing a revival of more traditional left identities. But as Laclau and Mouffe have taught us, populism is a transhistorical phenomenon, and one which is inherent in the character of contemporary democracy. That means we are very likely to soon witness new populist phenomena. In fact, if we look, they are already there—just not in the progressive form we might like.

**Interview conducted by Giorgos Venizelos**

Paolo Gerbaudo is a sociologist and political theorist at King's College London. He is the author of *The Digital Party* (2019) and *The Great Recoil: Politics After Populism and Pandemic* (2021) out with Verso.



# Book reviews

## Populism(s) in the V4 and the floating meaning of the 'people'



Review of *Discourse, Hegemony, and Populism in the Visegrád Four*, by Seongcheol Kim (Routledge, 2021)



By Francesco Melito,  
Jagiellonian University

Central-Eastern Europe is often described as the cradle of illiberal democracy in the European Union. Over the past years, an academic consensus has emerged pointing to 'democratic backsliding' in the region. This hasty judgment, however, does not take into consideration the different trajectories these relatively new democracies have followed (Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley, 2018). To make this picture even more incomplete, there is a tendency to equate 'illiberalism' and 'populism' as two sides of the same coin. Seongcheol Kim's book is a much-needed work to overcome simplifications of the 'illiberal backlash' as it offers an in-depth study of the diverse shapes populism has assumed in the region beyond the equivalence between populism and illiberalism. The book aims to enhance clarity in the comprehension of the political scene in the Visegrád Four (V4: Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia) by focusing on the construction of the 'people'. The result is a nuanced differentiation of populisms that sheds light on the political trajectories of these countries in the last 30 years and the relation (if any) between populism and illiberalism (most visible in the authoritarian hegemonic projects discussed in the final chapter of the book). Rather than a monolithic populist contestation of the post-1989 order, the picture that emerges from the analysis is a complex one where the empty signifier 'people' comes to embody different worldviews and different hegemonic formations.

The book is firmly grounded within post-foundational discourse theory and it is inspired theoretically and methodologically by Ernesto Laclau's work on populism (Chapter 1 and Chapter 2). This approach is particularly suitable "for digging deeper into the meanings of populist discourses as well as their discursive contexts of emergence" (p.4).

Accordingly, not only does the book contribute to understanding what the 'people' means in the Visegrád context; it also explains populism against the background of the post-1989 imaginary. Deconstruction of the 'peoples' (in the plural) and its conditions of possibility (as an alternative imaginary against the post-1989 broken promises) are the two main novelties of the book. In addition, using Laclau's specific vocabulary, Kim's empirical analysis offers a methodical and practical application of post-foundational methodology, which unfortunately is still rare in Discourse Theory.

Based on these premises, populism is seen as a political logic of articulation that combines the signifier 'people' with a range of different elements from different political traditions. The resulting 'chain of equivalence' creates an antagonistic frontier against a 'power bloc' and defines the nature of a certain populism: from centrist populism (e.g. Public Affairs in the Czech Republic) to nationalist populism (e.g. Jobbik in Hungary); from anti-party populism (e.g. Kukiz '15 in Poland) to conservative populism (e.g. OLaNO in Slovakia). This 'populism with adjectives' leads to an interesting (and maybe unintentional) outcome: notwithstanding the explicit post-foundational perspective, the author manages to bridge the gap between Laclau's political logic to Cas Mudde's populist thin ideology. The several categorisations of populism (from liberal to nativist) resemble the thickening of populism with external ideologies. The result is an analysis of the populist political logic based on Laclau's ontology that is optically reflected in Mudde's ideational approach.

This is evident in the chapters dedicated to the empirical analysis of populist parties in the V4 from 1989 up to today (3 to 6, a chapter for each country). The very structure of the chapters makes clear their aim and scope: understanding the role of the 'people' in political discourses. Moving from a historical account of the 'people' as a construction used for nation-building, this term has assumed a counter-hegemonic role after the regime change in 1989. A standard analysis of a populist party starts from the contextualisation of their political activity, it moves to the construction of the people (e.g. 'citizens', 'ordinary people', 'family...'), analyses other elements that 'thicken' populism through discursive articulations, and continue the discussion about the evolution of the political party and its discourse. In most of the cases (and this is one of the contributions of the book) populist discourses contest the broken

promises of the post-1989 imaginary: "a common feature of many of the populist discourses analysed here is that they radically reshuffle the discursive terrain of what it means to be a society after 1989/90" (p.270). It is the dissatisfaction with the post-1989 order that sparks what Jan Zielonka and Jacques Rupnik (2020) have defined as counter-revolutions.

