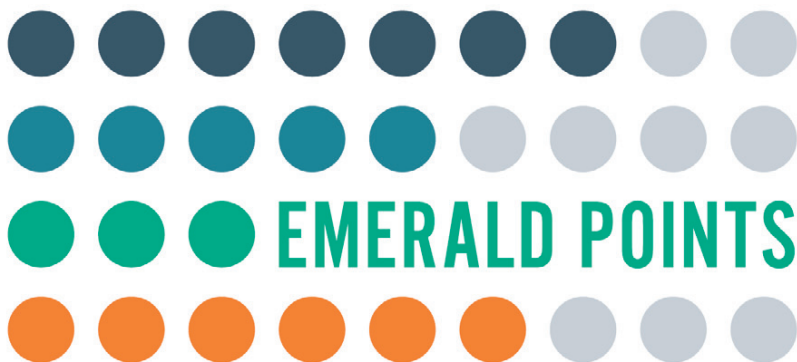


LEFT-WING POPULISM

The Politics of the People

Óscar García Agustín



LEFT-WING POPULISM

What is Left populism? In this book, Óscar García Agustín analyzes the Left populist movements of the last decade, showing how Left populism provides a distinct language and strategy for the European Left, distinguishing it from both right-wing populism and from the old Left. The book covers political topics such as migration, nationalism, and sovereignty, and analyzes the organizational challenges that a Left populist movement faces. *Left-Wing Populism: The Politics of the People* offers the first systematic book-length account of Left populism. It should be compulsory reading for anyone interested in the future of the Left.

Lasse Thomassen, Queen Mary University of London
and University of Copenhagen

The last few decades were marked by the crisis of neoliberalism and the rise of populist politics but despite the spilled ink few have managed to explain with clarity this conjuncture.

The author manages to do exactly that: not only does he dispel with a lot of misconception about populism but he also offers a fascinating mapping of the trajectory of left populism and an inspiring blueprint for future politics.

Dr Marina Prentoulis, University of East Anglia, UK

LEFT-WING POPULISM

The Politics of the People

ÓSCAR GARCÍA AGUSTÍN
Aalborg University, Denmark



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2020

© 2020 Óscar García Agustín
Published under exclusive licence by Emerald Publishing Limited

Reprints and permissions service
Contact: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licensing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Center. Any opinions expressed in the chapters are those of the authors. Whilst Emerald makes every effort to ensure the quality and accuracy of its content, Emerald makes no representation implied or otherwise, as to the chapters' suitability and application and disclaims any warranties, express or implied, to their use.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83909-206-0 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-83909-203-9 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-83909-205-3 (Epub)



ISOQAR certified
Management System,
awarded to Emerald
for adherence to
Environmental
standard
ISO 14001:2004.

Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CONTENTS

<i>About the Author</i>	vii
Why Left-Wing Populism?	1
1. The Left-Wing Populist Wave in Europe	13
2. The People and Popular Sovereignty	33
3. Class and Migration	47
4. Nationalism and Patriotism	65
5. Institutions and Republicanism	81
6. Sovereignism and Transnationalism	99
Five Dilemmas of Left-Wing Populism	115
<i>References</i>	125
<i>Index</i>	149

This page intentionally left blank

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Óscar García Agustín is Associate Professor at the Department of Culture and Learning at Aalborg University, Denmark. He is head of the DEMOS (Democracy, Migration, and Movements) research group. He works on populism, social movements, and migration. With Christian Ydesen he has coedited the book *Post-Crisis Perspectives: The Common and its Powers* (Peter Lang, 2013), and with Martin Bak Jørgensen he has coedited *Politics of Dissent* (2015, Peter Lang) and *Solidarity without Borders: Gramscian Perspectives on Migration and Civil Society* (Pluto Press, 2016). Together with Marco Briziarelli he has coedited *Podemos and the New Political Cycle. Left-Wing Populism and Anti-Establishment Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). He is author of *Sociology of Discourse: From Institutions to Social Change* (John Benjamins, 2015) and coauthor together with Martin Bak Jørgensen of *Solidarity and the “Refugee Crisis” in Europe* (Palgrave Pivot, 2018).

This page intentionally left blank

WHY LEFT-WING POPULISM?

It is becoming a kind of commonplace that every piece of writing on populism starts by questioning the usefulness of the term due to its vague and ambiguous meaning, both in academia and in the public and political debate. Not only that, its use frequently is pejorative and applied to discredit those who are portrayed as populist. Not many politicians define themselves as populists but rather hurry to call their adversaries populists instead. Although the concept is rejected, due to its inability to explain the political reality, it paradoxically continues to generate more and more articles and books and be the object of reflection. Populism accounts sometimes for a general and common phenomenon, being global and affecting both the left and the right, and other times a common but differentiated phenomenon for left and right. The focus on the similarities between right- and left-wing populism has not contributed to clarifying the term but instead to increasing the negative view that some authors or politicians, belonging to the left spectrum, have on populism as a progressive political project. They wonder why they should talk about left-wing populism when there is an extended agreement that populism is something bad. All in all, populism provokes, in general, a dual rejection: from mainstream politics and from left politics.

