BOOK REVIEW

Benjamin Moffitt (2020), Populism, Polity.

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Among the wealth of literature on populism, it is a daunting task to introduce a new book bringing clarity to the murky waters of populism. Benjamin Moffitt is a leading scholar in the field of populism studies and he pitches this book to scholars in the field of comparative politics, but also of political theory. This book fits perfectly with the career trajectory of its author, who is Senior Lecturer in Politics and Australian Research Council DECRA Fellow (2019-2022) at the National School of Arts, ACU (Melbourne). 'Populism' comes after the monograph 'The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style and Representation' (Stanford University Press, 2016), which can be seen as Moffitt's manifesto outlining the author's distinctive approach to populism as a performative style, and after the co-authored book 'Political Meritocracy and Populism: Curse or Cure?' (with Mark Chou & Octavia Bryant, Routledge, 2020). The latter proposes an original view of the complex relationship between populism and meritocratic regimes, such as China and Singapore. In 'Populism', Moffitt contextualises the stylistic approach to populism within the broad literature on the topic, by offering exhaustive explanations of competing approaches, as well as concisely examining parallels made between populism and other '-isms', such as nationalism, socialism, and liberalism, and the relationship between populism and democracy.

The book is coherently organised into six chapters, written in a crisp and incisive style. Chapter 1 justifies why it is still relevant to study populism; Chapter 2 explored different approaches to populism, comparing their advantages and their limitations; Chapter 3 starts the series of parallels made between populism and other concepts in political theory, such as nationalism, socialism, liberalism, and democracy, which are respectively examined in depth in Chapter 4, 5, and 6.

Chapter 1 on why populism matters is a reinvigorating account of why we, as scholars of populism, should not be discouraged by the 'explosion of work on this topic' (p.3), and instead probe deeper into it,

discovering new avenues of inquiry. Moffitt's assertion that 'This sudden escalation in portance [of populism] saw a vast number of researchers who worked on themes even remotely related to populism became 'experts' on it (…)' reveals Moffitt's honesty in expressing the surprise felt by 'those who had worked on populism for years' (p. 3) in front of the expanding literature on populism tackled from various disciplines. The merit of this new addition to the literature on populism lies in its theoretical approach to the topic that demystifies political theory and makes it accessible to a wide public beyond political theorists. Indeed, the book draws on a wealth of concepts of political and traces the intellectual lineage of the three approaches to populism to capture a fuller picture: Freeden (1998) and Sartori (1970) for the ideational approach; Laclau (2005) and Mouffe (2018) for the discursive-performative approach; Ragin (2014) and Tilly (2008) for the strategic approach.

The ideational approach to populism, championed by Mudde (2004), for instance, sees populism as delineating two antagonistic camps in society: the pure people against the corrupt elite. The people is hard to encase within one definition: it can represent a nation or a country as a united people, the ethnic kith and kin in an exclusionary sense, and the ordinary people, as the common people whose interests are overridden by the elites (Canovan 1999). Populism, according to the ideational approach, is a thin-centred ideology 'limited in ideational ambitions and scope' (Freeden 1998, 750), it can be attached to other thicker ideologies. As Albertazzi and McDonnell (2015, 5) argue, 'thin-centred ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous "others" who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice'. Many proponents of this approach follow Sartori (1976) in understanding populism as a binary concept, contrary to degreeists who understand populism as a phenomenon present in different gradations.

The gradational concept of populism has been used by Ragin (2000) with an approach to populism as a strategy, heralded also by Weyland (2001) for instance, considering populism in action and focusing on a personalistic leader with an unmediated relationship with the masses and a loose party organisation. This approach draws on Tilly's (2008) notion of populism as a kind of mobilisation. As Moffitt points out, however, this approach to populism is mainly used when analysing cases of populism in Latin America. Moreover, according to Moffitt, these first two approaches to populism are too positivist.

Finally, Moffitt sheds light on the discursive-performative approach to populism, which he deems as 'post-positivist' (2020, 17). In the discursive-performative view of populism supported by Moffitt (2020, 22), populist becomes a 'political style- the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences tha are use dto create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political'. These repertoires include well-defined themes: the dichotomy of people v. elites (reminiscent of the ideational approach to populism); bad manners; and the performance of a crisis, breakdown and threat. This approach to populism has been frequently adopted by discourse analysts, such as Wodak (2015), who emphasises how populists heighten the perception of crisis in order to induce threat of the Other, through the discursive tool of the topos of threat. This approach rests on the theoretical foundations provided by Laclau (2005) and Mouffe (2018), interpreting populism as the discursive construction of the people. Like the strategic approach, the discursive-performative approach focuses on what populism does, especially its construction of discourse, and can lend itself well to a gradational analysis.