As in the typical populist literature, populist discourses in the V4 contest the 'elite'; the 'power' that blocks people's identity. While significant (if not all) attention is given by Kim to the 'people', the role of the 'enemy' is somewhat overlooked. The analysis is indeed populism-driven: rather than moving from a particular problem in each country (namely, the rise of populist or illiberal parties), the author is interested in identifying when the populist logic is articulated by political parties. This research process is in line with the goal and scope of the book. However, it raises a question: does the construction of the 'enemy' impact the populist discourse itself? The author seems to be aware of the diverse nature of the 'elite'. An interesting differentiation in the conclusions of the book separates generational counter-hegemonic populism and authoritarian hegemonic projects as the two most significant forms of populisms in these countries (p.271), especially in their current shape (the so-called third generation after 2010). In the former, the enemy is associated with 'old parties' or 'political dinosaurs' as the hegemonic formation in power to be challenged. The latter, instead, is represented by two important populist parties in power: Fidesz in Hungary and Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland "draw on populism as part of projects of establishing authoritarian hegemony" (p.279). These parties and their discourses do not only contest the political party system; they also offer a completely different picture of the post-1989 imaginary and concretely aim at redefining what society means. In the words of Viktor Orbán (2014), "the new state that we are constructing in Hungary is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state". They reject the post-1989 trajectory towards a certain type of liberalism to redefine the meaning of society, and ultimately hegemonise it. Should we then use the same populist lens to discuss generational counter-hegemonic populism and authoritarian hegemonic projects?

To answer this question, I would dwell on the concept of hegemony. The book presents a non-Gramscian approach to the concept of hegemony (Gramsci is never mentioned). In this context, hegemony

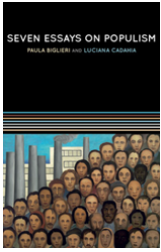
often indicates party hegemony. In the generational counter-hegemonic populism, the enemy is often constructed as the old political party system. In this case, this type of populist party applies the populist logic more as a political strategy than as a contestation of the political order. It is counter-hegemonic to the extent that they seek to break the party hegemony of the traditional parties. It is, therefore, closer to a sort of *qualunquismo* (common man's politics), praising the common man against the corrupt elite: in the words of Andrej Babis, "it's better to run the state like a family firm" (p.88); anyone would be able to do that. Conversely, if we understand hegemony as those sites of power that exert both political and intellectual control over civil society (Gramsci, 1971), Fidesz and PiS are truly counter-hegemonic. They contest liberal hegemony, namely the idea that became commonsensical after 1989 that society needs to be liberal. To be sure, the separation between generational counter-hegemonic populism and authoritarian hegemony reflects this discussion. However, references to *qualunquismo* and Gramscian hegemony would enhance the significance and depth of this distinction.

To conclude, the book is a valid contribution to the populist literature on Central-Eastern Europe: on the one hand, the deep analysis of populism(s) in the V4 is enlightening for those that seek to understand the nature of populist parties in these countries and their context of emergence. On the other hand, the book contributes to populist literature by empirically showing the different meanings the signifier 'people' can assume and how the populist logic of articulation works in practice.

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## Populism: Theses from the South



Review of *Seven Essays on Populism*, by Paula Biglieri and Luciana Cadahia (Polity Press, 2021)



Reviewed by Adrià Porta Caballé, University of Barcelona

'There is a long tradition in Latin American debates that is not well known in Europe and the United States' (p. 89). This sentence, almost read in passing in the middle of the book can be said to summarise the main spirit behind Biglieri and Cadahia's populist actualisation of Mariátegui's classic, *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality* (1928). The book we have in our hands is difficult to define or classify. It is not purely academic – as the authors themselves highlight (p. xxii); it has no full presumption of "objectivity" or "neutrality" because it takes a self-reflected partisan point of view. But, it is not a "manifesto" either, since it engages deeply in theoretical debates, rigorously reviewing the existing literature on populism and beyond. Following Althusser, this book is probably best understood as a theoretical intervention.

In *Seven Essays on Populism*, Biglieri and Cadahia develop seven arguments that touch upon different aspects of populism: its own methodology (empirical or ontological), the Left/Right imaginary, neoliberal fascism, (plebeian) republicanism, (inter) nationalism and feminism. However, the result is not a concatenation of isolated 'papers', but a constellation illuminated by a similar light, which I take to be none other than the laudable attempt to bring to the fore a series of militant experiences, philosophical theses and heated debates with Latin American autonomists and Spanish republicans which are not always well known in the English-speaking literature. To some extent, debates about populism in the global North are obsessed with cleansing the term negatively, placing it in opposition to (neo)liberalism and linking it with fascism. What is refreshing about these *Seven Essays* is the effort to defend populism positively, as an emancipatory movement *tout court* without any need to apologise (to use a formulation also dear to Laclau and Mouffe). This is not to circumscribe Biglieri and Cadahia's contribution to that of two Latin American thinkers but, on the contrary, to acknowledge their new and original "situated universalism" (p. xxiii) with regards

to question of 'the popular'.

