Book Reviews


While populist parties and political leaders have existed for some time now, a systematic study of this political trend has not fully developed. Following some earlier works (Margaret Canovan, Paul Taggart, Ernesto Laclau or partially Cass Mudde), the literature on populism is a growing field (we take into account only literature on populism per se, not on right-wing populism or other combinations). On the other hand, studies on the theoretical framework of this political movement continue to be insufficient. Few texts try to explain populism from a theoretical perspective, the current trend being to analyze rather the dynamics of populist parties or the development of populism in North (and South) America. Moreover, even fewer try to do so using recently developed theories.

From this point of view, Sergiu Mişcoiu’s *Au pouvoir par le "peuple"* is more than welcomed.

The author is courageous in his attempt: not only does he try to explain populism, but more than that, his main tool in this respect is the method of discourse theory. Despite the fact that he uses some of the ideas of Ernesto Laclau, mentioned previously, this does not make the author necessarily a follower of the Essex school of discourse analysis.

Briefly, the main objective of the book is to offer an “analysis framework of both populism and the transition from populism to neo-populism by employing a method based on discourse theory” (p. 18). In a broader sense, the study is intended to contribute to the development of a discourse theory of social or political phenomena as an alternative to sociological or historical theories (p. 18-19).

It is not the author’s first book based on explaining a political phenomenon based on discourse theory, but it is his first attempt to do so in connection with populism.

The point of departure for the study was research on the French extreme right, starting from the 1990s, and later of the Romanian political arena after 1989. Since the classical cleavages are not as influential anymore, and because it seems that populism is un-ideological (covering every sector from extreme right to extreme left), new analytical tools were needed, and this is where discourse theory steps in.

In order to achieve this, the first phase in the author’s plan is to thoroughly analyze the theories investigating populism and its definitions. The next step is to put into practice discourse theory, and to discuss some of its features, in order to prove that this methodological tool is perfectly adequate to explain populism.

What is the key factor behind the rise of populism? The author states that the charismatic personalization of power, the use of TV-politics, the “people-isation” of the public
space or the de-ideologization of the public discourse, all created the same type of populist development, be it that of the USA, Brazil, France or Romania (p. 17). Starting from this description, the study makes an inventory of definitions, descriptions or theories explaining populism. What is needed, claims the author, is an integrative theory.

One of the main contributions of the book is the building of a definition. According to Mişcoiu, populism is a “discursive construction with a hegemonic appeal based on the exaltation of the popular identification made through the ideological structuring of the presumed characteristics of a community (the “People”) and the exclusion of the others, guilty for not-fulfilling the identity demands of that community” (p. 66).

Until arriving at this definition, the book’s arguments are rather theoretical; from this point on, the author develops an empirical approach. In order to support his definition, Sergiu Mişcoiu employs five arguments proposed by Jacob Törfing in an earlier study: social meaning or practice is the result of a set of discourses (historical background); a discourse is based on a structure of hegemonic struggles (hegemonic articulation); this leads to the construction of social antagonism, which implies the creation of the “others”; a fourth argument is related to the dislocation of a hegemonic discourse, which occurs when it fails to “domesticate new events”; eventually, if a dislocation takes place, a split subject will occur and will try “to reconstruct a full identity.”

Each argument is tackled with empirical research using recent populist phenomena, or, in some cases, events which occurred decades ago. Worth mentioning is the argument dealing with the key element of any populist discourse: the construction of the outside, or the ‘othering’. From this point of view, Romanian political life is a genuine goldmine for a populist analysis, and the author uses several examples from this country.

While the idea of explaining populism through discourse theory is not new (in fact, even Laclau worked on this topic), the author goes one step further: he tries to explain the transition from populism to neo-populism using the same analytical tool. Since there is an ongoing debate on whether we can speak about a distinct phenomena, the author prefers to discuss “advanced populism” (“populisme avancé”, p. 101), instead of neo-populism.

The same discourse theory and eight criteria are used to search for relevant differences between “historical” and “advanced” populism: identity, relation with the past, mission, coherence, the relation between the leader and the people, communication patterns, political behavior while in power, and persistence of populist movements. Sergiu Mişcoiu concludes that, while there are important differences between the two, it would be more accurate to consider neo-populism not as a distinctive ideology, but rather a significant component of a larger populist family.

Even though the study tackles a quite difficult topic, that of explaining populism by using discourse theory (and the author accomplishes this aim admirably), some minor problem

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1) In French: “Populisme = ensemble discursif à vocation hégémonique qui repose sur l’exaltation de l’identification populaire opérée à travers l’articulation idéologique des caractéristiques supposées d’une collectivité (le ‘People’) et l’exclusion des altérités coupables pour la non-pléniitude de l’identité de cette collectivité”.