

Cas Mudde & Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017). *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 131, ISBN 9780190234874.

Populism has generated a huge body of literature in the last decade, which focused on the concept as such or on its links to a wide range of related phenomena such as democracy, elections, political communication, political discourse, rhetoric, social movements and, more recently, social media. In addition to gathering much scholarly attention, populism has great appeal to journalists and readers alike, judging from the large number of press articles and user comments available through a simple internet search. Therefore, this attempt to write a very short book on populism in the age of too-muchness on this topic seems even more challenging. Nonetheless, renowned political scientist and populism observer Cas Mudde and his long-time collaborator Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser deliver a well-documented, encompassing overview of populism and its intricacies, from a cross-regional perspective. The goal of the book, as announced from page one, is to offer a clear, broad description of the phenomenon of populism and the role that it plays in contemporary politics in order to avoid confusion and frustration generated by the intensive use of the term “populism” across fields and disciplines.

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser’s book comprises six chapters, each tackling a defining aspect of contemporary populism — from concept contestation to ideological delimitations, mobilization, leadership, causes and solutions. The first chapter critically examines the most important approaches to populism, only to propose a definition built around three core concepts — the people, elites and the general will — that virtually all forms of populism include. The authors adopt an ideational approach and define populism as “a thin-centered ideology.” This thinness makes it easier for scholars and laymen alike to understand the “oft-alleged malleability of the concept” (p. 6) and its capacity to borrow elements from the “thick-centered” or “full ideologies” which populism usually attaches to.

The second chapter looks at key populist actors of the past 150 years in three regions where populism has been relevant: North America, Latin America and Europe. Although concise, given the format of the book, the description of the particularities of populism in these geographical areas is highly informative. Despite its recent spread across the globe, “populism is an extremely heterogeneous phenomenon and populist actors can be left or right, conservative or progressive, religious or secular” (p. 21). The section ends with a reference to populism existing outside the three above-mentioned regions, especially in Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

A crucial component of populism is mobilization and the third chapter of the book discusses some forms of mobilization that populism is associated with. The success of a populist party and leader depends heavily on how efficient they are in

mobilizing the masses. Three main types of populist mobilization are described, each accompanied with an example: personalist leadership (top-down mobilization), social movement (bottom-up mobilization) and political party (both apply). When it comes to deciding which of these mobilization types to use, populists must consider the specificity of the political context of their respective countries.

Another interesting section of the book is the fourth, in which the centrality of leaders to populism is addressed. The charismatic strongman, the self-made female populist leader, entrepreneurs, ethnic leaders, insider-outsider are some of the most common labels used to characterize populist leaders. Despite foregrounding a set of different and very specific features, all populist leaders “present themselves as the voice of the people” (pp. 62–63). No other characteristic is essential to electoral success than a “carefully constructed image of *vox populi*” (p. 77) that populist leaders need to project constantly. An intriguing idea put forward by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser toward the end of this chapter is that, despite the strong connection between political success and strong leadership, populism does not really need a populist leader to define it.

Chapter five focuses on one of the most intensely debated topics in populism research: populism’s relationship with democracy. Here, the authors adopt a position contrasting the conventional view on populism as a pathology of democratic societies. Drawing on Canovan’s (2005) idea that populism and democracy are closely related, both being, fundamentally, about the power of the people, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser suggest that “populism is essentially democratic, but at odds with *liberal* democracy, the dominant model in the contemporary world” (p. 81), however it is not against democracy itself. Populism exacerbates the “will of the (pure) people” but rejects pluralism and the complex institutional architecture built to protect fundamental rights that are so deep-rooted in the liberal democratic model. Populism has both positive and negative effects on democracy; on the one hand, it tends to be more positive when it comes to political participation and voicing discontent with the political establishment. On the other hand, populism affects negatively democracy in terms of political contestation, judicial independence and minority rights. Despite the complex, multifaceted relationship between populism and democracy, recent history has shown that, when in power, populism can endanger profoundly the democratic system, as Orbán’s illiberal regime in Hungary and Fujimori’s breakdown of the democratic regime in Peru did.

Finally, the last chapter aims at explaining the success (or failure) of populist parties by taking into account both the supply side and the demand side of populism. While most of interpretations focus on the supply side of populist politics (i.e., populism as a strategy or a political style), adopting an ideational approach to populism allows for a close look at the populist demand, that is the degree of support for populist ideas at the mass level. The chapter concludes with an inventory of the possible ways to cope with the demand for populism and the supply of populist politics, respectively.

True to its moniker, this little over 100-pages “long” *Very short introduction* aims at unravelling the concept of populism to the literate public (particularly non-specialist in the field), while arguing for a balanced evaluation of this phenomenon as part of democratic societies. However, being “short” doesn’t make Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser’s book less complex. On the contrary, the book raises fundamental claims about the core concepts of populism, about populism’s implications for democracy, as well as about strategies to cope with populist politics.

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It is rather uncommon in the social sciences for research and associated publications to be carried out precisely at the moment when Europe is on the brink of falling into the “eye of the storm” of the phenomenon which is being studied. This is due both to objective factors, such as researchers’ limited interest in the rapidly evolving world, and to organizational impediments, such as lengthy editorial procedures. This might actually be one of the reasons for the decreasing prestige of academia and academic knowledge in many European countries; whereas the media analyze the situation within minutes, the results of academic studies are usually several years in the making. This is why it should be appreciated that the book being reviewed here hits the mark in terms of its timing and content, defining populism with respect to the three essential elements of political communication: political actors, society and the media.¹

Populism the subject of research for the authors of the book *Populist political communication in Europe* which, even by Western European standards, has coincided exceptionally well with the time of electoral transformations of many countries of the Old Continent, anti-immigrant movements, Brexit, Donald Trump’s success

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