Review Essay

Paolo Gerbaudo. *The Mask and the Flag: Populism, Citizenism and Global Protest*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 256pp. ISBN: 9780190491567. \$21.95 paperback.

Benjamin Moffitt. *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016. 240pp. ISBN: 9780804796132. \$24.95 cloth.

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These two books address the global resurgence of populism in very different ways. Moffitt's book is an exploration of the notoriously slippery *concept* of populism, hard to define because it takes such protean forms. Gerbaudo's is an analysis of the wave of popular protest movements that has roiled countries round the world in recent years.

Moffitt rejects (pp. 17–25) four extant explanations of populism – that it is: *an ideology* (too 'thin,' he says, to be theoretically useful); *a strategy* (of personalistic leaders regarding disorganized followers, yet some populist groups are highly organized); *a discourse* (emphasis on speech or text overlooking expressive elements beyond speech); or *a political logic* (following Ernesto Laclau who argued that the ontological structure of *all* politics is division between two antagonistic groups).

Moffitt rejects Laclau's broad sweep because it conflates different forms of politics, noting empirical counterexamples of contemporary political movements that attempted to disavow the 'populist logic' – Zapatistas, Occupy, *indignados* etc. – a point I'll return to when discussing Gerbaudo's book. Laclau's account is applauded, however, for seeing populism as something that is *done*, a political practice in which 'the people' is not a pre-existent entity but brought into being through a process of naming, performance and articulation.

This leads Moffitt to understand populism as a performative *political style* that can be used by a wide range of actors in different political contexts. Drawing empirically from acknowledged populisms, he discerns what he claims are the three main features of this style: an appeal to 'the people' let down or ripped off by 'an elite' who induce crisis, corruption and dysfunctionality; 'bad manners,' a coarsening of accepted modes of discourse that appeals to 'the people's' common sense; and 'crisis, breakdown and threat' that populists promise swiftly to address.

Moffitt claims that seeing populism as a performative style delinks the concept from particular ideologies, and also from any particular form of organization. It also allows us to see populism as a gradational rather than a binary concept, with political actors able to access a range of actions as it suits them along a spectrum from populist to technocratic style (characterized by appeal to expertise, 'good manners,' stability and progress). Even 'conventional' politicians can thus resort to the populist style when convenient. Emphasizing style also makes sense of the frequent complaint that populism 'lacks substance,' style being generally counterposed to substance. And finally, the style approach brings out the inherent *theatricality* of populist performance.

For Moffitt the key performers are *leaders*, whose tricky task is to play a representative role by balancing extraordinariness (strong leadership, even messianism) with ordinariness (just one of the people), the latter often through displaying bad manners. He especially emphasizes the importance of crisis, arguing that this is not simply external but a 'central core' of populism, as leaders seek to 'spectacularize' crisis and present themselves as the sovereign voice of the people in addressing it.

Moffitt claims his style approach vaults over the problematic relationship of populism with democracy by displaying both the democratic and undemocratic tendencies *within* populism. His answer to whether populism is or is not democratic is: 'it depends' – on context and how tendencies in tension and often in conflict play out in practice.

Moffitt suggests his populist style might usefully be compared with other political styles, including the 'post-representative' style of the Occupy and 15-M movements which (along with the whole array of similar movements) are the subject of Gerbaudo's excellent and very wide-ranging theoretical and empirical analysis. Gerbaudo's work, however, constitutes an implicit critique of Moffitt, for he describes these movements precisely as *populist*. Indeed he offers an extended defense of this normally pejorative term and its progressive history (pp. 70–77), and criticizes those who would reduce it to a 'style,' denying it positive content. "The kernel of populism, be it left-wing or right-wing," he writes, "is the principle of 'popular sovereignty,' according to which the People are the source of power, and government should act in the People's interests" (p.74).

Certainly the new 'movements of the squares' cherished a strong conception of popular sovereignty, their aim being to reclaim democracy from oligarchies monopolizing public power. However they departed from traditional forms of populism by adding a 'libertarian twist.' Gerbaudo describes them as 'neo-populist' or 'anarcho-populist,' "populist in content, but neo-anarchist in form" (p. 17). The hybrid political culture they created he calls *citizenism*, the anarchist

element residing in a preference for horizontal, non-hierarchical forms of (leaderless) organization.

Gerbaudo provides an enlightening comparative analysis of anti-globalist anarchist organizations and the new movements. While anarchists oppose the state as the enemy and strive to maintain their autonomy from it, leading to an exclusivist internal culture or counter-culture, the new movements seek to democratize the state and thus want as many citizens as possible to join. Such success as they have enjoyed came from just such open organization and broad mobilization. The emphasis is not on class or gender or cultural identity but on a mass of *citizens* opposing a usurping oligarchy that conventional parties and unions have either failed to curb or even enabled. This move puts ‘the nation,’ rather than cosmopolitan alternatives, back at the heart of the political enterprise. The traditionally conservative notion of citizenship is thus transformed into “a majoritarian and counter-hegemonic politics of radical citizenship aiming at achieving social and institutional change” from the bottom up (p. 9).

