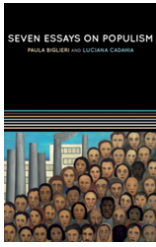


Populism: Theses from the South



Review of *Seven Essays on Populism*, by Paula Biglieri and Luciana Cadahia (Polity Press, 2021)



Reviewed by Adrià Porta Caballé, University of Barcelona

'There is a long tradition in Latin American debates that is not well known in Europe and the United States' (p. 89). This sentence, almost read in passing in the middle of the book can be said to summarise the main spirit behind Biglieri and Cadahia's populist actualisation of Mariátegui's classic, *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality* (1928). The book we have in our hands is difficult to define or classify. It is not purely academic – as the authors themselves highlight (p. xxii); it has no full presumption of "objectivity" or "neutrality" because it takes a self-reflected partisan point of view. But, it is not a "manifesto" either, since it engages deeply in theoretical debates, rigorously reviewing the existing literature on populism and beyond. Following Althusser, this book is probably best understood as a theoretical intervention.

In *Seven Essays on Populism*, Biglieri and Cadahia develop seven arguments that touch upon different aspects of populism: its own methodology (empirical or ontological), the Left/Right imaginary, neoliberal fascism, (plebeian) republicanism, (inter) nationalism and feminism. However, the result is not a concatenation of isolated 'papers', but a constellation illuminated by a similar light, which I take to be none other than the laudable attempt to bring to the fore a series of militant experiences, philosophical theses and heated debates with Latin American autonomists and Spanish republicans which are not always well known in the English-speaking literature. To some extent, debates about populism in the global North are obsessed with cleansing the term negatively, placing it in opposition to (neo)liberalism and linking it with fascism. What is refreshing about these *Seven Essays* is the effort to defend populism positively, as an emancipatory movement *tout court* without any need to apologise (to use a formulation also dear to Laclau and Mouffe). This is not to circumscribe Biglieri and Cadahia's contribution to that of two Latin American thinkers but, on the contrary, to acknowledge their new and original "situated universalism" (p. xxiii) with regards

to question of 'the popular'.

To begin with, in the first essay Biglieri and Cadahia attempt to discover the 'secret' of populism stored in the political *arcón* (p. 1). Against merely empirical analyses, and the mediatic view that uses it as a scapegoat, they defend a rigorous ontological definition of the term. On the ontic side, where all historical analyses fail – both coming from the perspective of capitalism and socialism – the understanding of populism is merely as a 'deviation from the norm': Marxism sees the national-popular as a 'betrayal', and modernisation conceptualises it as an 'anomaly'. On the other side, Biglieri and Cadahia recognise that with Laclau's *On Populist Reason*, we arrive at *terra firma* and, siding with Marchart against Ardit's criticisms (but going even further), they defend ontological terminology arguing that there is no 'semantic overlap' between hegemony, politics and populism, but rather a "mutual contamination" (p. 16). As suggestive as this might sound, perhaps the most important thesis coming from the South can be found in the second essay – and populist theory more broadly needs to engage with this. Drawing on Alemán, Biglieri and Cadahia justify on their own grounds that so-called 'right-wing populism' should not be considered populism at all, because populism is an emancipatory movement *tout court*. Again, Biglieri and Cadahia start from an ontological definition of populism *stricto sensu* against the position advanced by Mouffe in which populism is turned into a strategy susceptible to be used both by progressive and reactionary affects. I would go further and say that this traditional way of reading Laclau suffers from the defects of hylomorphism: it sees populism as an empty form, awaiting to be filled by ontic content coming from two ideological poles. Biglieri and Cadahia worry that this ontic privilege of the right/left distinction 'runs the risk of neglecting the evolution of populist experiences in Latin America – where the left/right distinction has not interpellated us in the same way as in Europe' (p. 23). Conversely, Alemán buys the whole of Laclau's edifice but introduces an apparently minor twist: the populist form has in itself an emancipatory content – and so "right-wing populism" is not populism at all. And this for two reasons. First, drawing on Lacan, capitalist discourse can be explained as expanding limitlessly at the same time it closes inwardly. This means that neoliberalism is a totalising power but not a hegemonic relation, because what is characteristic of the latter is the experience of lack. Second of all, capitalist discourse imposes a homogeneity very

different than the equivalence of a popular chain which is always left 'open'. And I would personally add a third reason, arguing that in so-called 'right-wing populisms' like Le Pen's, 'the people' is not even the Master-Signifier, but only secondary to 'the nation'. Why not – Biglieri and Cadahia ask – directly call then 'right-wing populism' what it is, namely 'neoliberal fascism', and leave populism as a synonym for inclusive politics, 'without having to clarify with adjectives' (p. 40)?

