
Review Essay

Reclaiming populism

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Populism's Power: Radical Grassroots Democracy in America

Laura Grattan

Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, 288 pp.,
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The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation

Benjamin Moffitt

Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2016, 224 pp.,
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The rise of right-wing populism both in the world's newer democracies and in its oldest, most established ones presents political theorists with an uncomfortable fact. Populism's 'defining claim', to 'transcend the authorized but corrupted institutions of popular representation through a purifying appeal to unmediated popular voice' (Frank, 2017, p. 631) expresses a core democratic commitment to popular sovereignty. In theory, in discourse, and in history, populism and democracy are intertwined. Yet today, movements and electoral insurgencies fueled by populist discourse and strategies dismantle pillars of liberal democracy worldwide.

Confronted with this uncomfortable fact, some scholars have responded by building a definitional wall. Jan-Werner Müller's *What is Populism?* defines populism as a 'moralized' anti-pluralism that involves three anti-democratic features: populists claiming that 'they, and they alone, represent the people'; populists figuring people as homogeneous and 'fully unified'; and populists branding any political opposition or dissent from their claims as 'immoral' (2016, pp. 3, 20). Müller chooses to paint an unequivocal portrait of populism because he believes it is politically urgent for establishment politicians to denounce authoritarian leaders like Victor Orbán of Hungary, or nationalist stunts such as



the Brexit referendum. In the contemporary political moment, work like Müller's has an undeniable political appeal. Yet it is reasonable to ask whether resisting such populisms politically requires our conceding populism *theoretically* to the right wing.

Both books under review here refuse to do so. Laura Grattan aims to reignite the 'spark of hope' in nineteenth-century US Populism by offering case studies of mass populist institutional and cultural practices both past and present (p. 88). Benjamin Moffitt proposes to make an empirical study of populism that is focused on the 'embodied, symbolically mediated performative elements' in the style of populist leaders (p. 41). These different approaches, kindred in their departure from the dark view of populism that has become mainstream conventional wisdom, carry the analysis of democracy's debts to and relationship with populism in promising new directions.

Populism's Power is a qualitative interpretive historical study that seeks out examples both past and present of 'aspirational democratic populism', a politics that 'facilitates efforts by unlikely actors to engage each other across differences in their social identities, spaces, and times' (p. 47). Aspirational democratic populism engages people in what Grattan calls '*experiments with horizontality*' (p. 443; italics in original), a concept she endows with the two-fold sense of creating lateral relations of power (i.e., the horizontal) to defy technocracy and mounting 'ongoing contests over the *horizons* of collective identity and democracy' (p. 44). Grattan proposes 'horizontality' to break out of the opposition between what she identifies as two camps in radical democrats' engagements with populism: the scholarship of 'populist resistance' and that of 'everyday populism' (p. 29). Scholars of populist resistance, Ernesto Laclau chief among them, emphasize the power of populism to repoliticize, 'to constitute "the people"' – a heterogeneous politically articulated subject – to replace the expert 'as the proper subject of politics' (p. 29). Although she values this repoliticization, Grattan argues that 'resistance' populists focus too much on the mobilizing force of symbolic antagonisms such as 'the people' vs. 'the establishment' at the expense of 'developing grassroots power [by] sustained, cooperative efforts to reshape political culture', to 'build the capacities of emerging political subjects', and to imbue them with 'a heightened taste for political action' (p. 35).

Such an orientation toward the grassroots defines 'everyday populism', as exemplified by scholars who shift 'our attention away from conceptions of politics and democracy that emphasize conflict, and toward practices of constituting the popular power that enables new peoples to emerge' (p. 36). Much as she values a politics that aims to change the culture of the everyday, Grattan puts to it a sharp question, asking 'if citizens are daily practiced in neoliberal common sense, how can public work avoid reproducing many of the greatest obstacles to democratic practice', particularly those 'internal social hierarchies and divisions ... which everyday populists often gloss or obscure in their efforts to theorize the roots of cooperative commonwealth' (p. 36)?



Grattan re-narrates the history of nineteenth-century US Populism through her concept of ‘horizontality’ in order to hold this movement up as an example for how to jointly pursue structural political power and build popular power. Organizers of the Farmers’ Alliance made it quite clear that they understood the need to work both in and against the everyday. Whereas Alliance publisher Harry Tracy ‘used the term “miseducation” to describe the unquestioned loyalties that had long tied farmers to the status quo’, Texas organizers William Garvin and S.O. Daws recognized that farmers’ ‘cruel aspirations to individual prosperity’ made them ‘unwitting’ accomplices to ‘commodity agriculture’ (p. 70). Grattan names two ‘peopling’ strategies that the Alliances and the Knights of Labor used to ‘rupture the sense of inevitability’ that attached to the commodification of agriculture at the time: ‘public enthusiasm’ and ‘translocalism’ (p. 88).

