

BOOK REVIEW

Neopopulismi. Perché sono destinati a durare

By Paolo Graziano. Bologna, Il Mulino, 2018. 109pp. €11.
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The last three decades have been marked by a global resurgence of ‘populism’. The term populism is part of the jargon of journalists, commentators, and readers, who use it to describe and label political phenomena quite diverse from one another: from the rise of president Duterte in the Philippines, to the resurgence of left-wing governments challenging the Washington consensus in Latin America during the 2000s. Limiting our focus to Europe, we are experiencing the same phenomenon here: the ‘populist’ label has been attached to a handful of different political actors and forms of political mobilization. As it has been noted, the tendency is to define as ‘populist’ all forms of protest and, more generally, everything that is considered different from the political mainstream, or everything that can more properly be considered popular, rather than populist. This catch-all use of the term, however, generates confusion and – why not? – a great deal of frustration for those who try to use the concept of populism for analytical purposes.

This pocket-sized, introductory book by Paolo Graziano aims to resolve the confusion around the concept of populism and to provide a synthetic, yet exhaustive, introduction to the topic, by centering our attention on some ‘specific properties of contemporary populist politics’ (p. 8). Also, the book aims at providing an informed answer to the question ‘are populisms meant to last?’. We can easily divide the six chapters that comprise the book into three parts: in the first one (Ch. 1 and 2), the author first provides some conceptual clarifications and a working definition of populism, after which he investigates the causes of its resurgence in Europe. In this regard, the presence of a crisis or of ‘traumatic disequilibrium’ (p. 32) is considered as a condition in which populisms thrive. In the European context, the author identifies three different crisis: the economic, the migration, and the political one – the latter being narrowed down to the crisis of representation, affecting the majority of European political systems. The overlapping of these different crises, be them ‘objective’ or ‘perceived’ by individuals, has been the trigger for the new wave of populist parties. Anticipating on the conclusions drawn by the author, the ‘depth and persistence of a state of crisis’ (p. 97) are the main factors that make populism far from an episodic phenomenon.

In the second part (Ch. 3, 4, and 5), the author briefly describes the politics of some of the most prominent populist actors in Europe, having first divided them into ‘exclusionary’ and ‘inclusionary’ types of populism. In this part, a specific chapter is dedicated to the Italian case that so often gains international attention for being a ‘political laboratory’ for European populism, given the high presence of (self)defined populist parties. It is worth remembering that, at the time of writing in 2018, Italy had just experienced the formation of the first European ‘fully populist’ government, namely the government coalition created by the League and the Five Star Movement. In the chapter, the characteristics of both parties are addressed. The last part of the book (Ch. 6) focuses on

the ‘demand side’ of populism, shedding light on the characteristics – sociodemographic and others – of the voters who could potentially support populist parties.

Regarding the first part of the book, one of the most innovative proposals introduced by the author is to use the term ‘neopopulism’ to distinguish between the populist parties and movements formed since the 1970s and those ‘populist’ movements formed in the United States and Russia at the end of the 19th century. This distinction is very welcome, as it helps to set some temporal boundaries within which it is possible to study contemporary populism, without losing the historical perspective of the evolution of the phenomenon.

Moving on to the definition of populism, it must be said that populism truly is an essentially contested concept: the scholarly discussion concerns not only what it is, but whether it even exists. The author of ‘Neopopulism’, who clearly believes in the validity of populism as an analytical category, prefers not to enter into the discussion on the nature of populism. Rather, and building on the works of authors such as Mudde, Canovan, Kaltwasser, Meny and Surel and Taggart, he provides the reader with a discussion based around three dimensions – ideology, communication, and organization – that are useful for identifying contemporary forms of populism, their differences, and their concrete articulations in everyday politics. This tripartition is certainly useful, as it provides the reader with a good tool-kit with which to interpret populism. However, by identifying ‘ideology’ as an analytical dimension, the author implicitly takes the side of that part of the scholarship that proposes an interpretation of populism as an ideology. This interpretation, first put forward by Cas Mudde, is broadly shared but far from uncontested, and the author contradicts his attempt at impartiality amongst the different approaches. The volume could perhaps benefit from a more extensive debate about the nature of populism, so as to enable the readers to develop their own stance.

Moving to the second part, the chapters provide a comprehensive introduction to the main European populist parties. The parties are sorted on the basis of their exclusionary or inclusionary conception of the people, following the joint work of Mudde and Kaltwasser: in the first case, the ‘people’ is defined along an ethnic, nationalist base; in the second case, the ‘people’ includes all subjects and groups that live within a delimited territorial space, regardless of their nationality or citizenship status (p. 27–28). For the first group, the author provides a short introduction to some ‘usual suspects’ of European populism, from the French Front National, to the Hungarian FIDESZ and the Italian (Northern) League. In the second group, beyond the well-known Podemos, SYRIZA, and France Insoumise amongst others, the author also dedicates some space to the Slovakian SMER and the Irish Sinn Féin, which perhaps do not have a frequent presence in the Italian public debate. The excursus through the history and development of these parties is excellent in providing the basic knowledge of these political formations. If anything, one recommendation would be for the author to integrate this part better into the next edition of the book, given the high rate with which populist parties rise and fall in European politics. For example, at the time of writing, it would no longer be possible to consider Italian populism without mentioning the party of the Brothers of Italy.

This volume will be of great value to everyone who is interested in understanding the dynamics and most relevant actors of current (populist) politics in Italy and beyond. As called for by the author, the book is indeed an accessible, though rigorous and exhaustive, introduction to populism studies. Students, and whoever is armed with intellectual curiosity, will find here all the elements to engage critically with this ever-expanding field of research.