

The ‘populist moment’: An expression that teaches us more about how we perceive our time than about this time itself

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journals.sagepub.com/home/est**Manuel Cervera-Marzal** 

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Books: Ilvo Diamanti, Marc Lazar, *Peuplecratie. La métamorphose de nos démocraties*. Paris: Gallimard, 2019; Chantal Mouffe, *Pour un populisme de gauche*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2018; Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le siècle du populisme. Histoire, théorie, critique*. Paris: Seuil, 2020; and Arnaud Zacharie, *Mondialisation et national-populisme. La nouvelle grande transformation*. Lormont: Bord de l’eau, 2019.

Abstract

Four recent books believe that we have entered the ‘era of populism’. After 30 years of neoliberal hegemony, we would now be living a new historical period in which political life would be more and more confrontational, personalized and emotional. Through a reconstruction of the main arguments of Ilvo Diamanti, Marc Lazar, Chantal Mouffe, Pierre Rosanvallon and Arnaud Zacharie, this article aims to highlight the accomplishments and the limitations of this historical diagnosis. Special attention is given to the fact that, behind an apparent consensus, the theorists of the ‘populist moment’ disagree on several issues: the definition of populism, its relationship with political liberalism and the existence of a populist electorate.

Keywords

Democracy, electorate, liberalism, populism

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Name our time

What time are we living in? To this simple and disarming question, a growing part of the academic community provides the following answer: after the ‘Trente Glorieuses’ (1946–1975) and the ‘neoliberal revolution’ (1975–2008), Western societies would have entered, after the 2008 crisis, in ‘the era of populism’. The term ‘populism’ is trapped, for two reasons. First, those who use it are far from having come to a common definition of the concept. This is the case with most political concepts. ‘Democracy’, ‘power’ or ‘sovereignty’ also have many meanings. But the term ‘populism’ is, more than any other, the subject of disagreements that seem difficult to overcome. The second obstacle is the normative connotation of ‘populism’. In the public arena, ‘populism’ generally functions as an insult aimed at disqualifying a political opponent. Hence, the question for academics is: Can we elevate ‘populism’ to the status of a scientific concept? Some consider such an attempt doomed to fail. They therefore prefer, in their work, to carefully avoid using the term ‘populism’.

Others, without ignoring the difficulties mentioned above, think it would be wrong to do without the concept of ‘populism’ because this concept says something about our time. Four recent works even make ‘populism’ the decisive political phenomenon of the present time. I intend to examine these four works here, necessarily in a schematic way since I am focusing on how to characterize the present period, leaving aside other aspects of these four books. Pierre Rosanvallon, historian at the Collège de France, entitles his latest book *Le siècle du populisme*. According to him, populism is ‘the ascendant ideology of the 21st century’ (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 14). This observation is shared by professors of political science Ilvo Diamanti and Marc Lazar. The latter consider that at the beginning of the 2000s, a ‘new era’ began, which they call ‘peoplcratie’, characterized by ‘the rise of populism’ (Diamanti and Lazar, 2019, p. 20). Their colleague Arnaud Zacharie speaks, for his part, of a ‘populist moment’ (Zacharie, 2019, p. 164). Behind the difference in terminology, their analysis remains similar: populist parties, which claim to defend a virtuous people against corrupt elites, are now gaining power in most democratic countries. The phenomenon is all the more worrying as it is spreading like an oil stain. As Lazar and Diamanti write, ‘all political actors adapt to the language and demands of the populists. To counteract them, to neutralize their charge, we often tend to imitate them’ (Lazar and Diamanti, p. 150).

Populism: A wrong solution to real problems

Rosanvallon, Diamanti, Lazar and Zacharie defend an ambivalent thesis: populism brings erroneous, even dangerous, solutions to real problems. In other words, according to these four authors, populism is the fruit of the difficulties that undermine liberal democracies from within: the rise in inequalities and unemployment, the decline of political parties, the rise in abstention, the distrust of citizens towards the media, the degradation of public debate, cultural insecurity caused by the arrival of migrants, the terrorist attacks. But, according to these four authors, the populists will only aggravate the evils they denounce. Populism is therefore a threat that must be averted.

According to Pierre Rosanvallon, the populists undermine the foundations of liberal regimes. They are trying to establish a ‘democrature’ (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 227) in which, in the name of a mythical people, a leader concentrates most of the power. In doing so, Rosanvallon explains, the populists attack the rights of individuals, intermediary bodies, constitutional courts, press freedom, political opponents and associations. At Marc Lazar and Ilvo Diamanti, the charges are just as numerous. By relying on several occasions on the reflections of Rosanvallon, Diamanti and Lazar accuse the populists of exciting passions, of adopting a simplistic and Manichean vision of the world, of ignoring the separation of powers, of easily switching in xenophobia and antisemitism, of professing hatred of elites, of castigating democracy and of entrusting an all-powerful leader that embodies popular sovereignty. Arnaud Zacharie partly takes up these criticisms but adds a final one, more specific, which points to the deceitful nature of the phenomenon: the populists often campaign by verbally attacking the powers of money, but, once in power, they willingly submit to the laws of the market. Nationalist ideology and the dismantling of social law go hand in hand.