The main controversy awoken by populism is what can be summarized as its alleged opposition to liberal democracy. From this perspective, there is no distinction between right and left, given that both sides question the essence of liberal democracy: the representative system and the constitutional and institutional realm. For this reason, populism is accused of being a threat to democracy while mainstream parties react to safeguard the pillars of the democratic system. From a left perspective, populism is regarded with skepticism since it would imply abandoning the emancipatory project of the left as well as the attempt to change the neoliberal system. The liberal position leaves intact any critique of the representative, and the crisis of the values on which it is grounded, and makes it even difficult to imagine any other alternative to it (Ranci re, 2016). The demands for political change and more democracy, coming from civil society and social movements, barely have the option to resonate in the political system. The socialist position is linked with the crisis of the left, more specifically the radical left, to forge its own ideological project, which has been in crisis since the fall of the Soviet Union, and reveals its need to be reconsidered after the crisis of the neoliberal system in 2008. The crisis has not led to a spectacular expansion of the political space of the radical left.

This book is no exception to the genre on populism and starts with the acknowledgment of the ambiguity and vagueness intrinsic to the concept. However, I believe that it is still useful and necessary to think about populism and its implication in current politics. Specifically, it can be fruitful to reflect on and analyze populism from its ideological position, in this case from the left, rather than conceptualizing populism as an overall phenomenon across ideologies. I am not arguing that there are no similarities, because there are, but the differences are significant and can be explained by the parties

belonging to the left or right axis. In other words, the populist articulation differs substantially if it is made from the left or the right. Thus, the objective of this book is to conceptualize and analyze left-wing populism as a political project developed from the left which embraces populism. Left-wing populism cannot imply that we can identify “pure” forms of populism or that populism is the only component defining the left. Yannis Stavrakakis (2017) points out that populism involves a series of contradictory articulations that imply a plurality of populist hybrids where what is at stake is the specific profile of the populism emerging within a context. Hybridity itself is a feature shared by all forms of populism (Zienkowski & Breeze, 2019), and this is applicable to the varieties of the left too. It would be wrong to look at the populist turn of radical parties as the total assumption of the populist logic instead of as the coexistence of populist and radical forms and traditions. The focus on (hybrid) left-wing populism highlights the importance of taking diverse socio-political contexts into account in order to understand how populism is embedded within different left-wing traditions. Therefore, addressing the specificities of left-wing populism can contribute to understanding the recent emergence or development of the left and the existence of multiple and valuable debates on the alternatives to neoliberalism, the multicultural societies, or the role of the nation in globalization times. Left-wing populism is not a “pure” or fixed concept, or an unproblematic one, but it is necessary to grasp the multiple debates and crossroads faced by the left in searching for its own identity.

The reflections on left-wing populism draw mainly on the European situation, particularly after the crisis of 2008 with focus on the political parties which embraced, more or less explicitly, left-wing populism (or a form of left politics distinguishable from the radical left and close to some

populist features), and on the political and academic debates generated around the populist strategy. It does not mean that we should ignore the previous experiences of the Latin American left-wing populism given its influence both theoretically and politically. It would also be naïve not to mention that the main interest in populism, despite having existed before, has been provoked by phenomena like the Brexit and the electoral victory of Donald Trump. I will refer to the far right and (radical) right wing indistinctly, although I am aware of the differences and the variety of positions around it. Focusing on left-wing populism, it is pertinent to explain, first of all, the emergence of the “populist moment” and later the definition of left-wing populism as a political phenomenon.

THE POPULIST MOMENT

Before the economic crisis, the idea of the populist *Zeitgeist* was used to explain the emergence of contemporary populism, both from the left and right, in Europe. In the beginning of the 2000s, Cas Mudde (2004) referred to the causes of the populist *Zeitgeist* and pointed to some perceptions, rather than facts, on the increasing corruption of the elites and the separation between “the people” and “the elite.” This trend was not only attributable to the right wing but also to the left. Luke March and Cas Mudde talked about “social populism” to characterize parties whose “ideological stance echoes democratic socialism’s acceptance of parliamentary democracy and rejection of capitalism” (2005, p. 35). While doctrine principles and the “correct” class politics still define these parties as radical left, the openness to egalitarianism and “proletarian” anti-elitism connects with populism, as well as supplementing class analysis with other identity issues,

including those associated with the right as ethnic or national sentiment. It is important to notice that the shift from radical left to populist left wing is, to some extent, a tendency pre-existing the crisis of 2008. Indeed, there is a continuity along left-wing populism before and after the crisis, even if it is true that the crisis of representation and the popular movements and social protests increased after 2008 and set the agenda and the priorities for left-wing parties. In short, even when the radical right-wing populism was dominant, the radical left was already embracing some populist principles. Without pretending to offer a comprehensive description of the populist moment (intensified in the aftermath of the crisis but existing before), these elements are important to understanding the left-wing turn to populism. All of them are about the decreasing capacity of representativeness by political parties. While the first two elements emphasize the production of common interests between parties and other economic actors, leaving out the demands of the people, the third one points to a way of strengthening both participation and representativeness.

