

Book review

Paula Biglieri & Luciana Cahadia: *Seven essays on populism*

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In *Seven essays on populism: For a renewed theoretical perspective*, Paula Biglieri and Luciana Cahadia (2021) set the record straight regarding right-wing populism – it has never existed. The authors reject the identification of populism with reactionary governing paradigms, raising some provocative objections. Fundamentally, can it really be said that Jair Bolsonaro, Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orbán, Donald Trump, Cristina Kirchner, Rafael Correa, Lula da Silva, and Evo Morales are all “populists”? Against chiefly consensual diagnoses, the authors believe that scholars should not adopt populism as a term that equally applies to both emancipatory movements as well as those antithetical to them. On the contrary, ultraconservative stances should accept another name: fascism. Biglieri and Cahadia suggest that “populism is itself a chest [*arcón*] that contains a series of secrets to be deciphered” (17). Still, none of its threads should be linguistically nor politically mistaken with grifting statecraft. From the outset, the book stitches together theory and militancy. The authors remind readers that those occupying Latin American streets are also their intellectual and affective peers.

While insightfully prefaced by Wendy Brown, the book rebels against readings instigated by distinguished scholars such as Slavoj Žižek (2009) and Maurizio Lazzarato (2019), due to their claims that populism aims at forging a “one-all” people, a project that left-leaning forces ought to sidestep. With Laclau, they observe that emancipatory populism is comprised of ever-expansive *equivalential chain*. The people is not one-all at all, but rather unity is the result of a plural and universalizing articulation. In contrast, exclusionary tactics seal up the demands of a select group. Against Laclau, however, they note that “right-wing populism” is unable to articulate expansive popular demands, and thus contradicts the principle of equivalential chains. The ersatz right-wing variant takes aim at certain groups, seeking to rule them out of the national anatomy altogether. In this way, capitalism is never to blame. Immigrants, gender and sexual minorities, and refugees beget national crises, not crisis-ridden capitalism. Instead of strengthening popular links, this mode of “liberation” elicits exclusion. The authors reject left-wing and right-wing distinctions on populism because it carries an apologetic tone for emancipatory routes.

By declining negative connotations attributed to populism, the authors adduce poetic, philosophical, and historical detours by sundering modern fascisms from liberatory experiences of organizing the *demos*. The authors reappraise the rejection of the state, precisely because a left-critique raised against it is at risk of furthering a neoliberal takeover of the state machine. Additionally, they believe that a *tout court* rebuff of the state has resulted in misguided criticisms of governmental projects that have improved the lives of highly aggrieved masses in Latin America throughout the 20th and 21st-centuries.

Three approaches to populism

Biglieri and Cahadia identify three common approaches to populism: mediatic, scholarly, and ontological. The mediatic dimension stems from the way media outlets “encourage us to form knee-jerk common sense that is more interested in generating immediate aversion to those processes deemed populist” (05). To this effect, the authors state that discourses similar to those purported by Gustave Le Bon (1898) and Sigmund Freud (1921) are used to endorse prejudices against mass movements. Logically, they believe, mediatic vernacular creeps into academic rhetoric. As a consequence, this charged verbiage produces pseudo-informed debates and reduces populism to authoritarianism. If political struggles are also understood as discursive disputes, both populism and communism bear vilifying stigmas, linguistically tarnishing radical alternatives to capitalism.

The second approach to populism is empirically oriented. Despite “identif[ying] breaks with oligarchic and elitist states” (05), scholastic readings of populism interpret it as a deviation rooted in crises of political representation. While this dimension tends to dredge up more relevant considerations, the caveat is that it limits populism as a method – at times, against neoliberalism – rather than as a political rationale. In *Seven Essays*, populism is understood as a political praxis and as an attempt to radicalize democracy for the majority. It is a framework that counts those who have *no part* (Rancière 1998).

Despite advancing claims alongside Ernesto Laclau (2005; 2010) and Chantal Mouffe (1985; 2018), the authors forcefully contest Laclau’s argument that a populist ontology could equally apply to the right and left-wing variants. While Laclau would insist that a populist ontology exists in both right and left-wing

populisms, it can only be *positivized* on the left due to totalizing – and never totaled – popular struggles; they still propose otherwise. The examples of Bolsonarism, Uribism, and Trumpism have latched demands that roadblock the path for some social sectors, for instance, indigenous groups. In other words, populism needs to invent an ever-expansive people, precisely because exclusion is a skill of neofascist projects (Traverso 2019). Biglieri and Cadahia, however, see populism as an emancipatory ontology (*for what it is*) in contrast to ontic resemblances (*as it may appear in the world*).