Grattan’s chapter on these practices of ‘peopling’ models a vibrant approach to empirically-grounded political theory by developing the critical concept ‘horizontality’ out of perspicacious engagement with historians’ accounts of a critical movement and with some primary documents as well. She theorizes the translocalism manifest in the suballiance experiments with grassroots political education that preceded the People’s Party and prepared the way for it. These ‘countless local spaces’, in which hundreds of thousands of people participated, constituted a principal weapon against ‘miseducation’ (p. 69). Pairing conventional pedagogical vehicles, such as lectures, with ‘other cultural practices of collective identification’, such as ‘taking part in meals and other social activities and singing popular hymns from movement songbooks’, the suballiances served at once to ‘dehabituate farmers from their responsiveness to existing dynamics of power, and rehabituate them toward practices of cooperation and collective action’ (pp. 70–71). ‘Practices of public enthusiasm’ were mass gatherings that convened for day-long public festivals the many and varied components of what would come to be known as Populism – ‘suballiances, union locals, temperance crusaders, single-tax advocates, suffragettes’ (p. 66). Grattan argues that these Populist festivities challenged accustomed subjectivities and broke typical patterns of enmity and alliance so as to proliferate what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner have termed “‘unsystematized lines of acquaintance”” (p. 67; citing Berlant and Warner, 2005, p. 198).

Grattan makes a deliberate theoretical choice to take up Warner and Berlant’s phrasing because she wants scholars to take account of the ‘experiential and affective chasms’ that often separate ‘actors who might [otherwise] join together to resist a given order’ (2018, p. 4). For Grattan, Warner and Berlant’s terminology better expresses what it takes to excite ‘people of disparate backgrounds’ to cross those chasms than Laclau’s (2005, p. 77) concept of ‘equivalential chain’, which she takes to connote a too-smooth closing of ranks against a common enemy (2018, p. 4). Grattan foregrounds such chasms in her narrative of Populism, emphasizing the fact that white Populists could advocate race equality without welcoming black



Populists into the movement or into white social space on equal terms. Or that women, ‘who took to the public stage like never before during Populism’, were not always afforded recognition as legitimate speakers (pp. 68–69).

Grattan’s account of nineteenth-century Populism gives her a unique perspective on Tea Party Republicans, which she presents in a later chapter as an inheritor to the Populists’ horizontality, in form though certainly not in content. Grattan cautions that critics of the Tea Party phenomenon who focus on its elite funding sources and its backing by Fox News risk missing what may be its most ‘striking’ feature: the ability to ‘mobilize popular power by constructing and intensifying feedback loops between...today’s right-wing resonance machine and the everyday practices of grassroots organizing’ (p. 157). Grattan introduces this concept resonance machine, William Connolly’s (2008) term for the ‘intense ‘assemblages’ of ideology and affect’ that sustain ‘neoliberal capitalist imperatives’ through everyday attachments, in order to explore how to translate horizontality from the nineteenth-century to the present context (p. 42).

Grattan explores populism and affect in her analysis of two cultural texts – Chevy’s ‘Anthem’ ad for the Silverado truck and Leonard Cohen’s ‘Democracy’ – that resonate with populism and show how the populist ‘imaginary’ can be tapped to mobilize either reactionary ‘aspirations to popular power’ or rebellious ones that ‘enact pluralist, egalitarian alternatives to the status quo’ (pp. 136, 139, 141). The Silverado ad, with its unabashed incitement to consumption, pairs well with Cohen’s ‘Democracy’, which also invokes Chevrolet as the (self-proclaimed) ‘heartbeat’ of America, and, Grattan points out, carries that beat rhythmically into a march. In Chevy’s version, images and soundtrack advance in tandem, using the technique of montage to present a ‘regulated populist imaginary’ that carries the viewer seamlessly from protest to progress, securely locating conflict in the nation’s past (p. 139). In Cohen’s rendition, Grattan observes, the lyrics ‘appear to mock the genre of the march and, with it, the familiar narrative that heralds the progressive march of American democracy’ (p. 115).