To begin with, in the first essay Biglieri and Cadahia attempt to discover the 'secret' of populism stored in the political *arcón* (p. 1). Against merely empirical analyses, and the mediatic view that uses it as a scapegoat, they defend a rigorous ontological definition of the term. On the ontic side, where all historical analyses fail – both coming from the perspective of capitalism and socialism – the understanding of populism is merely as a 'deviation from the norm': Marxism sees the national-popular as a 'betrayal', and modernisation conceptualises it as an 'anomaly'. On the other side, Biglieri and Cadahia recognise that with Laclau's *On Populist Reason*, we arrive at *terra firma* and, siding with Marchart against Ardit's criticisms (but going even further), they defend ontological terminology arguing that there is no 'semantic overlap' between hegemony, politics and populism, but rather a "mutual contamination" (p. 16). As suggestive as this might sound, perhaps the most important thesis coming from the South can be found in the second essay – and populist theory more broadly needs to engage with this. Drawing on Alemán, Biglieri and Cadahia justify on their own grounds that so-called 'right-wing populism' should not be considered populism at all, because populism is an emancipatory movement *tout court*. Again, Biglieri and Cadahia start from an ontological definition of populism *stricto sensu* against the position advanced by Mouffe in which populism is turned into a strategy susceptible to be used both by progressive and reactionary affects. I would go further and say that this traditional way of reading Laclau suffers from the defects of hylomorphism: it sees populism as an empty form, awaiting to be filled by ontic content coming from two ideological poles. Biglieri and Cadahia worry that this ontic privilege of the right/left distinction 'runs the risk of neglecting the evolution of populist experiences in Latin America – where the left/right distinction has not interpellated us in the same way as in Europe' (p. 23). Conversely, Alemán buys the whole of Laclau's edifice but introduces an apparently minor twist: the populist form has in itself an emancipatory content – and so "right-wing populism" is not populism at all. And this for two reasons. First, drawing on Lacan, capitalist discourse can be explained as expanding limitlessly at the same time it closes inwardly. This means that neoliberalism is a totalising power but not a hegemonic relation, because what is characteristic of the latter is the experience of lack. Second of all, capitalist discourse imposes a homogeneity very



different than the equivalence of a popular chain which is always left 'open'. And I would personally add a third reason, arguing that in so-called 'right-wing populisms' like Le Pen's, 'the people' is not even the Master-Signifier, but only secondary to 'the nation'. Why not – Biglieri and Cadahia ask – directly call then 'right-wing populism' what it is, namely 'neoliberal fascism', and leave populism as a synonym for inclusive politics, 'without having to clarify with adjectives' (p. 40)?

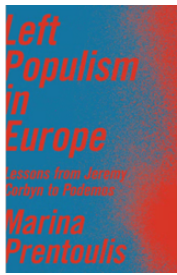
The second most important thesis coming from the South that must be acknowledged has to do with the relationship between populism and republicanism. There has been much debate worldwide in the last decade about this issue, but usually it is framed from the outset as a struggle between the 'Atlantic tradition' and the Cambridge School's reading of Machiavelli, on the one hand, and the 'Continental tradition' drawing on Althusser and Negri, on the other. Now, there is a tradition of (plebeian) republicanism in Latin America and Spain which poses the question differently. On one extreme we have Villacañas, who was the first independent intellectual to take populism seriously in the peninsula during the emergence of Podemos. In *Populism* (2015), Villacañas ended his monograph with a passionate defence of republicanism as opposed to populism. Drawing on a particular reading of Freud, Villacañas argued that populism is secretly related to (neo) liberalism because the latter inevitably generates individuals with a 'narcissistic wound' which can only be sutured in turn by identifying with the ego-ideal of the leader. There would be nothing, therefore, more anti-narcissistic than an institution, and republicanism would represent the real alternative to (neo) liberalism. On the other extreme, Biglieri and Cadahia side with Rinesi and Muraca when they insist that 'Latin American populism is the form through which republicanism has developed in Latin America' (p. 72). Biglieri and Cadahia make a similar critique to the narrative of Latin American autonomism, as exemplified by Lazzaratto, by virtue of which there would be a direct link between Pinochet, Lula and Bolsonaro. In the case of Svampa and Modonesi as well, the 'populist co-optation' of social movements would have paved the way to further neoliberalism. But the question none of them can answer, Biglieri and Cadahia point out, is 'why have neoliberal elites unleashed prosecution against populist leaders once they have left office?' (p. 30).