Gerbaudo is a conscientious, often personally involved guide to the various movements of the squares – Tahrir Square in Cairo, Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Syntagma Square in Athens, Zuccotti Park in New York, Taksim Square in Istanbul, the Avenida Paulista in São Paulo, and Place de République in Paris – and of their strategies of mobilization and outreach, their use of publicly visible protest camps as arenas of popular communion and participation, and their internal organization and decision-making as well as their eventual political outcomes. He concludes that the movements at their height in late 2011 enjoyed some triumphant moments and aroused great enthusiasm, but also eventually produced disappointment and depression. Even where one succeeded in bringing about dramatic change, as in Egypt, the aftermath was bitter. They flared like wildfires and, no doubt inevitably, flamed out, yet not without leaving significant political traces, giving rise to new parties capable of competing politically, like Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece, or injecting renewed progressive life into old parties like Labour in Britain and the Democrats in the US. At the very least they helped change political discourse, putting economic inequality at center-stage.

But what in the end are we to conclude about populism generally from these two works? First, if we accept Gerbaudo’s centrality of popular sovereignty then Moffitt’s political style interpretation, aimed at accommodating populism’s variegated manifestations, seems inadequate. Margaret Canovan once argued that democracy has two faces, one pragmatic, the other redemptive; when at critical junctures pragmatic democratic-politics-as-usual seems to fail a majority, then the desire for redemptive democracy kicks in, making the possibility of populism (in whatever form) a permanent feature. This seems right. Reducing populism to

a style fails to take quite seriously the political passions, dissatisfactions and beliefs, however disparate, that typically drive it. Moffitt's generalized features of populist style are drawn from its plainly demagogic forms, with bad-mannered leaders like the current US president as key 'performers' (but is Bernie Sanders 'bad mannered'?). It follows for Moffitt that the new movements cannot be populist because of their antipathy to leadership, but to portray them as thus choosing a particular 'political style' seems to trivialize the political reasoning involved. Perfectly aware of the demagogic dangers of populist movements and wishing to instate a purer form of popular sovereignty based on participatory direct democratic decision-making, the movements sought to eliminate leaders.

And yet their very resistance to leadership evinced a perennial conundrum at the heart of egalitarian politics since ancient Athens, one which may be managed but never fully resolved: democracy needs leaders but leaders inevitably threaten democracy. Gerbaudo's chapter on 'The People's Parliament' (pp. 181–205) reveals the strenuous efforts that the movements took to remain decentralized, diffused, participatory and consensus-based, and the counter-vailing pressures for efficient action, effective decision-making and the ability to 'speak with one voice' that led inexorably to a centralization of binding authority in a particular organ. And it is notable that where non-traditional party movements have recently succeeded politically, principal attention (and power) has devolved upon a leader – Emmanuel Macron in France's *La République En Marche!*, Sebastian Kurz in Austria's New People's Party, and Beppe Grillo in Italy's Five Star Movement. When Podemos Secretary-General Pablo Iglesias was criticised by activists for 'hyper-leadership,' he responded that "one cannot storm heaven by consensus."

Traditional liberal democratic parties addressed this problem with a variety of institutional mechanisms of election, recall, accountability, checks-and-balances and so on whose aim was to secure the efficient benefits of leadership while containing its dangers, an eternal balancing act playing out variously in various contexts. In large and complex democracies where continuing direct citizen participation seemed unfeasible, leadership itself was displaced by the less offensive notion of 'representation' (variously understood), though the central dilemma of freedom and control remained. But the problem becomes especially acute when, not just leaders, but parties *as a whole* seem to fail in their representation of popular opinions and demands, to have drifted into the orbit of more immediately powerful social and economic forces. This is precisely the crisis of legitimacy that has overtaken long-established parties in OECD countries around the world and provided the impetus for displacing 'movements' of either right or left, whether within old parties or outside.

But having displaced parties, movements immediately confront more acutely the ancient problem of leadership and the extent of authority and control leaders are to be permitted. The two broad choices seem to be: grudging acceptance of leadership combined with continuing suspicion and whatever institutional controls may be devised to preserve the spirit of 'true' democracy; or willing surrender to the leadership ethos or mystique for the sake of the mandated ends the leader promises and seems able to fulfill (an alternative view of the democratic imperative). This is the populist contest that is underway in Europe and elsewhere and we do not know what its eventual outcome(s) will be, though historical precedent may give us pause.

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