At this point, an objection may come to mind: What about left populism? Can it be said that Syriza and Podemos want to destroy representative democracy even though they are fully playing the election game? Can we say that these two movements carry the seeds of an authoritarian drift when, during their time in government (2015–2019 in Greece, since 2020 in Spain), they relaxed the repressive laws implemented by the governments that preceded them? Rosanvallon, Diamanti, Lazar and Zacharie are aware of this objection. This is why the four authors make a distinction between left-wing populism and right-wing populism, stressing that the former has an ‘inclusive’ conception of the people, while the latter has an ‘exclusive’ conception, which stigmatizes Islam and foreigners. Right-wing populists adopt a nationalist ideology, while left-wing populists are heirs of workers’ internationalism. However, despite the reservations they formulate very clearly, the four authors end up subsuming under one label – ‘populism’ – Golden Dawn and Syriza, Vox and Podemos, the Front national and France Insoumise, Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party, Pegida and Die Linke. The thesis of the four academics could be formulated as follows: what brings the far right and the radical left together is stronger than what separates them. What is the reason for this proximity? ‘The desire for a closed society’ (Diamanti and Lazar, 2019, p. 51), that is to say the rejection of globalization, answer Marc Lazar and Ilvo Diamanti. The ‘transversal sovereigntist culture’ (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 91) abounds Pierre Rosanvallon. The possible slide towards a ‘national-populist discourse’ hostile to ‘the European Union and to migrants’ (Zacharie, 2019, p. 172) concludes Arnaud Zacharie.

The concept of ‘populism’ thus makes it possible to subject the radical left and the extreme right to the same framework. The current ideological conjuncture is dominated by the idea that there is no alternative to the commodification of the world and generalized competition. In this context, the word ‘populism’ is one of the best finds in the extreme centre. This word makes it possible to (dis)qualify in a single gesture political projects deemed too left or too right. From Jean-Luc Mélenchon to Marine Le Pen, many have tried to return the stigma. In Latin America, ‘populism’ is not an insult. It simply refers to a type of regime for which Juan Perón (Argentine president between 1945 and 1956) provided the matrix. But, in Europe, the word remains negatively connoted.

Can we defend left populism?

The Belgian philosopher Chantal Mouffe is one of the rare European intellectuals not to adopt this pejorative conception of populism. Close to the leaders of Podemos and France Insoumise, Chantal Mouffe is the main theorist of left-wing populism. Her characterization of the current period converges with that of the four authors discussed previously. Indeed, in his latest work, Mouffe writes: ‘The 2008 economic crisis highlighted the contradictions of the neoliberal model – neoliberal hegemony is being challenged by different anti-establishment movements on the right and on the left. This is the new conjuncture that I call the populist moment’ (Mouffe, 2018, p. 17). Chantal Mouffe establishes a strong distinction between left populism and right populism.

Despite their differences, all populists mobilize the affects of voters. To unify the people, the populists equip themselves with a charismatic leader. The leader designates the adversary of the people. According to Mouffe, it is mainly on this point that left-wing populists separate themselves from right-wing populists. Indeed, for right-wing populists, the people’s adversaries are foreigners and/or Muslims, while for left-wing populists, the adversary are shareholders and bankers. Right-wing populists have an ethnic and xenophobic conception of the nation, while left-wing populists have a civic and republican conception of the nation. Thus, Chantal Mouffe defends ‘leftist populism’ that Rosanvallon, Diamanti, Lazar and Zacharie attack. ‘This book’, she writes, ‘is conceived as a political intervention and it absolutely does not hide its partisan character. I will explain what I mean by “left populism” and I will show that, in the current conjuncture, it is the strategy that we need to revitalize and deepen the ideals of equality and popular sovereignty that constitute a democratic regime’ (Mouffe, 2018, p. 21). The disagreement is therefore radical.