Apart from these two theses, which deserve serious

debate and evaluation, the book also has a series of brilliant moments. The fifth essay on (inter) nationalism and leadership is an excellent example of psychoanalytic interpretation which attempts 'not to conflate the people of populism with the Freudian mass, and not to conflate this group with the primal horde' (p. 80). Disentangling these three psychoanalytic concepts which usually get mixed up together, helps displace the question of the leader from that of the Name-of-the-Father linking it, rather, with an 'accountable brother' (*primus inter pares*) whose name does not belong to him/her. If there is a representative quotation from the whole book, probably it is this: 'the people cannot be understood as an undifferentiated mass of individuals held together by a purely libidinal tie. The people is never the same as soccer fans, an angry mob or a sum of individuals who have fallen under the hypnotic influence of a captivating leader' (p. 83).

The sixth essay represents a suggestive entry to an ethics of post-foundational militancy but, like Laclau's own ethics, Biglieri and Cadahia's position should be further developed. Their premises at least are clear: avoid the temptations of 'pure contingency and pure necessity' (p. 102) or, as Abelardo Ramos used to say, 'society never polarizes between the madhouse and the cemetery'. Finally, the seventh and last essay represents an unprecedented effort to think 'the popular' alongside 'the feminine' using Ginzburg's 'evidential paradigm'. Biglieri and Cadahia attempt to defend negativity, the Lacanian not-All and Antigone's perseverance against the essentialist risks of 'feminisation' that might hide behind the immanentist feminism of potency such as Gago's. In the end, if there is a criticism to be made to the whole book it is already advanced in the first pages by Wendy Brown's foreword: the partisan attempt to render populism an emancipatory movement *tout court* might run the risk of depriving it from all its tensions (which is precisely what a post-foundational outlook was supposed to bring to the table) and end up in another version of the 'beautiful soul' and 'the Good, the True and the Beautiful in politics' (p. xvii). Despite the care we should show to this temptation, it is one worth exploring in *Seven Essays on Populism*.

## In search of a radical democratic political vision in Europe: the role of left populism



Review of *Left Populism in Europe: Lessons from Jeremy Corbyn to Podemos*, by Marina Prentoulis (Pluto Press, 2021)



By Sophia Hatzisavvidou,  
University of Bath

‘Populism’ is trending: in academic journal articles and books, in politicians’ speeches, in commentators’ discourse. Everyone seems to have something to say about the phenomenon of populist politics, about populist politicians, movements, and parties. As a result, the meaning of the term varies and covers a wide range of events and personalities, depending on context, authors, and objects of analysis.

Marina Prentoulis offers a clear, well-articulated argument that attempts to fix our understanding of this polyvalent term. Populism, she argues, is simply a political logic, a way of doing politics that carries no derogatory or positive connotations in itself. As she says, ‘it is the particular content that makes it good or bad’. Prentoulis is interested especially in left populism and employs a simple, engaging, and effective method to study its manifestations: she looks at concrete cases — Greece, Spain, and the UK — and analyses interviews she has conducted with politicians, activists, and journalists, combining these with the analysis of political documents. This collated material enables her to identify populist political, rhetorical and electoral strategies employed as a response to the context of the 2007-8 financial crisis. But the purpose is to go beyond these particular cases and contextual analysis. Indeed, Prentoulis uses them in order to draw some general principles of left populism, while not losing sight neither of the dynamic of the term nor of the diversity that characterises the three selected case studies.

This short and sharp book will appeal to different audiences. Those unfamiliar with the vast — and fast-growing — literature on populism will find in it an accessible, yet intellectually engaging introduction to some of the key themes and movements of left populism in Europe in the last few years. Prentoulis takes nothing as a given; respecting her readers (and their time), she draws on key readings of the relevant scholarship but without getting into tiresome details

and provides a clear, working definition of populism pertinent to contemporary political life. Students who research populism will particularly benefit from reading the first chapters of this book, which will introduce them to some key debates in the field. Those more seasoned to these debates, will appreciate the wealth of primary data that this book includes, as well as the informed discussion of the conditions that enable and constrain left populist leaders. And yet those interested in practical aspects of left populist politics, will find in this book a lively discussion of empirical issues aspiring populists are confronted with, not least the tension between the horizontal modes of operating pertinent to movements and the challenges that political parties face in their attempts to gain electoral support.

Prentoulis offers an analysis that navigates debates and tensions in a careful and informed way. She clearly has a deep understanding of the synergies required between parties and grassroots movements; of the different political traditions that inform varieties of left populism; and of the role that radical visions can play in invigorating democracy, at least within the contemporary European context. A particularly interesting stream of thought unfolds when Prentoulis turns her attention to the promises of municipalism, where her idealism meets her pragmatism. Without painting a bleak picture of the future, Prentoulis acknowledges the limits that this particular approach has within the existing neoliberal framework. Left populism does not have to be utopian, but can certainly look to visions that offer alternatives for which there are no available blueprints.

