

Kapferer, Bruce and Dimitrios Theodossopoulos (eds.) 2019. *Democracy's paradox: Populism and its contemporary crisis*. London, New York: Berghahn Books. 100 pp. Pb.: \$14.95/£10.95. ISBN: 9781789201550.

Book review by

Ivan Rajković

University of Vienna (Austria)

Since the start of the crisis of the global capitalist system in recent decades, mobilizations dubbed “populist” are alive and well. As are their liberal critics, who dismiss the “people’s movements” as essentially right-wing demagoguery. One quieter but equally concerned voice in this debate has been that of anthropologists, with their own allegiance to the “people” and ambivalent (often Marxist) stances towards the topic. Such is the volume edited by Bruce Kapferer and Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, which focuses on the populist misgivings in the eclipse of (il)liberal democracies. The book offers an Introduction by the editors and five chapters focusing on different countries written by anthropologists with long-term engagement therein (Victoria Goddard on Argentina, John Gledhill on Brazil, Melinda Hinkson and Jon Altman on Australia, Susana Narotzky on Spain, and Michael Herzfeld on Greece).

The book’s central claim is that populism is democracy’s other side: a form of engagement that relies on the hegemonic forms it claims to upend. In the editors’ words, populism is part of the liberal settlement; it is “pervasive and integral to contemporary, representational democratic systems, despite its superficial opposition to the dominant political establishment” (p. 17). The figure of the “people” emerged at the same time as the capitalist nation-state and is hence prone to class compromise without changing the system’s structure. Thus, the ever-present possibility of populist causes betraying promises of equality and embedding themselves in structures of privilege as soon as they grasp power. How the voice of the suppressed “demos” is subverted in the process and how

populist sentiments are reshaped into new inequalities and, ultimately, Pyrrhic victories is the book's main focus.

The authors are ambivalent towards Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, the post-Marxist philosophers who redefined populism as a distinctive logic of creating equivalencies between different social demands. Instead, Kapferer and Theodossopoulos argue that "populism is not itself the logic of the political, but derives its logic from sets of pre-existing historical and political consciousness" (p. 25). Indeed, all authors keep an eye on a *longue durée*, showing how populist movements legitimate themselves as direct continuations of earlier populist mobilizations (e.g., Perón's legacy among the Kirschners in Argentina, or "the spirit of Vargas" in Lula's "pink tide"). The same long-term perspective shapes the enemies' point of view, as both left populists and their right-wing rivals seek to selectively affirm and erase the historical accomplishments they value differently (e.g., the indigenous right to self-determination in Australia or the austerity legacy of the Cardas government in Brazil). The role of media moguls is duly noted.

The book excels by focusing on populist framing. As Kapferer and Theodossopoulos argue, "The critical issue for every critical analysis of populism remains: who is the ultimate author of the notion of the people? And to what degree do 'the people' participate in it?" (p. 13). However, while the authors deliver strongly on the first question, they shy away from the second one. Put differently, it is as if the populist capture always derides the popular will. Thus, Eva Perón and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner are shown to have empowered working-class women but changed little of their structural position in the system (Goddard). *Lullismo* redistributed to the working poor but far more to financial capital (Gledhill). The Australian inclusion of Aborigines remained confined by white settler colonialism (Hinkson and Altman). Podemos attacked the privileges of politicians but was constantly troubled by demands for entitlements to one's particular group (Narotzky). Moreover, egalitarianism can conceal the entrenching of new racisms (Herzfeld). Different populisms are thus all leveled through a truism that they create openings on one side and closures on another.

While such concern with populist "misgivings" persuades, one wonders if the same picture would occur if the attention was less on interception from above and more on emergence from below. Namely, if the right-wing populists seek to cut the middlemen and unite the demos around the supposedly unmediated "people," what anthropologists can do is expose the full heterogeneity of emergent voices, affects, and positions of those agreeing to be part of such assembling bodies. Otherwise, the focus on the leaders and their lack of structural effects might ironically reproduce the very same liberal as-

sumptions (specifically, the fixation with representation and methodological individualism) that some of the Marxist authors here and the “people’s movements” themselves seek to undo.

A deeper question thus opens up: what is popular politics? And what means has anthropology for studying it? Symptomatically, the only authors who touch on the issue of *popular* define it negatively as something less mediated and definitely not *populist*. For Hinkson and Altman, the Australian 1967 referendum was popular, the 2007 campaign was populist, and later events shaping Aboriginal inclusion were a mixture of the two. For Herzfeld, the difference is categorical: populism is “a cynical manipulation of genuinely popular politics” (p. 134). While such dichotomies placate, one wonders how to account for Laclau’s most important implication: that “people” and “the popular” are always already constructed, with no clear borders from populist mediation. In this regard, Narotzky’s detour from Laclau’s formalism is the most consistent, as she seeks to move away from a focus on discourse to “the substantive motivations – both material and discursive – that push various agents (individual, collective, corporate, institutional) to action when confronted in a struggle for resources that they value differently” (p. 98). For her, populist mobilizations are always answers to the irresolvable double binds of illiberal capitalism: some of them seek to restore privileges of status, and some seek to transgress social inequality altogether. But “if we look at the actual people, rather than at the discourse of their alleged leaders”, Narotzky argues, we can always find overlaps. Thus, easy demarcations between the “inclusionary” and the “exclusionary” populisms risk obscuring “the actual issues which push reasonable people to mobilize against a particular social system, either seeking restitution of past forms of obligation or proposing new forms of social responsibility” (p. 98).

Narotzky’s point resonates throughout the chapters. When faced with an inability to erase capitalist monopolies altogether, it seems, populist movements defend particular entitlements (one’s nation, one’s class, one’s eco-zone): a freedom for some that only becomes a privilege in the eyes of another and generates new populist counter-movements. Read in such a way, many workers did not vote for Lula because he put the privileged trade unions in power over pension funds, the same way that some of Thatcher’s supporters were disenchanted by the selective protectionism of the “workers’ state”. Ultimately, this book asks us to rethink how we stay true to the evolving spirit of equality that moves many “people’s movements” even when their actual realizations come to betrayal.