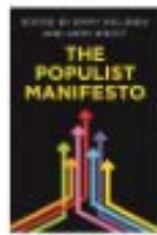


The Populist Manifesto: A partisan view on (left-wing) populism



Book reviewed:
The Populist Manifesto (2020)
Emmy Eklundh
and Andy Knott (eds.)
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Reviewed by Enrico Padoan

Emmy Eklundh and Andy Knott's edited book, *The Populist Manifesto*, is a much-needed work for the academic community and, potentially, for a broader public engaged with progressive politics. As stated by the editors already in the Introduction (p. 7), the book has a "clear position – on politics, on populism, and left populism more particularly", which is often in contradiction of an equally clear but opposite position – populism as an "aberration" – held by most other commentators who write on the subject. Emanating from different angles and touching different aspects of populism, all contributors attempt to "demystify" (p. 8) the notion of populism and emphasise the transformative potential of left-wing populism in the eight chapters that follow.

Andy Knott criticises Cas Mudde's (2004) well-known definition of populism as a "thin-centred ideology" and emphasises, as almost all other contributors do, that populism has no content: it is not an ideology, instead it is a "form of doing politics", which finds fertile terrain during moments of "crisis" or "transition". Maria Esperanza Casullo discusses the role of myth in populist phenomena. She argues that left-wing populist narratives are "forward-looking" in terms of time orientation and "upward-punching" in that they attack groups at the very top of the socioeconomic ladder, while the exact opposite holds true for "downward-punching" right-wing populisms. Paolo Gerbaudo discusses the relation between the rise of populism and the popular demand for "control" in times of advanced globalisation and crisis of neoliberalism. While right-wing populisms advocate for regaining border control and cultural homogeneity, for left-wing populist projects "control mostly expresses the need for asserting power internally to the political community, empowering the state to keep big economic powers in check and enforcing economic redistribution" (p. 41).

Emilia Palonen (Chapter 4) puts forward ten theses

on populism, emphasising its performative features, its intimate (and complex) relationship with the deep theoretical foundations of both politics and democracy, as well as the relationship between populism and its constitutive other – namely, anti-populism. Emmy Eklundh (Chapter 5) deconstructs the ideological, classist and discriminatory theoretical foundations of the axiomatic, (even in the academia) opposition between "rational" (associated with anti-populism) and "emotional" (associated with 'dangerous populists') politics.

Mark Devenney argues for the need of a "transnational populism" in order to overcome the unavoidable exclusions provoked by any definition of a "people" on the basis of a specific statehood and/or nationhood, for example, of indigenous populations, as often occurred in Argentina, Bolivia and Ecuador, where state-led developmentalist projects were pursued. Marina Prentoulis elaborates on why left-wing populism must be transnationalist, since, as the author writes: "no matter how powerful concepts like the 'nation' are in forging emotional identifications... this cannot be a left-populist project" (p. 104). She also questions the supposed "homogeneity" of the (populist) "People" as in Mudde's and Jan-Werner Müller's (2016) widely appealing theorisations, as well as the allegedly purely "top-down" form of representation in populist phenomena. At the same time, Prentoulis offers a sharp discussion over the (sometimes more tenuous, in the historical praxis) differences between left-populist logic and Marxism. In the concluding chapter, Knott focuses on the challenges brought by climate change and emphasises how a left-populist turn, based on the promise of an inclusive and pluralist Green New Deal, may successfully oppose both neoliberalism and right-wing populisms, which indeed have very little to offer to address environmental issues.

This book should be welcomed and endorsed by socially-engaged scientists and theorists in that it highlights the transformative dynamics of populism as a potential strategy for the left. One should take into account that, since the beginning of the Great Recession in Western Europe (and since the end of the Washington Consensus in Latin America), left-wing populist projects have formed most of the electorally successful new projects on the left – while both "old" and "new" lefts have, with few exceptions, been "in trouble". From an academic point of view, the critiques exposed in the book against the "mainstream" definitions and theories, and against their (not so hidden) normative underpinnings, are well founded. Still nowadays, such critiques are too often not even

taken in consideration by academic articles that take for granted a “shared definition” which is ironically not shared at all.

Having stated this, the major weakness of *The Populist Manifesto* is its excessive dedication to attacking Mudde’s definition and to emphasise how populism “is not an ideology, is not a content. Instead is a form or a logic”. First, this makes the book excessively jargonised and focused on academic debates that may be far from being interesting for broader audiences. Second, and related to the first point, many of the contributions fail to underscore why understanding populism as a form or logic should be that relevant. For instance, is the distinction between “upward-punching” and “downward-punching” so different from that between the “inclusionary” and “exclusionary” populisms of the ideational paradigm? Is arguing that populism is a “form of politics” that finds fertile terrain during “crises” so different from arguing that “populist ideologies” become electorally attractive during “crises”?

In this reviewer’s opinion, while acknowledging the deep ontological differences (and methodological consequences) between the different approaches, perhaps the main problem of Mudde’s definition (which is undoubtedly the most widespread and perhaps the closest to the journalistic use of the concept) does not lie in seeing populism as an “ideology”. Instead, the main problem is that this definition is elaborated by having only right-wing populist parties in mind. Said otherwise: the (main) problem is not that Mudde considers populism as a “content”. The (main) problem is that Mudde offers a very partial description of what that content is (and can be). The distinction between “inclusionary” and “exclusionary populisms” is a late, and in my personal view unsuccessful attempt to make the definition better suited to include left-wing populisms. However, what about “pluralism” as a necessary “populist enemy”? How can someone convincingly argue that projects such as Podemos or Syriza – or even the experience of MAS-IPSP in Bolivia – are “anti-pluralist”? Consequently, perhaps *The Populist Manifesto* would have benefited from just some brief introductory reflections over how and why the most widespread theorisations are simply not adequate to understand the progressive potential of populist politics.

More generally, many contributors de facto spent many words, and rightly so, to add some content to left-populism in order to differentiate it from both its right-wing (and even, non populist or anti-populist) counterparts. Gerbaudo’s chapter over the politics

of control and the concept of sovereignty is a (very good) example. Gerbaudo’s essay, in this sense, seems quite at odds with Przeworski and Devenney’s arguments about the necessity of looking at forms of “transnational populisms”. While the shortcomings brought by “national populisms” are well addressed by Przeworski and Devenney, it seems to this reviewer that both scholars are concretely (and legitimately) claiming for “more leftist and less populist” political projects. Indeed, as Przeworski highlights the frontier between Marxist and populist modes of articulation has often been blurred. The debate over the shortcomings of left-populism is pressing. It remains to see if such shortcomings were due to their statist-nationalist dimension – and their primary attention to the question of sovereignty, as this reviewer argued elsewhere (Padoan, 2020) – or, as for example Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Ventzelos (2020) suggested, due to left-populism’s failures in “impacting considerably on the modes of production and the psychosocial framing of consumption which conditions the majority of social identities”.

Overall, the book deserves much, much attention, and, most importantly, thanks to its forceful arguments, it can serve to relaunch a wide debate amongst scholars adopting different approaches to the topic. The goal of such a debate should not be to come to a “shared definition”. Instead, scholars could have an opportunity of refining the existing approaches in order to reply to often repeated criticisms, even to reach the conclusion that right-wing and left-wing populisms may need very different analytical tools to be fully understood in their features, causes and consequences.

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