Although Grattan claims Cohen’s work as exemplifying her ‘aspirational democratic populist imaginary’ (p. 141), it was not clear to me how his music or any other might engage ‘people in *experiments with horizontality*’ (p. 41) – whether that means organizing, voting, protesting, lobbying, contributing. To develop this important theme further, Grattan might have done more to specify the relationship between cultural texts and resistant politics, perhaps by making a deeper exploration of Connolly’s notion of the resonance machine and her own concept of horizontality, or perhaps by elaborating a comparison between these mass mediated ‘peopling’ strategies and the Populist organizing she featured earlier in the book.

This is a small objection compared to the contribution Grattan makes by her careful attention to grass roots democratic experimentation. To the extent that political affiliations form by attachment to movements and charismatic figures



rather than through organizations like unions and churches or broad-based movements, then it becomes all the more crucial for radical democrats to attend to the hard work of countering miseducation. Grattan offers richly detailed examples of activists who succeeded at soliciting ‘peoples’ in something other than the mode of the Tea Party and Donald Trump, which plays to the resentments of privileged identities and taps the lines of enmity and alliance that hold the United States captive to its colonial and apartheid legacies.

The Global Rise of Populism pairs well with Grattan’s *Populism’s Power* because both works understand political identity and affiliation to be performative. Moffitt’s central claim is that populism is best understood not as ‘an ideology, strategy, discourse or political logic’ (p. 28), but ‘as a performative political style’ (p. 4). Previous scholars who have emphasized the ‘populist style’ have not been able to theorize it because they lacked a conceptually rigorous, empirically operationalizable notion of ‘political style’. This Moffitt sets out to provide, not only to rethink populism but perhaps more importantly to persuade political scientists to make media studies more central to their analyses. From its current status as ‘a kind of academic placeholder’ for the ‘ephemeral’ elements that many scholars of politics dismiss as ‘surface’ phenomena, Moffitt aims to transform ‘political style’ into a proper object of political science investigation (p. 33).

Moffitt blazes a new trail for interdisciplinary research by working up a concept of political style from the work of rhetorical theorist Robert Hariman, political theorist Frank Ankersmit, and sociologist Dick Pels. His definition of political style is context-specific. It registers the increasing centrality of ‘performance’ to a mass politics in which informational cues from political parties and organized interests decline in significance from the combined force of what Ulrich Beck (2006) describes as ‘reflexive modernity’, and John Keane (2013, ch. 1) characterizes as ‘communicative abundance’. Beck’s concept describes individuals’ social identities becoming self-attributed, ‘patchwork, quasi-cosmopolitan, but simultaneously provincial’ (2006, pp. 2–5), rather than bounded, oppositional, and ascribed by the nation-state, racialized identities, political party affiliation, or by other traditional institutions. Keane’s work details the ambivalent effects of the new media revolution on democracy, which, while facilitating public monitoring of political decision-making, can also splinter audiences and enable the promulgation of conspiracy and other politically charged falsehoods for partisan and pecuniary gain. Moffitt takes Keane’s work to testify to the ‘increasing mediatisation of the political’, mediatisation being a term of art in media studies that names the process by which politics and many other aspects of contemporary society are increasingly ‘colonized’ by a ‘media logic’ (pp. 74–75). This logic sets a premium on winning audience share rather than providing information and uses specific storytelling techniques – personalization, emphasizing conflict, focusing on scandals, and getting good visuals – to do so.



Working together (in ways that Moffitt could do more to specify), ‘reflexive modernity’ and the mediatisation of mass politics by ‘communicative abundance’ transform individuals’ bids for political leadership, making them more performance-based than discursive: they depend more on ‘images, self-presentation, body language, design and “staging”’ than they do on argument, ideology, or even policy (pp. 70, 40). In a mediatised political context, Moffitt claims that ‘political style’, defined as the ‘*repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance*’, has ‘greater resonance’ in soliciting political affiliation, framing political conflict, and defining political experience than do ‘party affiliation or other markers of “formal” political activity’ (pp. 38–39; emphasis in original). Mediatisation, in turn, favors recourse to the ‘populist style’ across the ideological spectrum because it is ‘the media-political form par excellence’; it succeeds more effectively than do traditional political parties and movements at ‘marr[ying] the tendencies of media logic with the central processes of political representation and decision-making’ (pp. 76–77).