Summary of the arguments

In the essay entitled “Against neoliberal fascism: From sacrificial identity to egalitarian singularity,” the authors contrast their own position to populist detractors like Éric Fassin (2018) and Slavoj Žižek (2009), who identify a nexus between populism and neoliberalism. For example, Fassin ties populism (understood as mass movements) to neoliberalism simply because sectors of the working class fall into right-wing rationales. The problem with his conception is that right-wing populism erupts as a natural order among the working class, as if left-wingers supposedly had the responsibility of “convinc[ing] a racist, xenophobic, and neoliberal people of something different” (44).

Seven essays on populism doubts the veracity of Fassin’s analysis, because it positions populism squarely within European dilemmas. He insists that populism threatens democracy, namely for racial and sexual minorities, because it focuses on the people as opposed to democracy: the construction of a people will eclipse traditionally silenced identities. Biglieri and Cadahia contend that his argument belongs to a liberal and anti-communist left incapable of regarding the people beyond “a restrictive popular unity” (43). The people is neither a one-all mass nor is the proletariat a worker voided of subjectivities. His analysis favors democracy while it forgets that there is no democracy without *demos* or a *politeia*, roughly understood as the political relationships in the *polis*. The French sociologist seems to lose sight that neoliberalism has managed to swiftly occupy the so-called democratic order – the language of democratic protocols is often invoked against the working class via duly elected parliaments. In opposition to the fallacy of identity recognition in liberal democracies, the precariat revolution or the populist takeover needs to scale up a liberation that affects a diverse majority.

The last essay of the book, “We populists are feminists,” sheds light on how the people (*el pueblo*) should not be romanticized since cis-heteropatriarchal machinery also operates within the popular field. With Antigone, they warn scholars that feminism may collapse its liberatory character if emancipation is contingent on the destruction of the masculine. The authors take a risky avenue by stating that some feminist trends may invoke violent purges as they seek a totalized

feminine order, as if the matriarchy was the sole solution against patriarchy. Their approach is correct. In a Hegelian vein, Biglieri and Cadahia perceive that the destruction of the masculine would echo fascism: the extermination of the dissenting consciousness. In sum, emancipatory feminism should privilege those from below – understood in their plurality. At the same time, feminine emancipation should also be the cornerstone of any revolutionary project.

Inquiries

Following this thread and making the obvious distinction of patriarchy from men, I question if it is possible to destroy patriarchy without symbolically destroying (or disturbing) something socially fictionalized as masculine. While *Seven essays on populism* is a situated response, championing political experiences of the Global South, their work proposes an active dialogue with the so-called Global North. In refusing ventriloquist theoretical echoes, particularly those curtailing Latin American emancipation to decoloniality, *Seven essays on populism* takes the ebb of a more unsettling *potencia*.

The unapologetic defense of populism undoubtedly raises the question of communism or republicanism as desired landscapes in the construction of popular sovereignty. Communism haunts their polemic on the emergence of a people, begging the following questions: 1) how will the people be created as a non-restrictive unity? 2) How will the Laclauian perception of the equivalential chain take shape outside the party structure? 3) Where will the people or the proletarianized sectors converge in times of Überized labor relations? In popular alternatives, *voting for* a party is different than *building a party*. Logically, popular articulation cannot take place in a vacuum or simply in the streets during a mass action (Dean 2016). The socialist party form hovers any debate on popular emancipation – since liberation is feeble unless there is organization.

To illustrate my claim, we must remember that since Black Lives Matter protestors reeled from the streets, the officer who staged the botched raid that killed Breonna Taylor was found not guilty in Kentucky. In addition, Critical Race Theory has been banned or challenged in several states across the US. In Latin America, militants of the green wave are well-aware of the gulf distancing decriminalization of abortion from the substantial access to reproductive rights. My position acknowledges the crucial importance of spontaneous agitation; however, mass movements ought to find alternatives beyond marches and petition-signing. In this sense, should we understand populism as a conciliatory standpoint for post-1991 communism? As the radical left is an ineliminable presence in Latin American politics, the book raises the resounding question whether populism is – as a matter of fact – the localized path toward a commons-shared politics.

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How to cite this article: André Nascimento. 2022. Paula Biglieri & Luciana Cahadia: *Seven essays on populism*. *Kulturella Perspektiv*, vol. 31. s. 1-3.

Received: 13 June 2022 **Published:** 9 December 2022

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