
Review essay

The (anti)-democratic spirit of populism

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Le siècle du populisme. Histoire, théorie, critique

Pierre Rosanvallon

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L'esprit démocratique du populisme. Une nouvelle analyse sociologique

Federico Tarragoni

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In Latin America, where populism has historically been associated with the idea of social progress, it enjoys a rather positive reputation. But in Europe, where academics tend to associate populism with the rise of xenophobia, it is stigmatized. Because of the controversial and normative nature of this term, several scholars suggest that it should be banned from the lexicon of the social sciences. Pierre Rosanvallon, professor at the Collège de France, and Federico Tarragoni, lecturer at the University of Paris, take another path. For them, the word 'populism', despite its vagueness, captures something important about the present. Therefore, they argue, it would be unwise to deprive ourselves of this term. Yet while Rosanvallon's and Tarragoni's books have the same object (populism), the same goal (to develop an ideal type that eliminates confusion about the meaning of populism), and the same method (a theoretical generalization based on the historical comparison of the different manifestations of the phenomenon), their conclusions are radically contradictory. Where Tarragoni sees the contemporary populist moment as a salutary democratic refoundation, Rosanvallon sees in populism a pathology of representative electoral regimes, which turns democracy against its ideals and procedures and worries about the advent of a 'democrature'.

Rosanvallon sees in populism a pathology of representative electoral regimes that turns democracy against its ideals and procedures. He develops a detailed anatomy of the populist phenomenon by identifying commonalities beyond the diversity of its empirical manifestations. He argues that populism is a political culture characterized by five elements: (1) a homogeneous conception of the people based on a distinction between 'us and them' that presents the adversary an 'enemy of humanity' (p. 34); (2) an enhancement of direct democracy to the detriment of intermediary bodies and constitutional courts; (3) the central role of a leader



claiming to embody the people to remedy the alleged evils of representation; (4) a 'national-protectionist' ideology (p. 61); and (5) a mode of political intervention centered on emotions like disengagement, conspiracy, and abandonment.

While Rosanvallon thus begins with a lengthy and detailed reconstruction of the concept of populism, Tarragoni starts with deconstruction. His book is designed to undo the assumptions that underlie much of what he calls 'populology' – a neologism which refers to the plethora of social science works devoted to populism. Lamenting their generally poor quality, Tarragoni diagnoses this literature with three analytical errors. The first is the equation of populism with demagoguery, which Tarragoni rejects by arguing that not all populists make use of demagogic simplifications. Conversely, non-populist politicians do not hesitate to flatter the people by using rhetorical devices. The second error is the assertion that left and right-wing populism converge in their common hatred of migrants, the law, intermediate bodies (political parties, unions, associations, companies), Europe, and the media. For Tarragoni, by contrast, 'right-wing populism' is an invention that has replaced more robust and more adequate concepts such as nationalism, xenophobia, and fascism, which, importantly, are at odds with left-wing populism. Finally, the third error is the idea that populisms are fundamentally authoritarian in nature. Tarragoni debunks this idea by showing that it hides an 'agoraphobia of scholars' (p. 113), by which he means that scholars lend the people a natural thirst to be dominated.

While Tarragoni seeks to debunk these three errors in order to reveal the true 'democratic spirit' of populism, Rosanvallon insists that left-wing populists share with their right-wing counterparts a 'culture of mistrust and suspicion' (p. 90), a 'conspiratorial' inclination (p. 69), an electorate made up of 'losers' (p. 72), the same 'resentment' towards the elites (p. 68), and a 'caricatured stigmatization' of the oligarchy (p. 224).

The word 'populism' is used as much to denounce or praise as it is to analyze. The two books under review provide a perfect illustration of this, despite the fact that their authors lay claim to scientific objectivity and neutrality. Unlike scholars like Chantal Mouffe (2005, p. 9), who explicitly acknowledges the political aims of her work, Tarragoni and Rosanvallon both claim to be above the fray. Whereas Tarragoni distances himself from Mouffe, even though his work draws heavily on Laclau and Mouffe, Rosanvallon distorts Mouffe's account by attributing to her a 'fascination' with 'the radical anti-liberalism of Carl Schmitt' (p. 31). Mouffe's political project, however, 'radical democracy', is not the rejection of political liberalism but its emancipatory reformulation.

In other chapters, Rosanvallon and Tarragoni elaborate a rich and long history of populist experience. Such genealogical accounts are often plagued by two problems, namely, including in the same category disparate regimes and movements or, on the contrary, juxtaposing case studies without operating any increase in theoretical generality. But Rosanvallon and Tarragoni avoid these two



pitfalls by drawing on the Weberian method of comparison and generalization to develop an ideal type of populism.

Returning to its main historical manifestations – the Russian *narodniki* and the American People's Party at the end of the nineteenth century, as well as the 'populism achieved' by the governments of Péron, Vargas, and Cardenas (1930–1954) – Tarragoni identifies four recurring features of populism. First, populism intends to make democracy more inclusive, more egalitarian, and more democratic by limiting the power of capitalist actors and domesticating the logic of liberalism. Tarragoni therefore postulates a difference between democracy and liberalism, which Rosanvallon, a specialist on the French liberal statesman François Guizot (1787–1874), has studied in detail. However, Rosanvallon invites us to 'think in inclusive terms and not exclusive the relations between liberalism and democracy' (p. 22). Tarragoni does not seem to share this perspective, since he promotes a form of 'radical' and 'self-governed' (p. 123) democracy, rather than the kind of 'representative democracy' defended by Rosanvallon.