One of the greatest virtues of this book is that one does not need to be a scholar of populism or even an academic to engage with it. Prentoulis productively brings together the work of the academic with the insight of the activist to prove that the best political writing happens when theory and empirical analysis merge. Reading this book in the time of a global pandemic makes the reader wonder what this contingent event can bring for left populist movements. But it seems that the transnational left-populist vision that Prentoulis advocates, with the principles of solidarity and cooperation that infuse it, resonates particularly well with the current circumstances.

## The End of Neoliberalism?



Review of *The Great Recoil: Politics after Populism and Pandemic*, by Paolo Gerbaudo (Verso: 2021)



By Anton Jäger, KU Luven

Paolo Gerbaudo's *The Great Recoil* is both a definitive and definite analysis of our COVID predicament. Published merely a year after humanity's great confinement, Gerbaudo's work – like Adam Tooze's *Shutdown* (2021) and Toby Green's *The COVID Consensus* (2021) – moves beyond the think piece and the take for a measured assessment of the worlds produced by the March 2020 COVID shock.

The risks of such 'instant analysis' are well known. Like a high-speed camera, contemporary history always risks falling prey to the fluidity and indeterminacy of the situation it wants to capture, wedged between impressionistic detail and grand abstraction. This need not be its fate, however. Gerbaudo ends his book with a citation by Franz Neumann, who was able to write an analysis of the Nazi state (or rather 'non-state') while the European war was still raging and even actively contributed to the Allied war effort. Neumann's *Behemoth* — itself a Hobbesian motif — also sets out the parameters of Gerbaudo's analysis: a bestiary of our new COVID Leviathan, tracking the decomposition and recomposition of state authority in a time of crisis, and what factions determined the new monster's shape.

Gerbaudo fuses two areas of specialism here. On the one hand, he reaches backwards to the previous populist decade and the specific class blocs that coagulated around it—the subject of his previous books *The Digital Party* and *The Mask and the Flag*. Unlike poststructuralist analysts of 'populism', he moves from signifier to signified: what social constituencies do these different appeals to the people relate to in the current moment, and how do economic factors determine their interests? Secondly, he connects present and past with reference to the 'mighty dead' in the history of political thought: Hobbes, Machiavelli, Plato, Cicero, and Neumann, who all shed light on the dilemmas of public power today.

Gerbaudo rightly casts COVID as a terminal crisis for a specific ideal of neoliberal governance – the final nail in the monetarist coffin. The austerity mantras of the 2010s are dying out: both the European Union and the United States launched a series of impressive bailout funds in 2020; 'the state' is now back. The size of these funds indeed raises serious questions about the so-called 'death of neoliberalism', while commentators from Slavoj Žižek to Grace Blakeley have used the past few months to diagnose a 'new state'. The Biden funds provide plenty of reasons for that diagnosis. The price tag is huge: \$3 trillion spread over two bills that run for ten years. This includes money for schools, highways, bridges, hospitals and corona aid; all in all, one of the most ambitious rescue plans since the Roosevelt era.

Yet, the Biden funds also exhibit striking continuities with our 'pre-post-neoliberal' era. The package's bridges are still being built by private firms. Public healthcare has been wiped off the policy map (Biden even indicated that he would torpedo the proposal if it were to make it to the Senate). The American state is still mainly acting as a contracting authority. After ten years of quantitative easing and buybacks, these companies and funds are now sitting on mountains of underutilised capital for which they cannot find profitable investment. The services themselves must be guaranteed by a state, professing a strange, privatized Keynesianism: monetary policy radicalises, but fiscal policy changes little.

This is itself a continuity with the 'commercial Keynesianism' of the Kennedy administration in the 1960s, or the 'supply-side Democracy' Biden himself adhered to in the 1970s. In this sense, Gerbaudo's Keynesian era was more neoliberal than we presupposed, and the neoliberal era more Keynesian. It is true, of course, that the 1980s saw repeated attempts to gut the welfare system and stigmatise public sectors. Underneath the restructuring, however, a curiously market-friendly variant of welfare was also being constructed: generous and not fiscally conservative, but hesitant about removing entire areas of social life from the market.

Neoliberalism thus offered both its own variant of Gerbaudo's 'protection' and 'control': a shielding from the vagaries of the labour market through asset ownership or cash transfers, and a bid for control through the installation of consumer sovereignty in a new global civil society. With these

two dominant models, politics itself was marketized, turning into the playing field of a simulated civil society of NGOs and activists. This itself was a Polanyian countermovement in an internal sense; the disembedding of society from the market was countered with a protective system anchored in the market.