Moffitt starts Chapter 3 by powerfully claiming that 'Populism is not the same as nationalism': nationalism and populism are not interchangeable and the existence of one concept does not necessarily hinge upon the existence of the other concept. Nevertheless, populist parties often discursively articulate both the nation and the people at the same time. As de Cleen and Stavrakaksis (2017) argue, the people is articulated in opposition to the elites on an up-down axis, while the nation in opposition to the Other on an in-out axis. Interestingly, in the populist radical right's discourse, the nation delineates the borders of the people: the people become equated with the underdog against the EU, the domestic political class,

intellectuals, and the politically correct, but the people is not constructed to encompass also non-nationals, and the nation becomes synonym of the ethno-cultural nation (Griffini 2019).

Here Moffitt demonstrates admirable breadth and depth of knowledge, when underlining that, erroneously, populism tends to be equated *in toto* with nativist radical right populism, which is, instead, only a part of populism. Specifically, usually, right-wing populism embraces an ethnic nationalism, while left-wing populism civic nationalism, which results into the distinction between exclusive populism (mainly applied to Europe) and inclusive populism (mainly found in Latin America) (Mudde, Kaltwasser 2013). However, to map these two kinds of populism onto two different geographical areas, has some limitations. There are instances of exclusive populism in Latin America (such as Evo Morales in Bolivia) and cases of inclusive populism in Europe (such as Podemos in Spain) as Moffitt aptly notes (2020, 41-42). Moreover, the United States seems to be left out of this dichotomous line of reasoning, even if it represents a thriving environment both for left-wing and right-wing populism. In the wake of the 2020 presidential elections, both contenders have been classified as populist. While Trump's populism is hard to contest, Joe Biden's populism, identified in its appeal to the economic losers, suffers from conceptual overstretching.

An interesting note deserving great attention is the point on how populism does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with nationalism, but may adopt a non-national stance, such as in the case of regionalist populism, municipal populism, transnational populism, and international populism. The first case has elicited a wealth of academic attention (see, for instance, Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Huysseune 2010; Mazzoleni and Ruzza 2018). The last three cases, instead, have been underexplored so far (see, for instance, McDonnell and Werner 2019).

Chapter 4 deals with an ideology that has characterised mainly left-wing populism: socialism. Moffitt's sharp view on this clarifies the distinction between the two: while they share distrust against the elites, socialism takes the existence of the people for granted and directs its claims at the working class, while populism targets its claims to the people. This distinction, however, is hard to put into practice. In Europe, Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, the Scottish Socialist Party in Scottish in Scotland, as well as two prominent left-wing populist figures that have been under the spotlight recently, Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom and Bernie Sanders in the US, declare themselves to be socialists. At the same time, their socialism is hard to distil from their populism, evident in their appeal to the people against the economic and political elites, their direct style, and their attempt to establish a direct relationship with the people. Populism, according to Laclau (2005) and Mouffe (2018) can capitalise on the more universal appeal of the people compared to the socialist appeal to the working class and can offer progressives the chance of a project that is unbridled from class essentialism. The most recent events at the time of writing this review, including Corbyn's expulsion from the Labour Party due a row over anti-Semitism within the labour Party and Sanders' defeat in the presidential election primaries, make Moffitt's question about the longevity of socialist populism particularly relevant. 'Given the centrality of populism at our current political moment, it is likely that arguments about how the left seeks to characterise 'the people' against 'the elite' (…) will continue to be a pressing concern for progressive politics' (Moffitt 2020, 70).

Chapter 5 unpicks the relationship between populism and liberalism, which is fraught with contradictions. There are liberal mainstream politicians who espouse liberal views in the economy and but adopt illiberal policies regarding minorities, thus denying the liberal values of pluralism and openness. Pappas (2014) is firm in identifying populism as strongly illiberal, due to the monothematic division of society between the people and the elites, the adversarial style of politics, and its majoritarianism, which run counter, respectively, the liberal view of multiple cleavages characterising society, the liberal notion of consensus, and the liberal protection of minority rights (2016b). At the same time, Pappas (2014) is adamant in arguing that populism is not undemocratic. More in-depth discussion on populism and democracy will ensue in

Chapter 6. Howver, right-wing populist have not shied away from strategically using liberalism: they often couched their discourse under a civic veil, in order to gain legitimacy and respectability (Griffini 2020). In this sense, populism toys with liberal ideas, such as secularism, the protection of women's rights and of LGBTQI+ rights. The political theory standpoint adopted by Moffitt to unravel the conundrum posed by the coexistence of liberalism with populism is useful: the relationship between populism and liberalism depends on whether we consider liberalism in its Lockean sense, in its Kantian sense, and in its Millian sense. Right-wing populism seems to clash with Lockean liberalism valorising diversity, seems not to champion Kantian liberalism relying on autonomy and rationality, but seems to follow Millian liberalism emphasising self-expression. On the left-wing, liberalism infuses populism in a more explicit way: Occupy Wall Street, La France Insoumise, Podemos, Syriza, to name a few, have championed an inclusive notion of the people. Therefore, as Moffitt (2020, 93) points out, 'We should be wary of seeing the line between liberalism and populism as too clear-cut and instead take notice of how, why and when they intersect in the contemporary political landscape'.

