Tim Houwen


Matthijs Rooduijn


Last year in the Netherlands several PhD dissertations were published on the fervently discussed topic of populism. I will offer a short review on two of them from scholars with varied disciplinary backgrounds. Both are worthy of note, if for completely different reasons.

How can researchers on fascist ideology and movements (like myself) possibly profit from the analyses of these scholars of populism? There is, of course, the on-going and often heated debate as to whether (radical) right-wing populist movements and politicians can be compared with the fascism of the previous century and to what extent there is any kind of continuity between them.

Based on an imposing quantity of literature, and refraining from moral judgements, political philosopher Tim Houwen has written a profound dissertation on populism entitled *Reclaiming Power for the People*. The aim of his study is to grasp the meaning of populism conceptually and to understand its ambiguous relationship with democracy. This was motivated partly by his frustration at the large number of political commentators who associate populism simplistically with fascism or the extreme right ‘without being interested in what populism means in the first place’ (p. 15). It is clear that overall Houwen would have little time for the recent plea made by Nigel Copsey that researchers should examine the role that (neo) fascism has played, and might still play within contemporary (radical) right-wing populist movements in Europe.

In his thesis Houwen first describes the origins and the basic assumptions of populism in different historical contexts (USA, Latin America and Europe) and the interaction between the use of the label ‘populism’ and the political phenomena or agents labelled as ‘populists’. Second Houwen deals with the ambivalent relationship between current populism (a ‘broad’ and ‘thin’ ideology) and modern democracy defined as a compromise between the democratic ideal of self-government and good government by political elites. Populism and modern democracy both contain a central reference to the sovereign rule of the people but do have a very different and even conflicting interpretation of this basic principle. The crucial element of the populist repertoire is the idea of the people as a single homogeneous entity with opinions and interests that are ignored by the political elite. This fixed idea defines...
the anti-pluralistic view of populists on the sovereign rule of the people and their hostility towards representative democracy, governmental bureaucracy, mainstream political parties, the autonomy of political institutions, and the constitutional rights and liberties of minorities (‘the dangerous other’).

Houwen notices that populism is a response to the imbalance between power interests of political elites and the general interests of the people and the shifts in political decision-making towards a supranational level. On the other hand, he firmly concludes that the Janus-faced populism that reclaims power for the people at the same time undermines the legitimacy of representative democracy. Populism therefore is a threat for democracy in the name of democracy.

Although Houwen tells us much about the nature of populism and makes clear that there are fundamental differences with (neo) fascism, he pays too little attention to the anti-Islam, anti-immigration and (ethnic-) nationalist attitudes of modern right-wing populist parties. This is the consequence of the broad definition of populism he employs which includes left-wing as well as right-wing populism.

This objection can also be made against A populist Zeitgeist? The Impact of Populism on Parties, Media and the Public in Western Europe by political sociologist Matthijs Rooduijn. In his case, however, the consequences are far more problematic.

The thesis of Rooduijn is founded on the claim of Cas Mudde (a well-known expert on radical right-wing populism) that we are witnessing a populist Zeitgeist in western democracies. Mudde asserts that populism is not restricted to the political rhetoric of populist parties. Increasingly, populism has been incorporated by mainstream political parties too. Rooduijn is right in arguing that in order to speak of an actual all-embracing populist Zeitgeist, populism must have become more widespread than the arena of party politics. His dissertation provides a comparative investigation into the impact of the populist upsurge with three realms: the realm of political parties, of mass media, and of public opinion. Rooduijn uses Mudde’s definition of populism as ‘an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will of the people).’

Rooduijn examines three countries in which populist parties have been successful (France, Italy and the Netherlands) and two countries in which populists have been relatively unsuccessful (Germany and the United Kingdom). To

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assess whether populism has become more pervasive in the messages of mainstream political parties and in public debates in mass media, Rooduijn deploys a computer-based content analysis of election manifestos of mainstream parties and populist parties and of opinion articles from newspapers within selected election years. Two objects of his large-scale research – election manifestos and opinion articles – raise some serious methodological questions. General election manifestos of mainstream parties (whether they are Christian democratic, socialist or liberal) are well-considered elucidations. It is far more likely that when politicians of those parties make populist statements, they’ll do so in speeches, debates, interviews and party broadcasts on television. Moreover opinion polls are more reliable to measure populist convictions and attitudes of citizens. An even more fundamental objection against Rooduijn’s research is that it is grounded on Mudde’s definition of populism that exclusively focuses on the antithesis between ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’ (according to this one-sided definition even the Commune of Paris would have been a populist experiment). Moreover, some of the main themes of the most right-wing populist parties in Europe (hostility against the Islam and non-western, Muslim immigrants and arguments in favour of more severe penalties) are not considered by Rooduijn. This has skewed the results of his research in an alarming way. For example Rooduijn concludes that mainstream parties have not responded to the populist success by incorporating populism in their own messages and that tabloid media are not more populist than the elite media. I beg to differ.

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