Moffitt identifies three features that compose the ‘populist style’ and can be adapted to any ideology or policy goal: ‘*an appeal to “the people” versus “the elite”, “bad manners”[.] and the performance of crisis, breakdown, or threat*’ (p. 45; emphasis in original). Note that Moffitt disclaims any ‘attempt to capture the very “essence” of populism’ or to propose ‘an ideal-type’ (p. 43). He derives these features inductively, based on twenty-eight case studies of leaders, located in Europe, Latin America, North America, Africa, and the Asia-Pacific, who held power at some point from the 1990s forward and were branded populists by at least six contemporary scholars of populism. This approach yields a snapshot of ‘what links a number of disparate cases of contemporary populism across the world’, which Moffitt puts forward as outlining ‘the three necessary and sufficient characteristics’ for politicians on the Right or the Left ‘to be considered as utilizing the populist style’ (p. 43).

Moffitt’s approach is admirable for working between empirical examples and higher-level conceptualization in order to produce theoretical insights about populism ‘of the *middle-range* sociological variety’ (p. 6; emphasis in original). He does not pursue in-depth case studies in this book but lays out these characteristics as a framework to enable future studies to center on performance rather than discourse or ideology. Moffitt urges scholars to focus more on *how* populist leaders stage their claims ‘to speak for an embody “the people”’ than on what they *say* (p. 49). Building fruitfully on Michael Saward’s (2010) account of ‘the representative claim’, Moffitt also urges scholars to attend to the audiences of populist performances, asking who makes them up, analyzing why they respond to some performances but not others, and attending to the role that the media plays ‘as a proxy for “the people” – not only receiving and transmitting’ claims made on its behalf but ‘also actively *judging those claims*’ as giving voice to unheard or unexpressed popular sentiments and demands (pp. 108–109; emphasis in original).



Moffitt's argument for viewing populism as a political style relies on a broad and bold assertion that in mediatized political contests style matters more to voters than policy, principle, or party. Mediatization thus figures in Moffitt's account as both a theoretical construct and an empirical claim, yet he derives his account of this process largely from theoretical work by Beck and Keane without supplying empirical evidence to warrant it. If Moffitt aims to persuade political scientists to take political style as an object of study, why not exploit some political science resources to both specify mediatization and give it an evidentiary base? A 2014 Pew Research Center survey on polarization would suggest that, at least where the US electorate is concerned, Moffitt's claim for the centrality of political style is correct but imprecise. The survey finds just 43% of voters identifying as 'solid' partisans, while fully 57% make up a 'political middle' whose votes cannot be reliably predicted by ideology and partisanship (Kohut, 2014). Performance would certainly have 'greater resonance' for this political middle, but not for the others who can be counted on to vote for their party's standard-bearer, as did both Democrats and Republican partisans in 2016, regardless whether they were put off (even appalled) by that candidate's style.

One puzzle that eludes Moffitt's approach, which is to prioritize the populist style, is the very stylistic convergence between populist and mainstream politicians that Moffitt himself represents as an inevitable response to a mediatized political context (pp. 77, 81). As populists borrow mainstream tactics, such as hiring media consultants to hone their style, and mainstream political actors style themselves after aspects of populism by staging Town Hall events or actively posting on Twitter, it becomes difficult to distinguish between what passes for normal in a mediatized context and what is specifically populist on the basis of style alone. This poses a problem for Moffitt, insofar as he wants at once to urge scholars to 'acknowledge' that mainstream leaders (e.g., Tony Blair, Stephen Harper, John Howard) 'have, at times, drawn on the populist playbook to some extent', and to caution that 'we should not necessarily lump ... [them] together with the Wilders, Hansons and Correas of the world' (p. 77). This assertion begs the question how, without recourse to something more like Müller's definition of populism, analysts are to see these actors as belonging to distinct 'lumps' in the first place, and to judge their normative significance differently, as Moffitt so confidently does.

All this is to say that Moffitt may not persuade every reader to accept his central claim, that populism is best understood as a style rather than as 'an ideology, strategy, discourse or political logic' (p. 28). Yet his rich, creative, interdisciplinary scholarship succeeds brilliantly in demonstrating this: that 'contemporary populism has much to teach us about the formulation of group identities in the contemporary mediatized political landscape, where rusted-on party supporters are ever-dwindling, and new audiences for political performances are being formulated and targeted all the time' (p. 112).



Each of these fine books makes a much-needed contribution to debates on populism today by depicting that phenomenon in all its ambivalence, as a force that might illuminate (as well as threaten) the practice of democracy and the study of mass politics.

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