- *Party system crisis*: The cartelization of political parties (Katz & Mair, 2018) provokes the disappearance of differences between parties. Since they are funded by the state, they reproduce the same pattern of behavior. Politicians preserve their own interests, and that is why parties collaborate among each other. The cartel parties stop representing the demands of the electorate, and the extra-parliamentary party organization loses relevance (Müller, 2000). Peter Mair warns that the definition of democracy is leaving out its emphasis on popular sovereignty and the consequence of that would be “a kind of democracy without the *demos* at its centre” (2013, p. 9).

- *Corruption*: Cas Mudde in his definition of populism opposes the “pure people” against the “corrupt elite.” The application of “pure” to “the people” is questionable, but the characterization of “the elite” as “corrupt” requires a more detailed definition of what corruption is. The notion of “dependence corruption,” coined by Lawrence Lessig (2011), can be useful to such a definition. According to him, the main problem of the government is the dependency of the economic interests, its funders. Corruption is not about violating the criminal laws but about the dependency that highlights how political parties in government rule for the economic elites. Moreover, this reinforces the idea that the pattern of interaction underlying such a dependency is unbreakable and consequently avoidable. Corruption is relational in the sense that it entails bad governance (the government not expressing the will of the people) and lost trust (declining participation of the people due to their lack of faith in democratic processes).
- *Political movements*: It would be erroneous to consider social revolts and protests, which increased enormously in response to the implementation of austerity politics, as a risk instead of a necessity, argues Jan Hoby (2013). He claims that what distinguishes both perceptions (movements as risk or necessity) is the way in which social revolts are handled politically in terms of organization, leadership, vision, and strategy. Incorporating the antiestablishment rhetoric to articulate their discourses and experimental and horizontal ways of organizing, some social movements have transformed into political parties or, at least, movements and parties are interrelated. As a consequence, some organizational innovations are introduced such as the blurred distinction between members and non-members, alternative funding means, direct citizen engagement (social media and

digital tools), and mobilization of citizens (Klaukka, Van der Staak, & Valladares, 2017). The crisis of representation leaves the question of finding satisfactory means of participation and engagement open.

These three features show an overall picture of how the crisis of representation is fundamental to approaching the populist moment and the reason why left-wing parties are embracing populism or populist strategies. However, the main issue at stake is if populism is the main feature for the novelty responses coming from the left and the right. In other words, is populism the central political axis (“the people” vs “the elite,” the bottom vs the top) of the political dispute? If so, what happens with the traditional left-right axis? Chantal Mouffe advocates for the “populist moment” as a conjuncture in which both the left and the right adopt a populist strategy. Mouffe defines the “populist moment” as “the expression of resistances against the post-democratic condition brought by 30 years of neoliberal hegemony” (2018, p. 79). The crisis of neoliberalism would allow fostering a new hegemonic formation which could develop into more democratic or authoritarian politics. The expectations from a left-wing perspective are, obviously, to deepen democracy, but the association of “populism” with authoritarianism is frequent in the public and academic debate. It is not surprising that the predominance of “populism” to elaborate a left project bothers some leftist authors. They think that “populism” mitigates the political importance of the left and moves it to an ambivalent and less ideological place. Éric Fassin (2018a), for example, criticizes that left-wing populism is replacing the ideological conflict between left and right with one between “the people” and “the elite.” Fassin (2018b) does not see the point in reversing the “stigma” of populism or in labeling a political project as left-wing populism, implying it has something in common with right-wing populism; he refuses to accept that.

I share Fassin's concern about the political implications of erasing the left-right axis. There is, indeed, an intentionality in equating all types of populism regardless of their context or ideology. The left-right conflict is replaced with the opposition between liberalism (as democracy) and populism (as illiberalism) and produces paradoxically a political frontier separating which options are democratic and which are not (Agustín & Briziarelli, 2018a). The distinction between liberalism and populism hides intentionally the important differences between left- and right-wing populism and how the "populist moment," using Mouffe's concept, enables the generation of opposed political options. Judith Butler (2017) summarizes quite straightforwardly how pointless it is to compare both kinds of populism: Right-wing populism can lead to fascism, while left-wing populism must lead to radical democracy. Thus, left-wing populism must be seen, primarily, from the perspective of the left and, complementarily, from the way in which populism is embedded and contributes to redefining the practices of the left. There are elements, related to the populist tradition, such as participation or the inclusion of excluded groups, which are valuable in themselves for the left. A similar exercise could be done with the far-right parties or center-right parties who incorporate populist strategies or styles as part of their political repertoires. As mentioned above, my intention is to deepen what is characteristic of left-wing populism as a political phenomenon, specifically as developed in the aftermath of the economic crisis in Europe.

DEFINING LEFT-WING POPULISM

One of the main reasons to keep the distinction between left and right and not replace it completely with other distinctions like "the people" vs "the elite" or populism vs