COVID has clearly dynamited parts of this neoliberal consensus. Record spending levels are being recorded, while the fiscal dam has been broken from Singapore to Budapest. With the exception of China, however, the state has also taken on a curiously double role in this process. Welfarism in the twentieth century constituted an experimental program in a mixed economy and national development. Spurred on by a fractious but densely organized coalition between labour and small business, these states invested in long-term public services, the electrification of rural areas, the building of dams, roads, bridges, and other infrastructure. In its most ambitious moments, public money was spent to build public goods with very little private sector involvement.

This type of remaking of the economy for the public good has been, so far, completely absent from COVID crisis fighting. Instead, policy makers seem to have opted to replace the invisible hand of the market with the invisible hand of the state: a referee who will occasionally assist the players but rarely – if ever – partake in the game itself. In this sense, left-wing critiques risk relying too heavily upon a temporary ‘sugar high’: instead of reinvigorating the post-war welfare state, COVID could have opened the gateway to a ‘disinhibited public-private project’, as Adam Tooze recently put it. The vaccine race was itself a monument to this project: the state channels the cash, companies plan and produce. This is a creature more Behemoth than Leviathan, to use Neumann’s terms.

Gerbaudo is right to speak of a new statist moment. Yet the end result of this statism might also look frighteningly close to the UK’s COVID response: an uneasy continuation of the privatised state, with subcontractors angling for government contracts, now mainly oriented on a national rather than international axis. The list of providers for UK travel tests, for instance, provides a rabid illustration of this tendency: all British, all private.

This indeed is a far cry from the high globalisation we grew accustomed to in the 1990s and 2000s. Then, Tony Blair could compare the movement of prices to

the turning of the seasons while Polish poets attended the opening of their country’s first McDonalds. The ‘openness’ of this original globalization was always ambiguous. As Gerbaudo notes, the ‘Endopolitics’ was always coupled with severe restrictions on labour movement—while it proclaimed a universal model of consumer citizenship, notably in the European Union, only two-tier citizenship could assure the neoliberal service economy its labour supply. The result looks more like what Nicholas Mulder recently described as ‘globalisation without globalists’: underneath the neoliberal momentum, the basics of capitalist statecraft have not shifted fundamentally—there is a ‘great recoil’, but capitalist society is hardly in the process of being sublated.

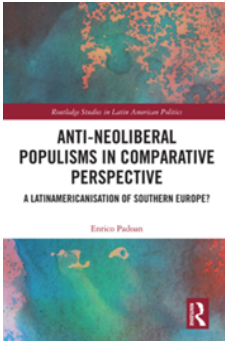
Gerbaudo is also clear that any prediction about the shape of our post-COVID world itself implies an abdication of agency – just like Neumann hoped that his book would be the contribution to a war of words that could help the war of actual armies. The task to combine this new politics of control with a politics of protection will have to be decided politically, not academically. Gerbaudo rightly criticizes the tendency to reduce the state to its pastoral functions—visible in works such as Benjamin Bratton’s *Revenge of the Real*—while he dissects the right’s ‘exit fantasies’.

Gerbaudo is clear that any move towards a more ‘public’ capitalism should obviously be welcomed from the left. But ‘socialization’ can happen both ‘from above’ and ‘from below’. The left needs more than the right kind of administration, much like it needed more than an assemblage of identities in the 2010s. ‘Populism’ was an attempt to do politics in a time after history, when the clash of classes and the bargaining of interests seemed both institutionally and intellectually impossible.

It is not clear how this populism will be channelled into our new era of public-private protectionism. The more the business of ‘government’ gets left to the central banks, and the more economic policy relies on simple cash-transfers, the less socialists have to offer as a philosophical counter-vision (‘Vote with your dollars or euros’ as the mantra of the future). If central banks can maintain certain consumption levels through cash transfers, the enormous gaps in inequality, the cannibalization of public services, and the decay of our social infrastructure can continue. This might indeed be neoliberalism’s end – but whatever’s next might prove even more confusing.



## Anti-Neoliberal Populisms in Europe and Latin America



Review of  
*Anti-Neoliberal Populisms in Comparative Perspective: A Latinoamericanisation of Southern Europe?*, by Enrico Padoan (Routledge, 2021)



By Juan Pablo Ferrero,  
University of Bath

Populism has for a long time been in disrepute. Traditionally it was disregarded by Marxists and liberals alike as a pre-modern form of political manifestation. More recently, the concept was dismissed by globalists, free-marketeers, and institutionalists as questions around the construction of 'the people' ceased to matter. This was a symptom of post-democratic thinking: politics have come to an end and we are transitioned from the realm of conflict to the sphere of bureaucracy and administration. Even worse, populism was perceived as a dysfunctional symptom, something that belonged to the politics within the peripheries of capitalism, to developing nations with unconsolidated democratic cultures, weak institutional frameworks, and a tendency to follow lunatic charismatic leaders.