The second most important thesis coming from the South that must be acknowledged has to do with the relationship between populism and republicanism. There has been much debate worldwide in the last decade about this issue, but usually it is framed from the outset as a struggle between the 'Atlantic tradition' and the Cambridge School's reading of Machiavelli, on the one hand, and the 'Continental tradition' drawing on Althusser and Negri, on the other. Now, there is a tradition of (plebeian) republicanism in Latin America and Spain which poses the question differently. On one extreme we have Villacañas, who was the first independent intellectual to take populism seriously in the peninsula during the emergence of Podemos. In *Populism* (2015), Villacañas ended his monograph with a passionate defence of republicanism as opposed to populism. Drawing on a particular reading of Freud, Villacañas argued that populism is secretly related to (neo) liberalism because the latter inevitably generates individuals with a 'narcissistic wound' which can only be sutured in turn by identifying with the ego-ideal of the leader. There would be nothing, therefore, more anti-narcissistic than an institution, and republicanism would represent the real alternative to (neo) liberalism. On the other extreme, Biglieri and Cadahia side with Rinesi and Muraca when they insist that 'Latin American populism is the form through which republicanism has developed in Latin America' (p. 72). Biglieri and Cadahia make a similar critique to the narrative of Latin American autonomism, as exemplified by Lazzaratto, by virtue of which there would be a direct link between Pinochet, Lula and Bolsonaro. In the case of Svampa and Modonesi as well, the 'populist co-optation' of social movements would have paved the way to further neoliberalism. But the question none of them can answer, Biglieri and Cadahia point out, is 'why have neoliberal elites unleashed prosecution against populist leaders once they have left office?' (p. 30).

Apart from these two theses, which deserve serious

debate and evaluation, the book also has a series of brilliant moments. The fifth essay on (inter) nationalism and leadership is an excellent example of psychoanalytic interpretation which attempts 'not to conflate the people of populism with the Freudian mass, and not to conflate this group with the primal horde' (p. 80). Disentangling these three psychoanalytic concepts which usually get mixed up together, helps displace the question of the leader from that of the Name-of-the-Father linking it, rather, with an 'accountable brother' (*primus inter pares*) whose name does not belong to him/her. If there is a representative quotation from the whole book, probably it is this: 'the people cannot be understood as an undifferentiated mass of individuals held together by a purely libidinal tie. The people is never the same as soccer fans, an angry mob or a sum of individuals who have fallen under the hypnotic influence of a captivating leader' (p. 83).

The sixth essay represents a suggestive entry to an ethics of post-foundational militancy but, like Laclau's own ethics, Biglieri and Cadahia's position should be further developed. Their premises at least are clear: avoid the temptations of 'pure contingency and pure necessity' (p. 102) or, as Abelardo Ramos used to say, 'society never polarizes between the madhouse and the cemetery'. Finally, the seventh and last essay represents an unprecedented effort to think 'the popular' alongside 'the feminine' using Ginzburg's 'evidential paradigm'. Biglieri and Cadahia attempt to defend negativity, the Lacanian not-All and Antigone's perseverance against the essentialist risks of 'feminisation' that might hide behind the immanentist feminism of potency such as Gago's. In the end, if there is a criticism to be made to the whole book it is already advanced in the first pages by Wendy Brown's foreword: the partisan attempt to render populism an emancipatory movement *tout court* might run the risk of depriving it from all its tensions (which is precisely what a post-foundational outlook was supposed to bring to the table) and end up in another version of the 'beautiful soul' and 'the Good, the True and the Beautiful in politics' (p. xvii). Despite the care we should show to this temptation, it is one worth exploring in *Seven Essays on Populism*.