

Book Review:
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Critique* by Pierre
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REDESCRIPTIONS

Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory

BOOK REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

In this book Pierre Rosanvallon develops his vision of populism, which at the same time serves to insist on his own proposals to renew our democracies, widely developed in his previous works. Critical of the literature that has addressed the topic, he offers a perspective based on his own theoretical presuppositions, which explains the subtitle of this work: a history of few moments of populism; its description as an ideology with common and characteristic elements; and a critique that becomes a defense of his views on democracy.

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In this book Pierre Rosanvallon develops his vision of populism, which at the same time serves to insist on his own proposals to renew our democracies, widely developed in his previous works. As he himself indicates, in *Counter-Democracy: Politics in the Age of Distrust* (2008) he offered a too reductionist reading of populism, which now he tries to develop and justify. Critical of the literature that has addressed the topic, he offers a perspective based on his own theoretical presuppositions, which explains the subtitle of this work: a history of few moments of populism; its description as an ideology with common and characteristic elements; and a critique that becomes a defense of his views on democracy.

He starts with a rejection of other authors' positions renouncing to provide a clear definition of populism and insists on the need of conceptual clarification. There is a frustration which arises from the fact that populism has a pejorative character, used as a criticism of the adversary, in a variety of issues, generating too great confusion. On the contrary, he envisions his book as a project helping to clarify the real nature of contemporary populism, as it truly reflects a 'new dimension of the political cycle' in the twenty-first century. In his view, this contemporary populism is an unprecedented event which responds to a widespread social expectation: the idea that the revitalization of democracies demands a deeper involvement of citizens, giving rise to a more active sovereignty. This is an expectation promoted in academic discourses as well as in the political debate denouncing political elites; but used in revitalizing democracies, it threatens to destabilize them.

The vast literature on populism incorporates these concerns but Rosanvallon does not enter in dialog with it. He merely notes that the previous approaches are too focused on describing populism or finding its causes, being thus incapable to portrait its genuine nature. They analyze it from different angles: as a protest movement, a style of politics or a type of discourse, giving rise to varied typologies that, to him, have little heuristic content. In the end, they are just long lists of types that assign specific cases to various categories. He is neither satisfied with the prevailing historical genealogies, as he believes that there is no linear history of populism. Therefore, in his view, we cannot understand contemporary populism based on movements that have called themselves 'populist.'

Unlike other authors who assume the plurality of its meanings and expressions, Rosanvallon does not give up trying to delimit the nature of the concept and defines it as an ideology. Therefore, the aim of the book is to make a first conceptualization of the essence of populism conceived as a specific twenty-first century ideology on the rise. Not a 'soft ideology,' as successfully conceptualized by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) following Freedman's categorization, but as an identifiable one embodied in a form of democracy reflecting important transformations of contemporary societies. And he does so by conceptualizing populism as an ideal type belonging to the generic typologies of the democratic forms.

The book starts with a description of the populist political culture, comprising of five elements that is common to find in the literature describing populism: a) a conception of 'the people' based on a tension between them/us that reflects the differences between the social and civic body; b) a theory of democracy preferring institutions of direct democracy (glorification of the referendum and demonization of the intermediate bodies and nonelective institutions); c) a mode of representation with a style of leadership that 'stands for' the people (representation as embodiment); d) an economic policy and philosophy that stress national protectionism; and e) a regime of passions and emotions, with a strong anti-intellectual feature, that tries to respond to feelings of institutional rejection and abandonment.

What is distinctive in Rosanvallon analysis on populism is that it constitutes an ideal type of borderline democracy, which he places alongside others such as the ‘minimalist’ (based on elections, as described by Schumpeter or Popper) and ‘essentialist’ (‘real democracies’ that aim to achieve a communal social order organized by management principles, of a Marxist inspiration). All of them would still belong to the democratic family, providing a different internal balance of their core elements which makes them prone to degenerate into oligarchical (minimalist) and totalitarian (essentialist) regimes or, in the case of populism, what he calls, a ‘democratorship’ (its authoritarian possibility).

Why is populism a form of democracy—even if it is a limited type? Because, as Rosanvallon has always defended in his very extensive and detailed work on democracy, it contains changing meanings in conflict. As a regime, it is full of unachievable promises, generating permanent feelings of betrayal. The reason is that its core elements are always in tension, and they can have a different institutional embodiment. However, the problem with borderline models is that they worsen certain characteristics to the detriment of others, and doing so, can turn democracy against itself. In his view, then, the three families of the limit forms of democracy approach differently these basic issues, proposing a balance that end in a transformation of democracy on its opposites.

