

Kapferer, Bruce and Dimitrios Theodossopoulos (eds.) 2019. *Democracy's paradox: populism and its contemporary crisis*. Berghahn Books. 100 pp. Pb: \$ 14.95 / £ 11.95. ISBN: 9781789201550.

Populism has, in the last two decades, received a vertiginously growing number of analyses within and beyond academia, yet much of the current research comes from political science, sociology and history. Anthropologists have only recently begun to heartily engage with these debates. *Democracy's paradox* is therefore a valuable step towards the consolidation of an anthropological interest in populism, or even towards an anthropology of populism.

The editors conceive of populism as integral to democratic processes yet highly vulnerable to forces antagonistic to the political system in which it is spawned. While historically and socio-culturally relative, its current expressions are seen as bearing underlying commonalities and being part of a broader 'moment of transition and transformation in global political and economic circumstances' (p. 3). Principally discussing Western liberal democracies, it is unfortunate that the allusion to Chantal Mouffe's (nearly) homonymous work (*The Democratic Paradox*) is left unexplored. If anthropology is entering the debates around populism somewhat late, that does not mean it needs to enter them alone.

Suggesting that anthropologists are particularly well-equipped for studying populism, Kapferer and Theodossopoulos foreground the importance of understanding the local meaningfulness of populism's appeal. The editors discuss anthropology's early interest in the topic and emphasize Peter Worsley's contribution to the seminal 1969 volume on populism, edited by Ionescu and Gellner. They argue that Worsley's influence is evident –if unacknowledged– in the relative consensus that populism is a thin ideology which can take entirely different shapes and forms in different contexts, and when combined with a particular (strong) ideology.

The wide-ranging approach to populism the editors adopt in the introduction is not equally shared with the contributors to the volume: two of the five short chapters that comprise the book reject populism in all its forms and shapes (chapters by Narotzky and Herzfeld), suggesting that ultimately it reproduces or accentuates existing hierarchies that disproportionately affect the less privileged. For Narotzky, ‘illiberal capitalism’ permeates social and economic structures which neither left nor right populism can escape.

Herzfeld taps into his notion of ‘cultural intimacy’ to suggest that ‘populist performances draw on a repertoire of culturally intimate secrets’ which often ‘include some of the most destructive forms of prejudice’. There are enlightening insights one may gain from this perspective –as, for example, in understanding the ‘sub-cultural’ embarrassing intimacies that often yield conspiracy theories and have, in recent years, moved from the fringe to the centre of social life. Yet Herzfeld suggests that ‘[t]his globalised populism dons the clothing of political correctness to a certain degree, much as, in everyday life, cautious rightists temporise by saying, “I’m not a racist, but...”’ (p. 125). This observation, based on a 2007 ethnography, goes against most current analyses of contemporary ‘global populism’ in the ‘post-truth’ era, as Ruth Wodak characterised it. Against Herzfeld’s affirmation, what we are witnessing around the world in recent years –from the Philippines to Hungary, to Brazil and the US– is the ‘coming-out’ of the ‘cautious rightist’, publicly and brashly asserting racist, xenophobic, homophobic, and sexist discourse.

The chapters by Gledhill and Goddard, on the other hand, focus on left or inclusive populisms and do not reject the possibility of an emancipatory or truly popular populist project. In their discussions –focusing on Brazil and Argentina respectively– they connect theory and political praxis, reflecting on the limitations, inherent contradictions, the gendered qualities of populism, and the neoliberal realities it encounters.

Goddard pays particular attention to the importance of recognising or giving visibility and legitimacy to formally marginalised groups for their inclusion to the national political project. This is an important aspect of populist politics on either side of the political spectrum and offers the possibility to better understand populist fragmentary politics and the appeal populist leaders may have among different social groups.

In his comparative historical discussion of Brazilian populism, Gledhill shows that history tends to repeat itself while exploring what he suggests is a disillusionment of the ‘popular classes’ with democratic institutions. In commenting Jair Bolsonaro’s 2018 rise to power, Gledhill argues that the politics of fear and hate silenced a politics of hope (p. 71-72). While this thesis has been defended in numerous post-factum analyses of the last Brazilian presidential elections, such aphorisms leave no place for nuanced understandings of the (repulsive) ‘other’. As the editors of this volume emphasize in the introduction, fine-grained ethnographies of populism are urgently needed precisely to defy sharp dichotomies of good vs. bad by approaching, listening to, and understanding the other.

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