In this sense, the reader of Padoan's book will have to overcome the first false impression evoked by the subtitle of the book (*a latinoamericanisation of southern Europe?*) because it does not insinuate a form of regression in southern European politics. Instead, it highlights shared traits in new political projects. While populism continues to be vilified by mainstream media and political discourse, the debate in academia is broadly split between those who loath it altogether and those who defend it as a form of emancipation in unequal and fragmented postmodern societies. Padoan does not elude this debate but, intelligently, offers a way forward by critically reflecting about populism in the light of what constitutes his object of studies: the cross-regional comparison of the anti-neoliberal political projects in Latin America and southern Europe. He defines populism as '*a political project aiming at occupying the public institutions through electoral means in order to allow 'the people' to recuperate or achieve its sovereignty; while relying on an antagonistic, polarising political discourse to generate new*

*collective identities and on varying organisational resources to overcome the problem of collective action that could arise and/or heterogeneous constituencies'* (p.9). Furthermore, the author identifies five key attributes to populism: a particular process of articulating demands, a primary focus on the search for power, a peculiar interpretation of the concept of representation, accountability, and sovereignty, a specific understanding of the concept of participation, which is present in some populist phenomena and organisational traits of some of the parties labelled populist.

Padoan goes on to propose two ideal types of anti-neoliberal populism according to the kind of solution provided for making sovereignty effective: electoral-delegative and participative-mobilising populism. These typologies are effective for the scope of the comparison and general objective of the book. Furthermore, they are carefully thought through to differentiate anti-neoliberal populism from both authoritarianism and polyarchy and liberal pluralism. The most important added value of these ideal types of populism is that they capture the organisational density, the intermediation, existing in anti-neoliberal political projects, which contributes to debunk the myth that suggests that populism means more manipulation of irrational mobs than the mobilisation of actors in the pursuit of their own rational interests. Padoan rightly highlights the role of trade unions (and not only social movement organisations) in the rise of anti-neoliberalism populism in Latin America, only when they departed from corporatist practices to form part of broader coalitions. While other scholars have highlighted the same element as key driver in the reinvigoration of an alternative to neoliberalism and therefore the reinvigoration of democracy in Latin America, Padoan takes it as co-constitutive of anti-neoliberal populist political projects. The book not only develops a middle-range theory of left populist formations, but it also puts this theory in motion to capture similarities and differences in socio-political processes in Latin America and Southern Europe.

The typologies function well to capture socio-political processes in Bolivia (Chapter 3), Argentina (Chapter 4), Spain (Chapter 5) and Italy (Chapter 6). Applying good comparative methodological practice, the book also studies Uruguay and Portugal as two 'negative cases' in the final chapter as countries where the traditional, labour-based left, grew stronger after the crisis and no populist project

arose. Padoan relies on three empirical variables to observe differences in the development of anti-neoliberal populism across different cases: the existence or lack of political party/partisan structure, the relationship with national unions and the degree of influence social movements has in activities such as candidate selection. This is not a book that seeks to redeem populism nor to criticise it entirely. Instead, Padoan's work is an exceptional analytical effort to articulate cutting-edge conceptualisations of populism with relevant political science perspectives in the light of an impressive number of relevant case studies. In addition, the book offers a wealth of insights into the different cases which are discussed in great depth. Lastly, while anti-neoliberalism functioned as the master-frame common ground for the constitution of progressive political identities in both sub-regions more than two decades ago, the author is right in stating that it was in Latin America where the penetration of political representation was greater because of the stronger linkages with well-rooted parties and movements rather. Does this mean that countries such as Argentina and Bolivia are better positioned to face the rise of 'anti-populist' movements than Italy and Spain? This question falls outside the remit of the book but, as can be seen, it provides insightful lessons that should animate future comparative research. The book is a must-read for students and researchers interested in understanding contemporary socio-political processes in Latin America and Europe.

## Back to the beginning: the ever-lasting search for the meaning of populism(s)



Review of *Global Populisms*,  
by Carlos de la Torre and Tree-  
thep Srisa-Nga (Routledge, 2021)

 By Lazaros Karavasilis,  
Loughborough University

The study of populism includes numerous attempts to define the phenomenon, conceptualise it in different contexts, and eventually draw conclusions about the corrective or corrosive effect that it has on liberal democracy. It is true that almost every study on populism focuses on these areas to a lesser or greater extent with only one goal: to understand what populism is. Every now and then, one of these studies attempts to provide an overview of the recent developments and offer some temporary conclusions about the state of the art of populism studies.