The following parts of the book develop this principal thesis, starting, firstly, with a focus on the description of the democratic ‘aporias.’ The key question is the controversial depiction of the sovereign ‘people’: how we represent it and define the channels to express its general will, under the guide of a principle of equality. All are aspects approached and developed on Rosanvallon impressive work for decades, here confronted with populist positions.

In a very simplified way, the basic question for democracy is how to portrait the sovereign people, who, in Rosanvallon view, can exist just through its manifestations, always plural, complementing but also contradicting each other. This implies a complex view of representation not equated to electoral representation, which integrates other social and institutional forms that give an important representative role to intermediate bodies—as Constitutional Tribunals or social organizations. Contrary to those who emphasize the separation of the ‘liberal’ and ‘democratic’ elements that coexist within modern democracies, he also considers the law as guarantor of the individual status of each citizen, giving rise to a depersonalization of power, offering thus a specific reading of the democratic requirement of equality.

These basic questions are the expression of internal contradictions always present in democracies, and populism proposes a recognizable way to overcome them. Populists appeal to a return to a more active sovereign people through a view of representation conceived as embodiment on a leader that uses referenda as a privileged mechanism to keep directly connected with the people. This view of representation is based on a rejection of electoral representation—impossible due to the existing gap between the elite and the people—expressed on a promotion of democratic polarization, as well as a critique of intermediary bodies and mediators. But the key question is that to implement it entails institutional changes that lead to the irreversible colonization of democratic institutions by the new representatives.

To help to understand the true nature of populism, Rosanvallon provides in the second part of the book various historical examples of populist practices used to solve the democratic tensions. He considers them experiments that reflect this problematic

character of democracy, without pretending to create a genealogy of populism. On his view, the Second Empire in France is the scenario for claims for a democracy differentiated from the liberal democracy model, appealing to illiberalism and the use of referendums. He also analyses the period before World War II in France and the USA as the field for an ideological redefinition of the right and the left in a context of globalization. And, in his list, the governments of Gaitán in Colombia and Perón in Argentina appears as examples of the claim that there is a constitutive opposition between the oligarchy and the people, attempted to overcome by a vision of embodied representation. These historical moments involved the radical polarization which constitutes, he argues, the fourth trait of contemporary populism. The criterion for selecting these examples is just their usefulness for justifying the arguments developed in the book, quite different from the ones used to create the widely assumed genealogies of populism.

Once described in this way, the rest of the book contains a (sometimes reiterative) dismissal of populist proposals, criticized from Rosanvallon's own view on how to mitigate today's democratic tensions. Nevertheless, the stress is located on the specific character of current populism as the product of important structural transformations which have made the definition of the social and political body even more complex. The key element is the growing individualization generated by a capitalism of innovation that exploits the individual and the social changes that have rendered obsolete the social categories that have articulated previous democratic politics (such as the so powerful division of social classes). These structural changes have given rise to new social identifications and distinctions difficult to compound in the construction of 'the people,' social and political, and to articulate any idea of the general will.

In Rosanvallon's view, the proposals of populism to rebuild the people and articulate their will as well as the channels to express it, are prone to lead to authoritarianism. Therefore, throughout the book, he theoretically criticizes populist principles, warns against their political practices, and tries to expose their contradictions.

Rosanvallon argues that it is necessary to readapt our democracies by expanding them through institutional reforms that rebalance their different components, as well as their daily exercise. One of the guiding principles he offers is an improvement of political representation that cannot take the path of populism, understood as the embodiment of any leader, and linked to the people by means of referenda. Neither by increasing political polarization in the name of an authentic representation that they deny on others. On the contrary, we need to understand representation as a complex system comprising multiple actors and forms, electoral and social, to which is important to add the more expressive function of 'give people a say' through a careful micromanagement of everyday life.

Following other authors approaching the topic from a similar concern, such as Urbinati (2019)—not quoted on the bibliography of the book—Rosanvallon concludes that, in today's democracies the real risk of populism is its political success. Once in government, populist leaders can introduce the changes to transform the democratic regime in a 'democratorship,' a deeply illiberal regime, even if it keeps elements of a democracy, with a great possibility of ending up as an authoritarian regime. This is so because populist regimes tend to change the institutions, generating dynamics of polarization and constitutional change to assault them irreversibly, and to introduce a morality of radicalization that threatens political pluralism. But populism as ideology is wrong and it leads to bad solutions for today's problems of democracies.

In sum, Rosanvallon insistence on considering populism an ideology of the twenty-first century assumes that the structural changes experienced by our democracies have generated an ideological realignment focused on the concept of democracy defended. Democracy is not a meta-ideology or the frame for the left-wing/right-wing competition any more, but it has become the center of the ideological competition.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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