Second, while for Rosanvallon citizen apathy and democratic disenchantment constitute a fertile ground for populism, Tarragoni argues that populism always appears in times of strong popular mobilization. This mobilization, he specifies, is heterogeneous in terms of demands and sociological composition. However, and this is the third feature of populism, this heterogeneity can be unified through a charismatic leader. Populist charisma, unlike fascist charisma, relies on the leader's ability to create an inclusive relationship with individuals who do not feel represented. But when popular autonomy is denied, when the state claims to control the masses, populism drifts towards authoritarianism. Indeed, this is the fourth element Tarragoni identifies: populism opposes the elites with an open conception of the people in which various identities – feminists, workers, sexual minorities, precarious workers, etc. – can coexist. By contrast, Rosanvallon holds that populists adopt a monist vision of the political community, which leads them to behave without mercy towards the 'enemies of the people' (p. 35).

Tarragoni does not ignore Rosanvallon's warnings about a possible undemocratic degeneration of populism. But he refuses to see this possibility as inevitable, instead suggesting that such degeneration betrays populism's original spirit, so that it is no longer populism strictly speaking. He also disputes Rosanvallon's equation of populism with a type of political regime, such as the type he identifies in Napoleon III's Second Empire, Peron's Argentina, and Putin's Russia. In contrast to these regimes, which Rosanvallon also describes as 'illiberal democracy' and 'democrature', Tarragoni regards populism primarily as a form of social contestation that weakens established institutions. This mobilization can give rise to a political regime in the long term, but for Tarragoni, 'populism is not intended to be institutionalized' (p. 296). Thus, where Rosanvallon adds illiberal democracy and 'democrature' to the canonical tripartition of political regimes into democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy, Tarragoni insists that populism is a phenomenon of



crisis and by definition transitional. It springs from internal contradictions of liberal democracies. When a populist force comes to power and the 'movement' turns into a 'regime', this force renews democracy by integrating those who were formerly excluded. At the same time, however, it weakens checks and balances. This contradiction is either recognized as unsurpassable and the populist phase ends, or it is seen as a threat and populism turns into statism, personalism, or even fascism.

Understood in this way, populism is not a style that can be grafted onto any political project, nor is it a symptom of deeper problems such as inequality, nationalist withdrawal, and mistrust toward politicians. For both Tarragoni and Rosanvallon, populism is much more fundamental than a style or symptom: it is an ideology, that is to say, a coherent vision of the world, a philosophy of public action, and a global conception of society, democracy, and the economy. Populism is, therefore, a political culture, just like anarchism, communism, liberalism, and conservatism. Tarragoni's and Rosanvallon's shared ambition is to systematically theorize populism, even as their respective accounts are each other's mirror image.

Nevertheless, there is an important point of consensus between Tarragoni and Rosanvallon: there is no populism without a charismatic leader who can embody popular aspirations. Such charismatic leaders rise when there is a diffuse feeling among the people of being abandoned and despised by an elected political class with which the governed do not identify. Governors have procedural legitimacy but not the confidence of their constituents. The sociological disconnect between professional politicians and ordinary citizens is coupled with an ideological disconnect between a political class and a majority of voters who do not support its policies. This context is conducive to the emergence of a charismatic leader without whom, according to Tarragoni and Rosanvallon, there can be no populism. While there is broad agreement on this point among most scholars of populism, this consensus should be critically examined. Rosanvallon and Tarragoni regard the *narodniki* of the 1870s and 1880s, as well as the American People's Party of the 1880s and 1890s, as the starting point of the populist epic. Likewise, they see the French 'yellow vests' movement of 2019 as its most recent manifestation. These three cases are, therefore, emblematic of populism. But the question arises where the charismatic leader is in each of these movements.

Despite this obvious contradiction, Rosanvallon argues that 'the yellow vests have stubbornly refused to structure themselves and to allow leaders to emerge within them ... They did not want a *homme-peuple* to emerge among them' (p. 80). And Tarragoni describes the 'populism of yellow vests' as 'a spontaneous and leaderless movement' whose 'only bond of mobilization' is not a tribune but 'the safety vest worn by the demonstrators (pp. 354–355). Rosanvallon goes even further in associating populism and leaderlessness, suggesting that Russian populism 'had a profound impact on what has become the anarchist doctrine' (p. 258). Its two great figures, Bakunin and Kropotkin, were far from 'being identified with the figure of a leader' (p. 259). These early populists, Tarragoni adds, 'believe



that revolution should emanate from the self-organization of the people, not from a vanguard of professional politicians' (p. 165). From the *narodniki* to the yellow vests, then, the charismatic leader is, indeed, alien to the populist tradition.

Rosanvallon and Tarragoni here advance, but without fully developing, a hypothesis as fruitful as it is original: that the key to the relationship between democracy and populism may lie in anarchism. Their initial question can thus be reformulated. The problem is no longer whether populism is a threat or remedy for liberal democracy, but whether we are able to recognize that populism points towards a *libertarian*, rather than *liberal*, idea of democracy. As Claude Lefort, a former activist for the councilist group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and central intellectual influence on both Rosanvallon and Tarragoni, wrote in 1979:

The passion that once inhabited me has not become foreign to me. It seems to me now more vigorous, more daring, more faithful to my first movement, or in a worn word, perverted, but irreplaceable, more revolutionary to attach myself to a libertarian idea of democracy than to pursue the dream of communism as if he could get rid of the totalitarian nightmare (Lefort, 1979, p. 15).

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Manuel Cervera-Marzal
University of Liège / FNRS (Pragmapolis), 4000 Liège, Belgium
manuelcerveramarzal@gmail.com