One of the most recent endeavours of that nature is the textbook by Carlos de la Torre and Tree-thep Srisa-Nga who attempt to offer a conclusive account of the global manifestations of populism. As both authors state in the preface of their book, they have 'normative goals', as they find populism capable of being an inclusive phenomenon but not as a democratising 'panacea' (viii). Based on that, they examine populism through its connection to other concepts and through its expressions in the Americas, Europe, and Asia. The structure of the book is indicative of that: populism in Latin America, populism and media, populism and fascism, and populism in Europe, are some of the themes that the authors address. It is interesting to highlight here that their introductory chapter is titled 'who is afraid of populism?'. There the authors discuss the overuse of the populism concept and the possibility of getting rid of the concept from social sciences. Considering the preface, the selected aspects that they address in the book and the introductory chapter, one can safely assume that the authors have a very specific opinion about populism which they infuse throughout their textbook.

Primarily, the authors' view on populism has two aspects: (first) the acknowledgment of how elusive the concept is, and (second) how it can be better understood through its connection to concepts

such as nationalism, authoritarianism, and fascism. While this approach may seem sensible, it also entails certain dangers that must be avoided through the proper distinction between populism and other '-isms'. Indeed, the authors appear to conflate the populisms with other ('related') concepts throughout their book. An example can better illustrate this point. In presenting the cases of Trump, Bolsonaro, Erdogan and Duterte, the authors draw an almost intrinsic connection between populism and authoritarianism that leads to generalisations about the effect of populism on liberal democracies. The authors go even further and claim that the most dangerous aspect of populism is that it is leader-centric. Again, this opinion has been disputed by multiple accounts that have researched extensively anti-austerity social movements in Southern European periphery (such as the Indignados and Aganaktismenoi) and the Tahrir Square protests. These movements have been described as populist but did not have a strong leading figure. This connection between populism and authoritarianism also creates some rather troubling comparisons (such as the one between Alexis Tsipras and Viktor Orban), because they have been both hostile towards media. As a result, and given the normative goals proclaimed at the beginning of the textbook, populism's negative aspects are over-emphasised while its positive attributes are downplayed.

This approach towards populism is also evident in its connection and comparison to fascism. Based mainly on the case of Juan Perón in Argentina, both authors examine in greater detail the common elements between fascism and populism rather than focusing on distinguishing them as separate phenomena. In doing so, they conclude at the end of the respective chapter that populism can potentially lead to fascism as populist actors (again, such as Bolsonaro and Trump) act against liberal-democratic institutions. While this may be true to some extent, the rest of the chapter does not allow any space to discuss the opposite – that is, the transformation of populism to fascism might not happen at all. On top of that, their understanding towards both phenomena leads the authors to employ the 'populism' label to describe actors that are (mainly) nationalist, racist, or fascist. This is indicative of how the conflation of populism with other notions negatively impacts the concept's analytical utility; it also contributes to further conditioning the 'populist hype' that is (still) evident in populism studies.

These examples are representative of how the authors of the textbook understand populism, its connection to other concepts and its contemporary expressions worldwide. To their credit though they do acknowledge the differences between different ideological variations of populism as well as other elements that highlight populism's uniqueness as an analytical concept. However, the authors move on too quickly and show little interest in exploring this further.

There are, arguably, many similarities between *Global Populisms* and Jan-Werner Müller's *What is Populism?* book. Considering that both books are five years apart, it is rather interesting to see that some opinions on populism have not been influenced by the progress of populism studies in-between. The use of 'populism' as the *de facto* concept that attached to contemporary non-mainstream political phenomena has been disproved by empirical and theoretical works over the last decade, so have claims framing populism as a force that is necessarily anti-(liberal)democratic. The authors however still embrace such normative claims. Indeed, the authors do warn about their normative goals in the preface of the book. However, when writing a textbook, the approach to populism should be more inclusive and avoid personal bias about the phenomenon. The scope of the book is global (as the title suggests) and for this reason, the authors should have extended their overview beyond any normative perceptions on populism that are region-specific.

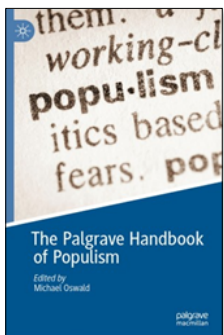
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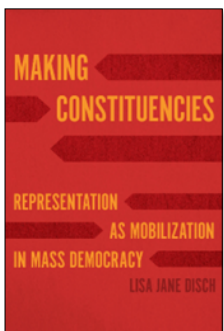
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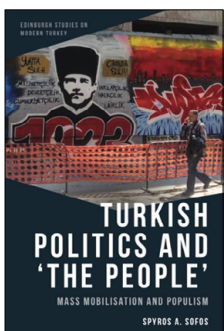
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