Populism: the view from anthropology

John Clarke

Katharine C. Donahue and Patricia R. Heck (eds), *Cycles of Hatred and Rage: What Right Wing Extremists and Their Parties in Europe Tell Us About the US*, Palgrave Macmillan 2019

This collection addresses a cluster of interlinked questions about the current rise of right-wing, nationalist, populist political movements. In what conditions do they thrive? What animates popular support for them? What cultural tropes and practices connect such movements and their publics? Finally, the book is also organised around the rather strange (for a UK audience) subtitle which indicates its target readership: do European developments help to explain or understand Donald Trump's remarkable 2016 election as US president? Although not identified in the title, the book is also driven by a further concern: what can anthropological studies add to the outpouring of recent work on populist politics from political scientists and sociologists? The editors and contributors are all anthropologists, working on European locations, and came together in a panel organised by the two editors at the 2017 meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, DC.

There are seven substantive chapters, dealing with aspects of populist, nationalist or right-wing politics in a variety of countries: Northern Ireland (in the South Armagh border region after the Brexit vote); England (in Margate, a strong base for UKIP and Brexit votes); Germany (centred on the Eastern town of Greiz and exploring the rise of AfD); Italy (examining the rise of the *Lega Nord*); France (centred on the Doubs region, an industrial stronghold of the *Front National*

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(latterly *Rassemblement National*), and home of the breakaway party, *Les Patriotes*); Poland (centred on a comparison of official and opposition Independence Day rallies); and Hungary (focused on the rise of *táncház* - literally Dance House - folk music and dance, and its trajectory from a subcultural social movement to its nationalisation by the *Fidesz* government, led by Viktor Orbán). There is a brief introduction by the editors, which explains the sequencing of the chapters (it reflects the place of the country on which the chapter focuses in the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index rankings) and establishes some of the themes, including the idea of 'cycles' - the repeated rise and fall of right-wing political movements, especially in the period following the Second World War. This idea perhaps works better for (West) Germany than elsewhere - and indeed most of the chapters do not refer back to it.

There are some familiar themes in play that cut across and link many of the chapters. Roberto J. González's conclusion highlights three of them: demographic changes, economic crises and crises of authority. Writing on demographic changes tends to focus on questions of migration, and the xenophobic, nationalist and racist responses to migration which, in the view of Orbán and his fellow-travellers, threaten 'European civilisation' and its Christian foundations. Less is made of changing national demographies, especially the ageing of European populations and the ensuing crisis of care, often resolved, as in the UK and US, by the arrival of low-paid migrant workers. Discussion of economic crises tends to centre on the 2007 global crisis but extends to the changing fortunes of particular places and regions in the uneven dynamics of 'open markets' (Heck) and neoliberal globalisation. From the collapse of Northern Italy's manufacturing to the post-reunification crisis of Eastern Germany's industry, examples of these changing fortunes are plentiful, but for some this leads too quickly to the borrowing of Kalb and Halmai's argument about the effects of 'dispossession and disenfranchisement' on the working class.[1] As González notes, by no means all of the political actors in these studies are working-class; and in my view the reach of nationalist-populist politics into the middle classes forms a critical link between European and US experiences. And González adds a further important point about the unevenness of economic dynamics: it means that even 'success stories'- those economies boasting growth - have profoundly unequal distributions of the rewards (including for middle-class strata, many of whom have been made precarious both in and out of employment). The final theme he identifies, 'crises of authority', borrows from Celiksu's use of Gramsci

to discuss the legitimacy crisis of the Italian state. He argues that one linking thread in the volume is the decline of the older form of nation-state (Fordist-welfarist, perhaps?) and its institutions of social security, and its replacement by leaner and meaner states committed to the pursuit of neoliberal visions of growth and progress. Here a critical role has been played by parties of the left (loosely speaking), who have abandoned their former electoral bases in favour of various new liberalisms (cultural and social as well as economic).

