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BOOK REVIEW

Populism: Still something of a Kafka trap

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Stankov, Petar. *The Political Economy of Populism: An Introduction* (Routledge Frontiers of Political Economy) Taylor & Francis, 2021.

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It has been said of the German-Czech writer Franz Kafka that his writings are easy to read, but difficult to understand. The same could be said for the concept of populism. Much on the minds of political analysts over the past decade, it is a ready descriptor of such phenomena as the successful presidential bid of Donald Trump in the United States (Homolar and Scholz, 2019), the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, and the ascendency of rightist political forces in Europe (Wood and Ausserladscheider, 2021). It has a much longer association with Latin America, with regimes tending both towards the political right and left, marked by names like Getúlio Vargas, Juan Perón and Hugo Chávez (De la Torre, 2017; Cachanosky and Padilla, 2019).

In Africa, "populism" has been invoked as a framework for understanding the politics of leaders such as Frederick Chiluba in Zambia, Jakaya Kikwete in Tanzania and Jacob Zuma and Julius Malema in South Africa (Makulilo, 2013; Nyenhuis and De Jager, 2021).

Identifying a political phenomenon as populist often precedes defining what populism is. Perhaps this is because the word itself seems self-explanatory, suggesting a mass appeal based on an untidy grasp at popularity. But if populism is to be seriously considered a conceptual category, it needs just such a description.

Petar Stankov's *The Political Economy of Populism: An Introduction* attempts a timely, multi-disciplinary analysis of the issue. In summary, the book "explores

the interplay between identity, the economy and inequality to explain the dynamics of populist votes since the beginning of the 20th century" (Stankov, 2021, p. iii).

Revealingly, the first chapter is entitled "What do we know about populism?" It presents an overview of the various approaches developed by scholars over the years, useful for setting the context and introducing intellectual thinking about populism to the reader unfamiliar with the term. It settles on a broad working definition: "We can define it as a quasi-ideology, or better still, a political strategy, which creates and nurtures radically conflicting identities for political gain." (Stankov, 2021, p. 3).

This gets at the idea of populism as a Manichean view of the world, pitting a virtuous and deprived mass – "the people" – against a disconnected and indifferent elite. In the name of the former, populist movements and populist leaders seek a new form of politics, demanding that their interests be centred, loosening if not dispensing with the institutional constraints on their actions. From this follows the risk of democratic degradation and reckless economic choices, as people's ascriptive identities and class positions are invoked, and redistributionist policies pursued. Under populist regimes, both the constitution and the fiscus come under threat.

Stankov does not, however, offer a detailed historical account of populism. His concern is conceptual. There are no case studies or any intimate treatments of the experiences of, say, Argentina or Hungary. The main contribution of this book is its analysis of the drivers and consequences of populism as he defines it. This is explored through the framework of what Stankov terms "populist cycles" – in other words, if populism is understood as a political phenomenon that emerges and recedes, how is this to be explained and understood? (Stankov, 2021, pp. 35-59).

He guides the reader through a series of correlations between voting and particular (presumed) drivers of populist sentiment and expression. The dataset of countries used is a large one, covering 37 countries and their elections (yielding 8,478 vote shares – in other words, how parties and ideological factions carved up the various electoral results) (Stankov, 2021, p. 36). Despite the large data set, the book suffers from a narrow focus, as the countries selected are all Western or Central European, plus Turkey, Israel and Japan. Latin American countries appear not to be represented at all, despite populism's outsized place in the politics of that region. African countries are excluded entirely; indeed, "Africa" appears only twice in the text.

Voting behaviour – measured by the share of voter preferences going to each broad ideological camp – is matched against data on inequality, migration and

austerity (which he expresses as "ausime", drawing in the opening letters of each word (Stankov, 2021, p. 54). And from this comes extensive discussion of the trajectories of extremist parties, building an argument about the differing paths taken by those on the left and the right.

Under conditions of stress, old certainties are questioned, and people who might previously have been willing to acquiesce in the status quo become amenable to alternatives that break through boundaries of the normative. Stankov identifies rents as a key concept: rewards and incentives for participating in a political system, specifically for those occupying subordinate positions. These may be economic, as in redistributionist welfare measures, or identity-based, as when the supposedly malign or disruptive influences in a society (capitalists who exploit ordinary folk, migrants who poison society and steal opportunities, unaccountable multinational bodies like the European Union that are insensitive to national aspirations and so on) are targeted.

