

E EXTREME

August 2021

Volume 22

Number 2



Newsletter of the ECPR Standing Group
on Extremism & Democracy

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BOOK REVIEWS

PAOLO COSSARINI AND FERNANDO VALLESPÍN (EDS.)

POPULISM AND PASSIONS, DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY AFTER AUSTERITY

ROUTLEDGE, 2019. 196 PP. £34.99. ISBN 9780815383796

Patrick Sawyer

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The global rise of populism, and its highly emotional style, has brought the study of passion back to the forefront of social science research. Within a discipline dominated by theoretical premises that humans are ultimately rational creatures, new revelations are revealing the limitations of the explanatory power of 20th-century theories of rational choice for 21st-century politics. In *Populism and Passions*, Cossarini and Vallespin argue that the social sciences are undergoing a paradigm shift away from purely rationalist theories, and towards an “affective turn” that accepts the non-rational side of human behavior and seeks to reconcile the emotional with the rational in explaining social phenomena. Maldonado’s chapter introduces the ongoing “affective turn” in the social sciences, referring to the multidisciplinary project of neurologists, psychologists, and economists whose research has led them to conclude that humans are something other than “autonomous and reasonable” individuals. Instead, “cognitive biases and emotional influences” serve a mediating role for human behavior that recalls the conclusions of the many behavioral economists who claim that rationality is “bounded”.

Nicolas Demertzis bridges this discussion with the topic of populism, revealing the lack of attention given to the study of emotions in populist movements, and investigates three common emotional features related to populism; nostalgia, anger, and resentment. Linking back to Taggart’s concept of “the heartland”, nostalgia compensates for current difficulties and retains a sense of continuity in one’s identity. The “power emotion”, anger, is a reaction to perceived outsiders that should be held accountable for dangerous, threatening, or otherwise negative situations. Finally, resentment, or indignation, links anger with a sense of justice, and pushes the individual to right the wrongs perceived to be at fault for their deprivation. In Benjamin Moffitt’s chapter, this discussion of affect converges with that of the “populist style” of politics, which is more effective at reaching out to voters through emotional appeals, and its opposite, the “technocratic” style. Moffitt argues that the populist style consists of three necessary and

sufficient components: appeals to “the people” against “the elite”, a tendency to ‘break the rules’ of mainstream politics”, and performances that emphasize crises, breakdown, and threats to the people, which all appeal to voters through the emotions they elicit.

Emmy Eklundh’s contribution touches on the usage of emotional appeals in the left-wing populist party Podemos. As collective identities are not pre-determined by the individual, but are constantly made and remade, Eklundh argues, it falls upon the role of affect to provide meaning to empty-signifiers such as “the people”, producing a collective identity based on group commonalities. The case of Podemos is then used to demonstrate the way in which Iglesias and the party embody both the rational and emotional sides as a co-constitutive process and argue that in attempting to avoid the political ineffectiveness of the Indignados, Podemos are moving towards a more rationalistic view of politics which uses emotions more as a tool than a constituting factor of their political identity. Similarly, Cossarini also discusses the “boundary problem”, related to the way which the source of democratic authority, “the people”, is constituted. “The people” as such is a historically-contingent abstraction that constitutes different parts of the popular strata, and at its core, is formed by collective sentiments held in common. To employ this symbol is not simply a call for popular sovereignty, but an effort to bring a “people” into existence by choosing a leader to speak on its behalf and its right to compete for power; thus, this inevitable part of democratic life can also carry a democratizing promise by bringing the frustrations, demands, and identities of citizens back into the political system.

Moving to specific cases of this democratizing promise, Paulina Tambakaki’s chapter invites the reader to ponder whether populist discourse can help “reignite” affect for democracy by mobilizing excluded groups from the process of representation; taking the case of Syriza during the Greek debt crisis, she argues that the focus on constructing a discourse centered around ‘equality’ as directly opposed to ‘austerity’ allowed the party to position itself in direct opposition to the dominant order and encourage the people to become reengaged in the democratic process. In Óscar García Agustín’s investigation of the role of emotions in two Danish left-wing populist parties, the Red Green Alliance (RGA) and The Alternative, the author argues that emotions can play a positive role in politics as demonstrated by the way in which they can be used to great effect to recreate a sense of identity, community, belonging, and hope in voters necessary for the development of a more participatory political system, a supportive welfare state, and an environmentally-sustainable economy.