In this summary form, it is not obvious what is added by taking an anthropological turn: these are, after all, familiar themes across the social sciences. But there are some distinctive contributions that are gained from anthropology's willingness to plunge below general trends and tendencies into more focused ethnographic studies. Thomas M. Wilson's study of Northern Ireland's Brexit Borderlands reveals the complex local dynamics of the UK's disruption of the border question, and the ways in which fears about the border's future have brought 'new nationalisms' into play alongside, and entangled with, 'old nationalisms' (and it would have been a salutary and educational read for the Northern Ireland Office at any point in the last few years …). In very different ways, the chapters by Balthazar, Celisku and Kürti illuminate the powerful role that objects of different sorts and the memories with which they are invested can have potent animating and mobilising force, attaching those memories (and those who do the remembering) to emerging political projects (Brexit, the Northern League and the Fidesz government, respectively). Similarly, the political work of emotions (desire, loss and anxiety) is visible across this collection, especially in the chapters by Balthazar, Heck and Galbraith, who show how such emotions underpin attachments to political movements that promise to satisfy desires (for recognition, for security and more); to replace what has been lost (often the imagined nation of the past); or to protect the newly vulnerable. Finally, the ethnographic depth of these studies gets to the way specific practices engage and animate people. For example, Galbraith highlights the feeling of being at political events, contrasting the sense of being a passive spectator at the official government Independence Day event with the experience of being an active participant in the opposition's march. Meanwhile, Kürti draws out the complex ways in which music and dance are enmeshed in the making of tradition, and how such constructed traditions have been put to work in the making of the 'real' Hungarian nation, within and beyond Hungary's borders.

There are, it should be admitted, some losses that follow from this ethnographic focus. It is sometimes difficult to keep hold of the relationship between the particular animating connections and the larger political dynamics: I am still not sure I know much more about UKIP or Brexit after my encounter with retired people in Margate. Donahue, on the other hand, offers a multi-focal view of the Doubs region, the shifting political formations of the French far right, and the transatlantically connective role played by one crucial racist text: Jean Raspail's 1973 novel *In the Camp of the Saints*, read by Steve Bannon among others on the global right. But too often, such lines and levels of connection between particular groups of people and larger processes and formations feel thinly stretched; or perhaps the chapters are better at seeing how such larger processes act on the everyday than at exploring how they are mediated by institutions, technologies and networks. And (because I am obsessed by the question) I wanted to see the emotions at stake here probed more deeply: what exactly do people think is the loss in a 'sense of loss'? Loss of employment, income, status, or that more elusive (and often racialised and patriarchal) 'way of life' and the forms of relative privilege inscribed in it?

I was glad to read this collection and have no doubt that anthropology brings additional ways of seeing to the current concern with populism, nativism, nationalism, racism, authoritarianism and more, not least because anthropologists tend to think more fluidly and processually than (some) political scientists and sociologists. It's one of the reasons I hang out with anthropologists and even, occasionally, contribute to their collections.[2] But I confess to also being a bit frustrated: like so many collections, this one doesn't quite hang together, and there's little sense of engagement between the chapters. They do all end by addressing the 'what can we learn about Trump from this' question, but it feels a little forced and unsatisfactory.

Notes

1. Don Kalb and Gábor Halmai (eds), *Headlines of Nation, Subtexts of Class: Working Class Populism and the Return of the Repressed in Neoliberal Europe*, Berghahn Books 2011.

2. For my most recent contribution, see Jeff Maskovsky and Sophie Bjork-James (eds), *Beyond Populism: Angry Politics and the Twilight of Neoliberalism*, University of West Virginia Press 2020.

The importance of conversation

Sally Davison

Critical Dialogues: Thinking together in turbulent times, John Clarke, in conversation with Wendy Brown, Allan Cochrane, Davina Cooper, Larry Grossberg, Wendy Larner, Gail Lewis, Tania Murray Li, Jeff Maskovsky, Janet Newman, Aradhana Sharma, Paul Stubbs, Fiona Williams, Policy Press 2019

I was immediately attracted to this book because it is based on a series of conversations with very interesting people. It begins with an introduction explaining why conversations are an important part of thinking, not least because of the importance of 'thinking with' others. I was further attracted by its focus on the importance of conversations that cross boundary and subject disciplines, and explore the relationships between politics, theory and practice. And I also liked its suspicion of works that are 'announcements' (e.g. this is the era of x, y or z); and of writers who keep on knowing they are right and saying the same thing over long periods of time; and of politics as the performance of certainty. I share its preference for thinkers who attempt to address specific questions, and are able to live with a sense of messiness or contradiction, who - as Wendy Larner puts it - engage in 'looking really hard at what is in front of you and then seeking the conceptual languages and registers that help you to make sense of that' (p186). Perhaps most of all I was interested because it is a book that talks about thinking as a (political) practice.

Clarke has chosen interlocutors who share his basic approach to thinking - this is not a book where people explore or attempt to reconcile big disagreements. Instead, each interlocutor gives us specific insights into the themes that run through the book from the specific spaces in which they work, and from the perspective of the problems their work seeks to address. Because it is a book

of edited transcripts of conversations, it is a relatively easy read, especially considering the complexity of the some of the ideas with which it engages. This in itself illustrates Clarke's point: being polished, 'finished' or wrapped up neatly is not necessary for the discussion of complex ideas. In fact, the wrapping up part usually involves the dismissal of the bits that don't fit. These bits are on full display in this book - and it is all the better for it.