How these impulses play out within a given context helps explain – at least in terms of correlation with voting share – the form that populism takes. Rising inequality tends to favour the left; the presence of migrant populations, the right. Austerity seems to trigger both (Stankov, 2021, p. 55).

Stankov then performs another set of correlations to examine the outcomes of populist incumbency, looking at correlations between various forms of populist participation in government – that is, when populists hold positions in cabinet or as presidents or prime ministers – and the state of political rights, civil liberties and economic performance. The impact on democracy and freedom is ambivalent, according to the author (Stankov, 2021, p. 72). He interprets his data sets as showing that populist governments might either strengthen or weaken rights in the short term, and as having variable longer-term impacts. On his reading, these variable impacts have much to do with the particular ideological orientations of the relevant parties (Stankov, 2021, pp. 60-72). Similarly, his analysis shows populists might record initial gains in aspects of the economy, but that here populist incumbency does not have longer-term impacts (Stankov, 2021, pp. 72-80).

Finally, Stankov sets out some ideas about the kinds of policy ideas that might counter populist policies. His account of these ideas is worth reading, although it is not entirely original. Among other things, he argues that wealth taxes, globally coordinated, are necessary to ameliorate frustrations about inequality and economic exclusion. He also argues that the impact of particularly damaging populist ideas can be managed by regulating social media (Stankov, 2021, pp. 85-89).

Perhaps the central passage of the book is the opening words of the final chapter:

> "Populism emerges and gains traction when political entrepreneurs with strong leadership qualities explore already existing identity conflicts. The search for political gains is more likely to succeed in times of economic transformations because recessions, austerity, and inequality produce a variety of distributional consequences. As the distributional consequences of both economic distress and economic growth typically favour the elite over the poor and the lower middle class, economic shocks typically sharpen the underlying identity conflicts, and identity rents become a more salient characteristic of voter choice at both the extensive and the intensive margins. Despite those conflicts, liberal-democratic systems uniquely harbour the power of self-correction. Is today's populism part of the liberal-democratic self-correcting mechanism, or it is a prelude to its demise?" (Stankov, 2021, pp. 84).

This is indeed the question that motivates much of the concern about populism today, with particular emphasis on its emergence and growth in mature democracies.

So, is this a book worth reading? Certainly, particularly for those seeking data on the empirical links between voter performance and broader dynamics in society – the ausime trifecta – and the resultant gains of extremist parties.

But this said, Stankov's schema for dividing up political vote shares to identify "far left" and "far right" gains is a contentious one. In his analysis, extremes are an evident stand-in for "populist". But this is by no means obvious. While parties of the extremes might have a predilection to see enemies in their opponents – something akin to the populist binary – this need not make them populists. For instance, they might eschew the strongman style of leadership, or their ideological bases might be more properly and firmly defined than that which has typically been ascribed to populists. The Dutch scholar Cas Mudde describes populism as a "thin centred ideology", for example (Mudde, 2004, p. 544). An important contribution by Jorge Castañeda in *Foreign Affairs* in 2006 – *Latin America's Left Turn: A Tale of Two Lefts* – made the intriguing observation that left-wing movements at that time on the continent were moving in two currents, one being weakly ideological and populist, the other having its roots in a more doctrinaire "hard-left" posture. It was the latter that was more open to reform and modernity (Castañeda, 2008).

Be aware, too, that this book is not always easy reading, despite its relative brevity (94 pages, including copious notes, as well as introductory material). Page after page is devoted to the formulae Stankov uses to make his correlations. This demonstrates scholarly integrity but will be of limited interest to readers more concerned with his conclusions.

For those seeking insights into populism in Africa, this book is compromised by the rather narrow set of countries used for the analysis. This makes it for the most part a study of populism among wealthier societies, and it's by no means apparent that this would be applicable to less developed societies, with their own sets of dynamics.