The next two chapters move towards a discussion of the role of emotions within the current context of the crisis of representation haunting many liberal democracies. Jason Glynos and Aurelien Mondon’s chapter provides insightful commentary on the “Populist Hype”, characterized by an

equally emotional response to the rise of new challengers emerging from the populist right; this is manifested in their tendency to exaggerate their significance, describe their rise in apocalyptic terms while ignoring larger systemic problems, and the tendency to interpret their rise as one homogeneous movement without consideration of important national contextual factors. Simon Tormey's chapter takes the position that the ongoing mainstreaming of populism as a concept only benefits the elites who use the label of 'populism' to lump political alternatives of all ideological backgrounds together into a single basket, characterizing them all as fundamentally undemocratic movements. The author points out that several arguments made against the populists, that they are anti-pluralistic, represent a 'the people' in a crude majoritarian way, and they are led by charismatic strong-men, as unfair characterisations that not only unfairly malign all populists in the same way, but also miss out on key aspects of democratic politics in the modern era which lead them to be successful.

In the final chapter by Fernando Vallespin and Máriam Bascuñán, the authors develop upon the importance of the transformation of the public sphere from media democracy to digital democracy, characterised by the widespread expression of "post-truth" politics. With the decline in traditional news outlets and the democratizing structure of online information sources that increasingly competes for the attention of audiences with traditional news sources and other online outlets, this has provided for the development of online collectives that form a "people" by delineating themselves from others. This increasingly polarized and trivialized communicative structure reinforces the proliferation of alternative narratives by providing content that the user "feels" is true, something that populist candidates such as Donald Trump gain from. The authors argue that ultimately, if democracy is ever to regain its footing, populist parties, which provoke intense emotions, yet are likely to burn out in a short period of time, should occupy less of our attention, and instead focus on rediscovering the "common world".

This book provides an original discussion that paints a different picture of the role of emotions in populist movements, anti-populist responses, and democratic politics more broadly than what mainstream observers tend to perceive, casting the irrational features of affect in a more positive light. In this respect, the authors were clearly successful, though, to some extent, if the emotional side of cognitive processes have generally been viewed as a negative feature of democratic politics, in many cases the authors of this book seem to have swung far in the opposite direction almost as if to over-compensate for the lack of prior discussion. This somewhat optimistic take can be seen in the many cases of left populist attempts to promote feelings of "community", "solidarity", and "hope" that serve to create a "people" based on principles of inclusion, without much discussion of negative sentiments, such as hatred, fear, or racial resentment, that can serve as the basis for exclusionary conceptions of "the people". Nonetheless, the text

makes a huge contribution to current research on populism, forcing us to rethink the vital role of affect, challenging the preconception of the damage that the irrational side of human cognition can do to the state of democracy, and providing a convincing argument as to why, instead, it may be pivotal for solving the current “crisis of representation”.

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VITTORIO EMANUELE PARSÌ

THE WRECKING OF THE LIBERAL WORLD ORDER

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2021. 325 PP. €103.99. ISBN 978-3-030-72043-8

Valerio Alfonso Bruno

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Vittorio Emanuele Parsi’s latest work, *The Wrecking of the Liberal World Order* starts from the discouraging consideration that the Liberal World Order (LWO) today is in a severe crisis and argues that since the 1980s it has been gradually replaced by what Parsi defines as the ‘Neoliberal Global Order’. It asks what can help us make sense of this current state of the liberal global order and its identity crisis?

The book, without underplaying external and internal factors, ranging from the presence of competing illiberal projects advocated by China or Russia to the emergent populist and technocratic dynamics within liberal democracies, adds a third factor into its analysis to explain the wrecking of the LWO. It contends that the departure from the original path of the LWO—the complex balance between market, democracy and sovereignty—has been the main cause of the shipwreck. The LWO was born at the end of WWII as a project aiming to harmonise state sovereignty with the market, through the promotion of liberal democracy domestically and of free trade and economic cooperation internationally.

In a constant dialogue with Ikenberry’s recent work, *A World Safe For Democracy* (2020), *The Wrecking of the LWO* continuously moves along three different temporal horizons: (1) from the origins of the LWO to 2000, (2) from the beginning of the current century to the eve of the Trump presidency (2000- 2015) and (3) finally from the “*MAGA presidency*” to current days, in order to include the Covid-19 pandemic and Biden presidency (2016- early 2021).