

Populism

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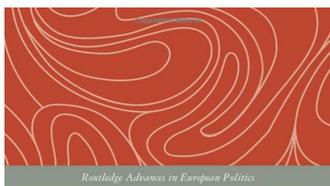
A special issue dedicated to left wing populism



strategy to achieve progressive social and political transformation. Evidence shows that in the pre-electoral phase, populist discourse can significantly enhance the radical left's mobilization potential. The common fate of different socialist projects that ended up surrendering to class collaborationism and cartelisation should not be dismissed as a matter of context (p. 264), but the institutional, economic, cultural factors behind such capitulations still need to be investigated in detail.

By combining historical and comparative assessments, the book has the merit of having raised new important theoretical and normative questions, laying a solid ground for new academic and political reflections on the future of populism and the left.

A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of radical left populism



THE POPULIST RADICAL LEFT IN EUROPE

Edited by
Giorgos Katsambekis and
Alexandros Kioupkiolis



Book reviewed:
Giorgos Katsambekis
and Alexandros
Kioupkiolis (2019), *The
Populist Radical Left in
Europe*, Routledge

By **Thomás Zicman
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There is a tendency in mainstream literature on populism to conflate various phenomena under the same label. Populism is often presented as the root of all evil, as a quintessentially pejorative term that is used to foreclose any challenge to the political mainstream. However, even an author who rejects the pejorative definitions of populism, such as Ernesto Laclau, incurred in this conflating problem. His formalistic approach was not always clear in differentiating between right-wing and left-wing, nor between authoritarian and democratic forms of populism. One of the merits of the volume edited by Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis is that it allows for an analysis of a particular expression of populism: the populist radical left in Europe. The book's well-founded empirical studies indicate that radical left populism itself is not monolithic, as it assumes

different shapes and dynamics in different countries.

The different configurations point to different answers for two major tensions that traverse the populist radical left. The first tension is constitutive of what could be called "Populism 2.0" (Kioupkiolis, chapter 8). It refers to the innovative but also tense relation between political parties and autonomous protest movements that frequently lead to the creation of profound transformations. This tension is present in cases such as Syriza in Greece (Katsambekis, chapter 1) and Podemos in Spain (Kioupkiolis, chapter 2). To a large extent, their challenge is to find a compromise between their embedded horizontality (of the base) and their verticality (of a party). From the opposite angle, this challenge is also latent in leader-centred movements such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon's France Insoumise (Marlière, chapter 4), in which the bottom-up processes are inverted by a charismatic figure.

The Levica party in Slovenia (Toplišek, chapter 3) also emerged from protest movements, but it may serve as a transition from the first tensions to a second kind: the tension between populist and socialist traditions within radical left parties. Other borderline cases such as the Socialistische Partij in the Netherlands (Lucardie & Voerman, chapter 5), Die Linke in Germany (Hough & Keith, chapter 6) and even Corbyn(ism) in the UK (Maignashca & Dean, chapter 7), show how left-wing politics interact with populist ones in inconsistent ways, often for strategic purposes, in various degrees and throughout the time.

Because it makes these tensions explicit, this volume is especially useful in the context of a crisis. I am not only referring to the economic, social and health crisis that defines our world today, but also to the crisis of the populist radical left itself. Since the publication of the volume a few months ago, many things had happened to the populist radical left in Europe. If populism may be a by-product of crisis, and itself an element that brings crisis to the political arena, it now seems to face its own identity crisis.

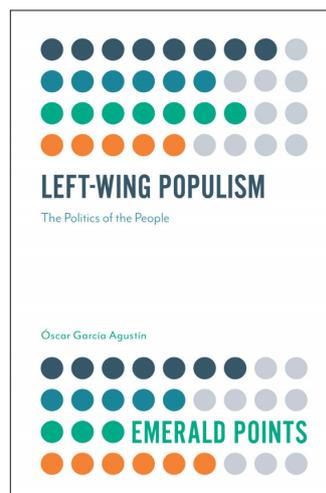
Despite its merits and the challenges of government, Syriza ended up losing the elections in July 2019. The experience in power undoubtedly transformed party and alienated part of its base. In January 2020, Podemos took part in a coalition government with their previous rivals from the centre-left PSOE. Paradoxically as it may seem, this was a bittersweet triumph, a concession after a series of deceiving

electoral results and an internal split along populist and socialist lines. In France, Jean-Luc Mélenchon portrayed himself as a victim of lawfare and instrumentalised political justice. The accusations against him jeopardized his movement, heavily depended on its leader's charisma. In the UK, Jeremy Corbyn – a frontier case of populism – suffered a major defeat in the 2019 general election and was forced to step down from the Labour leadership.

As Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis suggest in their introduction, their previous volume on the square movements (Radical democracy and collective movements today, 2014) indicated the potentialities and limits of the respective experiences. For them, the populist radical left appeared as a possible answer to these and other tensions. In the same vein, in his postscript Yannis Stavrakakis (chapter 9), suggests that the populist radical left was an answer to the crisis of the left. Following them, one can assume that the dislocation in populist radical left caused by the current crisis will be an impulse for its reinvention.

Here, it is worth indicating a topic that is not well developed in the volume. Although the book discusses the populist radical left, it says very little about these movements' relation with a very particular kind of radicality: the ethics of radical democracy. It seems that, through institutionalisation and hierarchy, the populist radical left may have lost part of its transformative and disruptive power. Maybe, instead of fixing its own identity as a normal political player, the populist radical left – in Europe, but also abroad – should once again construct 'the people' as a destitutive symbol in a paradoxical counter-hegemonic hegemony.

Left-populism: one name, different interpretations.



Book reviewed:
Óscar García Agustín
(2020), *Left-wing
Populism. The Politics of
the People*, Emerald

**By Samuele
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Discourse Analysis
from the University of
Essex**

'Left-wing Populism. The Politics of the People' is one of the first systematic endeavours analysing what remains an undeservingly understudied political practice: populism in its leftist variant. In this sense, the book has several merits, as the theoretical and empirical dimensions that compose the phenomenon are savvily interwoven in the text. The latter is particularly well developed: the path of a variety of progressive political subjects across Europe is meticulously reconstructed in the light of their choice to undertake, more or less decidedly, the populist route, with special but by no means exclusive mention of the paradigmatic cases of Syriza, Podemos and France Insoumise. The book thus well recounts the salient moments of left populism progression in the 2014–2019 period, as well as the polemics that it has attracted from the radical left and the thematic cruxes that its concrete deployment has posed.

By collecting the different stances at stake, 'Left-wing Populism' provides a fair and illustrative cataloguing of these discussions straddling between the theoretical and the empirical. This effort arguably constitutes the major contribution of the book. This does not mean that the author refrains from putting forward his own original views on a number of controversial questions. I will start from those on which I'm in agreement with. Populism — of any ideological sort — has shown a high dependence on the figure of the leader. While relatively unproblematic for the right, it shouldn't be so for the left. This tendency has fostered vertical structures and plebiscitarianism, while making left populist subjects more vulnerable in the medium-long run. This doesn't mean that leaders are of no value — far from it — as they act

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