Clarke has also chosen people whom he regards as having expanded his own horizons - which means that the conversations are likely to widen those of the reader. So I found out new and interesting things about people whose work I already knew, but I also had to begin to compile a reading list of people whose work I now realise I also need to know. In particular, Clarke shows why disciplines that a casual outsider sometimes may see as infused with 'empirical dullness' - e.g. social policy, anthropology, law, geography - can in fact offer up richly rewarding insights in the hands of academics who are willing to borrow from other disciplines, or to ask questions that seek to unsettle certainties within the discipline (for example, when Davina Cooper asks what, if anything, is to be gained by a legal definition of gender). Clarke is attracted to these areas because they force theorists to engage with the 'thingness' of the world - an idea that recurs in several of the conversations. This is also the reason for his more recent engagements with anthropology: the conversations with anthropologists give many examples of how an engagement in 'thingness' gives pause for thought to those who operate amidst the certainties of the (largely western) academy. For example, the welfare state in India is utterly different from - and unsettling of - a British-centred notion based on the postwar period (p83).

One of the most productive aspects of Clarke's approach is that he asks people to tell us about the *way* they think. I found this fascinating. Wendy Brown discusses the erotic pleasures of political theory and the sense of power it can give, while also cautioning against those who 'wield' ideas (including some of her own) as if they are political positions - deploying them as weapons rather than 'candles to light the room' (p63). Tania Murray Li gives an illuminating account of how she unpacks ideas and theories in order to find the best way of 'chasing' a subject. Fiona Williams describes how she tries to get away from the backdrop of everything being caused by 'neoliberalism' or 'global capitalism' to find out more about what happens on the ground - through exploring institutional complexity, 'the pulls and tugs'

around reforms, not least in order to find the weak points in the system (p144). Janet Newman puts this succinctly when she points out that the institutions of the current settlement are 'working but not working' (is the economy working? is society working?); as she argues, we need to understand this if we are to intervene to reshape things.

The home from which Clarke roves to explore all these questions is cultural studies, as born and practised at the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies in the 1970s and 1980s. A self-described 'cultural studies boy', Clarke was one of the co-authors of *Policing the Crisis*, and the book is dedicated to Stuart Hall, 'whose voice lives on', including in the work of the people in the book. For Clarke, Hall is a central person for thinking with - including his ideas on conjunctural analysis, his dialogic thinking and learning style, his focus on questions that have political salience rather than on abstract theory, and his habit of drawing on a very wide range of theoretical work, whilst not becoming an 'adherent' of any of them. For Hall and for Clarke, the question is how to understand something with all the available theoretical resources.

Clarke is also critical of the hero thinker and the master of the monograph. Like Hall, his work has in the main been co-authored and has often taken the form of essays - precisely as a result of his commitment to the ideas discussed in this book. He particularly draws attention to Tariq Ali's bemusement (writing after Hall's death in 2014) at Hall's having never published a solo-authored book (p220-1); Ali is moved to ask himself whether it is because the masochistic practice of collective composition had exhausted Hall![1]

Sometimes people find uncertainty annoying. Clarke mentions twice in the book the time he was hit over the head by Neil Smith at a conference because he had argued once too often for ambivalence. But as he points out, he does recognise the need for 'provisional resting points', and the need to take positions; it is just that he also recognises that clarification and further thought are always possible and desirable. And he also recognises the need for faith (however difficult it is to conjure) in the possibility of change through collective political action - as opposed to certainty about how that is to be achieved.

It is sometimes difficult to judge how something will be read by people coming to all these ideas for the first time. In this case, the question arises of whether the conversational style of the book may permit the inclusion of too many unspoken

assumptions that are not accessible to all readers, or whether there is a level of 'insiderism' operating. But Clarke has a number of strategies for dealing with this. He has a very useful list of key words at the end; as he correctly points out, the index supplies a good guide to the main themes; and the reading list is also very useful. So I hope that people will find this book a relatively accessible way of exploring the issues it raises.

Finally, to those who correctly note that we do not all have access to the privilege of in-depth conversations with high-flying academics across the globe, I would respond that many of us have access to conversations with those who share an interest in exploring questions collaboratively and are question-focused though informed by theory: these are approaches that are productive for all of us.

Notes

1. Since Hall's death a number of collections of his work have been published, as well as his memoir *Familiar Stranger* (with Bill Schwarz), Duke University Press 2017.

John Clarke is a Professor Emeritus at the Open University, and currently holds a Leverhulme Fellowship to work on questions about Brexit and Beyond. His most recent book is *Critical Dialogues; Thinking Together in Turbulent Times* (Policy Press 2019), reviewed in this issue.

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