Would the stress that Stankov sets on austerity be equally applicable to countries in which welfare measures are limited or less institutionalised? At first glance, perhaps not. It cannot be presumed that austerity would upset long-established social agreements in countries around Africa, as it would in Western Europe. It might be that the promise of better life circumstances constitutes a pillar of the implied political bargain in the democratic transitions of developing countries. If that is the case, the withdrawal (real or threatened), or the prospect of the non-extension of such welfare measures as may exist might in fact play a significant political role in African politics. One thinks, for example of South Africa's social grant to millions of people who live in poverty; it is likely that a sudden withdrawal of these payments would have a serious impact on the country's already fragile social stability. These are hypotheses that might fruitfully be explored.

Indeed, there is polling evidence that the prospect of an authoritarian government that delivers material upliftment holds considerable attraction in South Africa (with which the reviewer is most familiar), as well as elsewhere in Africa; this despite a general normative preference for democracy. However, this is a possible condition for a populist outcome, not an inevitable one. Rhetorically at least, the alternative to democracy is a sort of developmental authoritarianism, with China as the exemplar (Matfess, 2015; Yang, 2016).

Would it perhaps make sense to speak of a distinctly African variant of populism? Danielle Resnick has argued that populist strategies on the continent consist of charismatic leadership appealing to a coalition of the urban and rural poor (Resnick, 2010). This happens in the context where party systems tend not to generate distinct and competing programmes. Moreover, populism in other parts of the world is associated with political outsiders, while its proponents in countries on the African continent tend to be based in existing political establishments. Jacob Zuma, for example, enjoyed a long career in the African National Congress (ANC) before his rise to power as president of the country. Raila Odinga in Kenya established himself as a national figure long before his (failed) presidential bid during the recent elections.

Moreover, Resnick suggests that a key aspect of African populism is based on appeals to ethno-linguistic identity. In this respect, the African experience

might have some overlap with the ausime scheme – specifically, the migration elements. However, it's questionable whether this represents a strictly comparable phenomenon. Many of Africa's states have had to contend with long-running and debilitating ethnic divides since independence, without the institutional resilience to mediate them. By contrast, the selection of countries used for Stankov's analysis includes several that have historically been largely homogenous. In such countries the political salience of migration, and especially of migration perceived to be culturally alien, is obvious, although some of them at least have been able to develop the institutions to provide some management of diversity. An interesting related question, then, would be whether a history of ethnic diversity predating significant migration would have an impact on the populist impulse in any of the countries included in Stankov's panel.

Taking this a little further, if populism can be seen as a response to stresses in a society, there might be a case for looking at governance dysfunction as a driver. Much African political discourse revolves around a sometimes untidy and indistinct demand for accountability combined with condemnations of elite corruption. In South Africa, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) – a group whose platform and conduct are frequently described as populist – latched onto the malfeasance associated with former president Zuma and the ANC as a central part of their message and offering. Ironically, at the same time, credible allegations of corruption have been made against the EFF leadership. It seems plausible that a compromised or malfunctioning institutional system would provide an attractive ecosystem for populism. It would be an interesting – and possibly revealing – endeavour to correlate populism with something like the Governance Effectiveness Index or the Corruption Perceptions Index. This might be a particularly valuable approach to understanding populism in Africa.

In sum, scholars of politics will find much to commend this book. Scholars of African governance and politics will find a useful resource, but one that has a certain inspirational or persuasive quality, rather than direct analytical value in the African context. Possibly its most valuable contribution is that it provides the interested reader with food for thought for further investigation.

At one point in his book, Stankov remarks: "The observations presented here are more suitable for asking the right questions than for giving the correct answer." (Stankov, 2021, p. 51). This might well serve as the subheading of almost any attempt to wrestle with populism. As I remarked at the beginning of this review, this situation is not dissimilar from a reading of a text by Kafka, with all its subtleties, nuances and internal contradictions. Populism as a concept is easy to grasp, but difficult to understand. This work is an admirable and valuable

attempt to get to grips with an important phenomenon of the present. It advances but by no means concludes the conversation.

Biographical details

Terence Corrigan is the project manager at the Institute of Race Relations (IRR), where he specialises in work on property rights, as well as land and mining policy. A native of KwaZulu-Natal, he is a graduate of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Pietermaritzburg). He has held various positions at the IRR, the South African Institute of International Affairs, SBP (formerly the Small Business Project) and the Gauteng Legislature – as well as having taught English in Taiwan. He is a regular commentator in the South African media and his interests include African governance, land and agrarian issues, political culture and political thought, corporate governance, enterprise and business policy.

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