

Pierre Ostiguy, Francisco Panizza and Benjamin Moffitt (eds.), *Populism in Global Perspective: A Performative and Discursive Approach*

(Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 324, £120.00, £34.99 pb, £31.49 E-book

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While very much indebted to Ernesto Laclau's seminal work on populism, *Populism in Global Perspective* critically engages with its ontological, epistemological and theoretical foundations and builds on it, making original contributions to the study of this complex and diverse global phenomenon. The volume brings together, theoretically and conceptually, the Laclauian/Essex school with the socio-cultural and performative approaches to populism. Illustrating the complementarity of the two distinct approaches, the volume centres on the relational mode of identification and construction of popular identities, blending content and form in a combined discursive-performative approach.

This approach clearly distinguishes itself from two mainstream approaches to populism, namely the ideational and the strategic approaches. The discursive-performative approach rejects the notion of populism as an ideology (however 'thin') and understands instead the divide between 'the people' and its Other to be political rather than normative in nature (p. 2). The editors also argue that neither moralism nor a popular '*volonté générale*' (general will) are features unique to populism, as the ideational approach suggests. On the other hand, the discursive-performative approach 'shares with the strategic approach the notion that populist politicians deploy populist appeals strategically to gain political support' (p. 3). However, by studying populism in a relational way, discursive-performative approach researchers wish to understand what makes followers actually follow, conceiving of this support as rational, not pathological (p. 234); affective, not uncritical, hence opposing a certain '*mépris des masses*' (contempt for the masses) implicit in the strategic approach.

Two chapters on theory, written by Francisco Panizza and Yannis Stavrakakis (Chapter 2) and Pierre Ostiguy and Benjamin Moffitt (Chapter 3), lay the foundation for the nine case study chapters that follow. Among other things, both chapters take a critical stance towards Laclau's notion of an 'empty signifier', which, in his work, is ultimately represented by the name of the leader (p. 34). While this emphasises the vertical forms of identification

between 'the people' and the (name of the) leader, Panizza and Stavrakakis, as well as most contributors to the volume in their turn, emphasise the importance of paying equal attention to horizontal forms of identification. Both, they argue, are 'constitutive intertwined dimensions of democratic populist identities in which horizontal forms of identification – social, political, and cultural – are crucial conditions for the reception of the leader's populist appeal, as well as effective barriers to authoritarian personalism' (pp. 35–6). At the same time, the populist leader, as Laclau himself analysed, is someone who is 'just like us' but *also* exceptional, not fully like us (p. 61), a *primus inter pares*. Populist identification, it is argued throughout the volume, is informed by horizontal practices *and* vertical appeals; by shared negative experiences of exclusion *and* positive practices of association.

Ostiguy and Moffitt, on the other hand, propose to substitute Laclau's notion of an 'empty signifier' with that of an 'overflowing signifier', which, the authors suggest, is better able to capture 'the multiple interpretations of the leader that are invested within that person on the part of "the people"' (p. 53). It is particularly helpful in exploring the fragmented mediatic landscape, 'which affords an intensified "overflowing" or "abundant" nature of the meaning of the leader where all different meanings can and do co-exist' (p. 65). Even though these meanings are multiple, they are also specific for the different publics that interact with the leader.

The book further offers an eclectic collection of nine case studies. From Turkey (Toygar Sinan Baykan) to the Philippines (Nicole Curato), and from South Africa (Sithembile Mbete) to Ecuador (Samuele Mazzolini) and the United States (Joseph Lowndes; Laura Grattan), the ethnography-based empirical studies explore cases of populism in office and in opposition across continents. Grattan (Chapter 7) and Grigoris Markou (Chapter 9) discuss radical democratic populist projects in the United States and Greece respectively, dispelling arguments about populism's alleged homogeneity. However, while Markou shows that Syriza's discursive construction of 'the people' as a heterogeneous political subject successfully managed to appeal to a wide range of social groups, Grattan points to the shortcomings of Bernie Sanders's 'open-source' coalition, which did not succeed in equally accommodating different marginalised or minority groups. She importantly highlights that even when situated on the Left, populist movements 'inevitably reproduce some of the structures and hierarchies they challenge' (p. 151). Sanders's initial failure to engage with the issues raised by the Movement for Black Lives points to representative

failures of populism. His eventual change of stance, however, confirms the volume's argument about the relationship between the leader and 'the people' operating as a two-way street: 'the Movement for Black Lives had succeeded at remoulding [Sanders] into a candidate that champions Black causes rather than just makes nods to them' (p. 149).

In a similar vein, Curato (Chapter 11) explores the 'negotiated relationship' between Rodrigo Duterte and his publics (p. 227) to argue that populist politics and deliberative democracy are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Duterte's electoral success was partly due to him being seen as someone who responded actively to latent anxieties (p. 230), which he politicised (one may compare 'latent anxieties' to Laclau's 'demand' as the basic unit of analysis). However, this support is not unconditional but 'always grounded in [people's] personal circumstances' (p. 234). Curato invites us to explore how 'populist claims are received, interpreted, and negotiated by populist publics' (p. 232). Her ethnographic portraits show that 'far from being fanatical, populist publics are critical. They are ready to identify their differences from the President's positions and render moral judgement' (p. 234)

The role of affects and of discourse as meaning-creating praxis, informed by informality and transgression, are central to the relational study of populism. María Esperanza Casullo (Chapter 4), for example, shows how Evo Morales's embodied performance of transgression did 'not lie simply in dressing or eating like an "Indio", but to do so *while* doing things that "Indios" are not supposed to do' (p. 84), in an effort to subvert racialised social hierarchies. Mbete (Chapter 12) similarly discusses the transgressive and spectacle qualities involved in the defiance of colonialist decorum (p. 246) by the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party in South Africa. Furthermore, she explores the limits of clearly situating certain populist manifestations on the ideological spectrum when parties such as the EFF are simultaneously characterised by commentators as right-wing/fascist *and* as left-wing/progressive (p. 241).

Benjamin De Cleen, Jason Glynos and Aurelien Mondon (Chapter 8), on the other hand, alert us to the fact that a disproportionate focus on populism in discussions of the European Populist Radical Right (PRR) risks side-lining these parties' racist and exclusionary ethno-cultural nationalism. As they put it: 'Nativism is the ideological heart of the PRR, while populism is a political logic performed by the PRR first and foremost (but not exclusively) to legitimate exclusionary nationalist demands' (p. 166). As do other

contributors to the volume, the authors also underscore the need to study populism alongside anti-populism to understand the latter's often 'unintended but powerful impact' on populist identification (p. 266).

Ambitious, wide-ranging and interdisciplinary, tying theory to empirical cases, this volume is a fundamental reading for understanding the complexities and nuances of a much-discussed but often-misunderstood global phenomenon from a cross-regional discursive-performative approach. This volume is bound to impact the field of populism studies and will hopefully contribute to strengthening consensus on how to treat analytically this highly relevant yet persistently slippery concept.