Pierre Rosanvallon accuses Chantal Mouffe of being ‘fascinated’ by the ‘radical anti-liberalism’ of the Nazi lawyer Carl Schmitt (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 31). He adds that ‘this fascination makes one of the intellectual links between right-wing populism and left-wing populism’ (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 31). This accusation is unfounded. Chantal Mouffe writes that Carl Schmitt is ‘wrong’ when he postulates the existence of an ‘insurmountable contradiction’ between liberalism and democracy (Mouffe, 2018, p. 28). Mouffe distances herself from Schmitt because, for her, the current challenge is ‘to reestablish the articulation, disowned by neoliberalism, between liberalism and democracy’ (Mouffe, 2018, p. 71). Rosanvallon therefore presents as an opponent of liberal democracy a philosopher who explicitly defends this type of political regime. Ivo Diamanti and Marc Lazar make accusations that are just as caricature. According to them, the left-wing populism theorized by Chantal Mouffe would be ‘critical of representative democracy, therefore illiberal, and fervent promoter of direct democracy’ (Diamanti and Lazar, 2019, p. 56). In support of their judgement, Diamanti and Lazar do not provide any quotation from Chantal Mouffe’s texts, and we understand them, since Mouffe never says what they are trying to make her say. In her latest book, she takes, as in the previous ones, the defence of representative democracy. She specifies that, ‘in certain particular cases, alongside representative institutions’, one ‘could imagine direct forms of democracy’ (Mouffe, 2018, pp. 100–101).

Here we face with a difficult question: that of the relationship between political liberalism and direct democracy. Chantal Mouffe claims to belong to the first, while wanting to add a few touches of the second. Hence the question: is political liberalism compatible with even a minimal dose of direct democracy? We can answer in the affirmative. Political liberalism is not a homogeneous philosophical current. Some of its supporters defend a representative democracy hostile to any form of direct democracy. But there are also many theorists of political liberalism who believe that it is compatible with devices of direct democracy such as the referendum, citizen juries or local assemblies, provided that these devices respect the Constitution and the separation of powers. Chantal Mouffe belongs to this category. We could even add that the (democratic and left-wing) populism defended by Chantal Mouffe does not threaten liberal institutions, as we so often hear, but on the contrary allows these institutions to breathe new life.

Pierre Rosanvallon, Ilvo Diamanti and Marc Lazar condemn populism as a whole. Chantal Mouffe defends left-wing populism against right-wing populism. And Arnaud Zacharie takes an intermediate position since he criticizes left-wing populism while refusing to equate it with right-wing populism. Another sensitive question divides these five authors: who votes for the populists? Indeed, a global analysis of the phenomenon cannot be limited to the study of the populist *supply*, that is to say of the political parties. It is also necessary to analyse the populist *demand*, that is, the electorate. For Arnaud Zacharie, Pierre Rosanvallon and Chantal Mouffe, the populist electorate is essentially made up of the ‘losers of globalization’ – all three use this expression (Mouffe, 2018, p. 90; Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 15; Zacharie, 2019, p. 11). Such a claim is by no means obvious, especially when one remembers that in 2016, Donald Trump’s voters were richer and more educated than the national average. Skin colour and gender weighed as much, if not more, than social class. In addition, in the most comprehensive study carried out on this subject, the sociologist Matthijs Rooduijn demonstrated, by comparing 15 populist parties from 11 European countries, that the populist vote is not the expression of those left behind by the globalization. Contrary to a widely held belief, writes Rooduijn, ‘there is no consistent proof that the voter bases of populist parties consist of individuals who are more likely to be unemployed, have lower incomes, come from lower classes, or hold a lower education’ (Rooduijn, 2018, p. 364).

The untraceable core of populism

Marc Lazar and Ilvo Diamanti go further. They deconstruct the idea that there is a homogeneous populist electorate. ‘The geography of populist voters varies, as does their socio-professional affiliation, their ages, their levels of education, their territorial roots, their motivations too. Or the meaning of their vote’. Such a claim is supported by data from the World Values Survey and the European Social Survey. These statistics show that populist voters are divided on at least four subjects: immigration (a threat or wealth?), the role of the State (should it intervene or not in the economy?), the European Union (should we leave the treaties or reform them?) and sexual minorities (should they be granted more rights?).

To speak of a ‘populist moment’ supposes to identify a common denominator to the phenomena which one encompasses under this label. However, it would seem, at the end of this cross review, that such a denominator cannot be located neither on the side of the parties thus designated (which do not all have the same ideology, the same program, the same mode of organization) nor on the side of voters (who do not have the same sociological profile or the same values). We are thus brought back to the initial question: how to name our era? Such an operation is never neutral. Historians know this better than anyone. The designation of a period carries with it a whole imagination, a dramaturgy. Thus, the term ‘populist moment’ may tell us more about the assumptions of those who use this expression than about the era they intend to describe. Indeed, four presuppositions seem to be recurring among the followers of this expression: the neoliberal hegemony that was imposed in the 1980s has been in crisis since 2008; the main manifestation of this crisis of neoliberalism is the growing gap between the people and the elites; popular anger is reflected in the rise of anti-system parties, on the right or on the left; the electoral efficiency of populist parties leads their non-populist rivals to imitate populist recipes, so that the populist shift affects contemporary representative democracies as a whole.

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