

## Book Reviews

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Robert R. Barr, *The Resurgence of Populism in Latin America*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2017. Tables, figures, acronyms, bibliography, index, 250 pp.; hardcover \$75.

Populism is back. Dozens of populist movements, parties, and leaders have dynamically emerged around the world in recent years, attempting to demolish the neoliberal political establishment and change the lives of oppressed and poor people. The forceful rise of populism has rekindled the interest of political and social scientists in this crucial phenomenon. A growing number of academic researchers try to define populism, trace its features, find the causes of its emergence, and highlight its implications for democracy and society. However, this is not an easy task, as there are many conflicting opinions about it. As a result, the populist issue becomes more and more complicated.

One of those who try to explain populism is Robert Barr. In his new book, Barr examines the re-emergence of populism in Latin America, a region where this politico-social phenomenon has been presented in various periods with different forms. Specifically, the author seeks to answer what populism is and explain the reasons for its resurgence in recent years in Latin America (3). Contrary to other researchers who call for consensus around a minimal definition, Barr argues that it is not necessary to develop a short definition, because an important phenomenon like this should be based on conceptual and analytical terms (3). Moreover, he argues that it is important to utilize a useful concept for the research, which should be able to tell us not only what something is but what it is not (4).

Let us examine briefly the chapters of the book. In chapter 2, Barr explores the various strategies for conceptualizing populism with the aim of developing the most useful definition (24). First of all, there are three main concept categories that try to analyze populism, according to Barr: the family resemblance, the classical, and the radial. The first type uses multiple defining features to characterize populist parties, movements, or leaders, but none of them is considered necessary (27). The classical type needs all the identified characteristics to label something as populist. The radial type uses specific features to name a political party as populist, while characterizing as partial examples the cases with fewer populist features (28).

Furthermore, Barr explores the major definitions of populism, analyzing and criticizing the two leading contemporary schools of thought, the political and the ideational, but also the essential work of Ernesto Laclau (36–44). According to Barr, populism is a political strategy (6) with two main characteristics: antiestablishment appeals; namely, the challenge by the people/us/citizens against the political establishment/them/elites; and plebiscitarianism, a personalistic leadership with a top-down and unmediated character (a kind of linkage between the people and the

leader/party) (44–48). At the end of this chapter, Barr discusses what populism is not, separating it from other related ideas or concepts, such as political outsiders (48–54).

In chapter 3, Barr analyzes the existing explanations of the rise of populism in Latin America in recent years, such as the economic crisis, distrust of institutions, corruption, and so on. However, he asserts that the most important goal for research is not the identification of a principal cause, but the combination of factors that have affected the strengthening of populism (19). As he mentions, there are three main factors that create propitious conditions for the rise of this phenomenon: weakly institutionalized party systems, prevalence of corruption, and evidence of disadvantage (76).

In chapter 4, Barr examines the political, social, and economic situation in Bolivia after 1980 through standard qualitative methods and a variety of sources of data. Specifically, he explains the reasons for the collapse of the previous political system (neoliberalism, privatizations, corruption, salaries, taxes, etc.) and for the rise of the populist figure Evo Morales to power. However, the case of Bolivia is not enough to draw safe conclusions about this important issue. Therefore, in chapter 5, the author examines 35 presidential elections from 1996 to 2010 in Latin America, through a medium-*N* study, with the aim of finding the possible combination of factors that play a crucial role in the empowerment of populist parties. Barr uses fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fs/QCA) methodology to examine all possible combinations of factors and discovers that his argument (weakly institutionalized party systems, perception of prevalent corruption, and evidence of disadvantage) is substantiated (143).

In chapter 6, he examines the outer boundaries of the concept of populism and argues that populism is not the same as other kinds of “challenge politics” and should be disassociated with notions such as outsider or newcomer (169). In the final, short chapter of the book (chapter 7), Barr underlines the implications of populism for democracy and political systems, arguing that the concentration of power by populists leads to the troubled relationship between populism and democracy (179).

*The Resurgence of Populism in Latin America* is a well-written book and has a well-structured argument based on a combination of methods. First of all, the author clarifies the discussion about the concept of populism, conceptualizing the definitions according to their character (family resemblance, classical, radial) and exploring critically the two leading approaches (ideational and political) that have been developed around this phenomenon. Subsequently, Barr manages to detect the causes of the rise of populism in Latin America in recent years, through the utilization of different methodologies. An important point of this book is that the author rejects some characteristics that have been given over time to populism (such as charisma of the leader or clientelism), as they are not necessary conditions to the construction of a populist discourse. Moreover, it is noteworthy that he attempts to distinguish the notion of populism from other quite similar notions, like political outsider or newcomer, succeeding in distinguishing populism from other antisystemic, nonpopulist cases.

However, Barr's work presents some points that can be strongly criticized. First of all, the author rightly criticizes Laclau's ideas about empty signifiers, as it is true that if any signifier can function as a nodal point of a populist discourse, then the concept loses its analytical value. Nevertheless, Barr's criticism underestimates the overall work of Laclau and its strong influence on academic thought. Laclau's early work on populism (the people, logic of equivalence, and the creation of a collective identity) constitutes an extremely useful theoretical tool that can be used comparatively in any case and can be combined with several qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

Is there any other problem in his analysis? Barr's definition of populism (political strategy) is based on reasonable thought, utilizing the fundamental challenge between the political subject and the establishment (antiestablishment appeals) and highlighting the importance of performance (language, behavior, etc.) in constructing social reality. Nevertheless, it does not seem to consider the signifier of "the people" as an important aspect of populist discourse, as he focuses mainly on anti-establishment appeals. Furthermore, he argues that "plebiscitarian linkages" (the relationship between the leader and the people) are an essential part of populism. But what happens in the case of populist movements without leadership, such as Occupy Wall Street (USA), Indignados (Spain), and Aganaktismenoi (Greece)?

In addition, Barr argues that populism leads to the concentration of power by the leader and that populists do not enhance direct or participatory democracy (181). However, the negative valuation of populist governments has to do with the person's individual preferences and perspective on politics. For example, if someone proclaims his or her adherence to liberal values, it is quite difficult for him or her to accept the prospect of a participatory democracy. Hence, it is not easy to grasp the positive results of populists in power, such as the equal participation of citizens in political processes and the strengthening of people's rights. Moreover, Barr's opinion on populism and democracy does not reveal the antidemocratic function of liberal democracy (or postdemocracy) in recent years, which undermines the popular subject and serves the interests of the few.

To sum up, *The Resurgence of Populism in Latin America* is a useful contribution to the existing literature on populism, mainly because of its great attempt to find the causes of the rise of populism in Latin America. Moreover, an important aspect of this work is that it rejects some features that have been attributed to populism and tries to distinguish the notion of populism from other quite similar concepts. However, Barr's definition of populism and his ideas about the relationship between populism and democracy are quite problematic. Even though it presents controversial views on some points, however, the book is a useful work for anyone who deals with Latin American politics and society.

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