The concluding chapter displays superb clarity of thought in delineating in concise terms the debate around the impact of populism on democracy. On one side, liberal democratic scholars argue that populism contravenes the liberal democratic principle of pluralism through projecting the people as representing the whole society and the 'true' voice of 'the people' (Moffitt 2020, 97). On the other side, radical democratic scholars see in populism the potential to achieve a radical democracy, as a 'panacea of the multiple problems that radical democracy is now facing' (Moffitt 2020, 100). Liberal democrats are accused by their radical counterparts of being too rational and naive in insisting on overcoming political divergences through consensus. A criticism levelled at liberal democrats is that they tend to be anti-political, by erasing the politicised line traced between the people and the elites by populism. The relationship between anti-politics and liberal democrats, though, is not straightforward. Anselmi and Blokker's (2020) latest edited book on populism offers an in-depth elaboration on the fraught relationship between populism and democracy, illustrating how actually populism itself has been connected to anti-politics and de-politicisation (De Nardis 2020), and anti-partyism (Urbinati 2020; Viviani 2020). Moreover, the radical democratic view of populism displays weaknesses, since it assigns a disproportionate role of the populist leader, in whose hands power and responsibility are concentrated. This may pave the way to an authoritarian drift.

Moffitt's incisive insights can be useful to grasp the Italian political milieu, characterized by the clear populism of the Lega and the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S). Both parties share populism, evident in their championing of the people, in their attacks on dangerous Others (embodied by the elites and immigrants), in the presence of charismatic leaders, and in their straightforward and emotional language. However, the Lega and the M5S present divergences in their main ideological underpinnings. The Lega belongs to the right-wing tradition, emphasising neoliberal economic policies, conservative values, the ethno-cultural nation, and the strong state. In office, the Lega's discourse and policies were markedly nativist. The M5S represents a unique case of populist party that escapes any consensual classification, since it occupies a more ambiguous position on the political spectrum than the Lega. On one hand, the M5S shares with the Lega antagonism against the elites, including political parties, the media, and the EU. On the other hand, the M5S is populist beyond the left-right divide, by combining redistributionist policies with a socialist flavor, such as a universal basic income, with opacity on the notion of the nation. Before its experience in government, the M5S was elusive about immigration policy and did not adopt nativist discourse. In government it acted ambivalently: whereas a few M5S representatives denounced the Lega's nativist policies, the majority favoured them and deployed anti-immigrant discourse. Of particular interest is the relationship between these populist parties and democracy: the M5S is openly advocating participatory and deliberative democracy, but, when sharing power with the Lega in 2018-2019, it did seem to support a majoritarian view of democracy.

The addition that would have been worth mentioning in Moffitt's superb account of populism is the analysis of another '-ism': fascism. While Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) reassure us that contemporary populism holds no risk of treading into fascism, other scholars, such as Mammone (2018) and Traverso (2019) have warned us that political parties often labelled as 'right-wing populist' have not yet shed all their fascist heritage. This consideration becomes of paramount importance in the Italian context, where Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), a populist radical right party that has been defined as 'neo-fascist' (Mammone 2018), made an electoral breakthrough at the regional elections in September 2020, when they scored 18% in the region of Marche. FdI fits the definition of populism from an ideational, stylistic, and strategic perspective, and, at the same time, it is heir to Alleanza Nazionale, which was the transfiguration of the openly neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano. FdI's rise makes it even more significant to ponder the extent to which populism relates to fascism.

The significance of this undertaking would offer useful food for thought for comparisons stretching beyond Italy: in 2020, the Black Lives Movement cast light on the American uneasy relationship with racial equality. Meanwhile, Trump deployed federal forces to disperse protests against racial inequality and police brutality, in the wake of the killing of George Floyd by the police in May 2020. In June 2020, Trump proposed to designate the Antifa movement as a terrorist organization. According to Stanley, a prominent scholar of fascism, 'Trump is performing fascism', through his law and order adage and his Manichean 'Us-Them ideology' (2020). Trump's animosity against Antifa and his deployment violence against protesters was characterised as a 'fascist' by some scholars, such as Stanley (2020). However, other scholars are more cautious in attaching the label of fascist to Trump, because America has not drifted yet into an authoritarian state: it is still holding elections, it does not have a one-party government, and Trump 'lacks a mass movement at his command' (Bell 2020). With the 2020 US presidential election results still hanging at the time of writing, it is significant to consider the intricate relationship between populism and fascism.

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