Introduction

Andrés Velasco and Irene Bucelli

In 1969, an influential volume arising from a conference at LSE began with a declaration phrased to echo Marx and Engels: 'A spectre is haunting the world: the spectre of populism' [1]. More than half a century has gone by, and the warning remains timely. Donald Trump may be gone from the White House, but populism is still a powerful force in world politics. From Mexico City to Manila and Mumbai, from Budapest to Brasilia and Buenos Aires, and from Ankara to certain party offices in Amsterdam and Athens, Warsaw and Washington, both the right-wing and the left-wing varieties of populism are alive and kicking.

Once an intensely contested concept, the meaning of 'populism' has recently stabilised. Jan Werner Müller defines populism as 'a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified … people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior [2].' Very much along the same lines, according to Mudde populism is 'first and foremost, a set of ideas focused on a fundamental opposition between the people and the elite' and arguing for implementing something like a 'general will' of the people [3]. Framed in this way the populist label can apply to social movements, parties or political leaders. Recent years have witnessed an

upsurge in populist phenomena in many countries, raising questions about how they should be understood. Are the causes of populism economic or cultural? National or local? Is populism a threat to liberal democracy? If so, what kind of threat? And what can be done about it? This book brings together authors from a range of disciplinary perspectives, employing a variety of methods, to tackle these thorny issues.

One widely endorsed explanation of the populist surge focuses on economic insecurity as a root cause. Andrés Velasco opens the book by addressing the shortcomings of this view, with its implication that fixing the economy will result in an automatic setback for populism. This explanation has weak empirical foundations, since populism has surged in countries that can be considered clear winners from globalisation. It also assumes a simplistic, automatic relationship between economic changes and political outcomes. Exploring the debate between the 'cultural backlash' and the 'economic insecurity' hypotheses, the chapter underscores the mediating role played by identity in shaping the relationship between economics and politics. The key policy upshot from this analysis is that liberal politicians need to 'practice identity politics' in ways that promote values such as liberty, dignity, and mutual respect – providing an expansive definition of the shared 'we' in society, in contrast to the divisive 'us' versus 'them' rhetoric promoted by populists.

The recent populist surge in Europe and North America is often coupled with warnings that 'democracy is dying'. But does mechanically linking populism and democratic decline make sense? Michael Ignatieff suggests that we need to understand the recent populist challenges to representative government and

the rule of law within the normal functioning of democracy. Populism can surely give rise to bad politics and policies. But it can also accelerate renewal in democratic systems, signalling wide discontent on issues on that otherwise often remain overlooked. Rather than necessarily being a sign of democratic collapse, some degree of conflict should be recognised as a constituent and necessary part of liberal democracy. Yet, of course, populist episodes do not always end well. In some cases that Ignatieff documents, populists have succeeded at dismantling the checks and balances needed for a functioning democracy. Here, instead of democratic renewal the result is a descent into authoritarian rule.

Within Europe Sara Hobolt and Catherine De Vries emphasise that the recent success of populist parties is not a new phenomenon, nor is it historically anomalous. It is useful to view populist parties as part of a broader group of 'challenger parties', new entrants that seek to disrupt the dominance of established 'mainstream' parties and have not yet played a role in shaping public policies. Both populists and challengers use anti-establishment rhetoric, issue entrepreneurship, unconventional modes of organising, digital campaigning and other similar strategies. Looking at populism in this way suggests three possible scenarios for the future of European party systems. They may fragment into smaller units as innovative challenger or populist parties gain traction. Alternatively, the new parties may overtake the previously established or dominant parties, replacing them completely – a rare event so far in Europe, but still feasible. Finally, the established parties may reinvent their appeal or organisation to counteract new entrants, in the process

taking up parts of the themes previously associated with populist or challenger parties.

The role played by social media in fuelling the recent populist surge is another much-debated phenomenon, which Gilat Levy and Ronny Razin explore from a new angle, relying on insights from behavioural economics. Most voters are unable to process large amounts of data and can fall into a particular bias called 'correlation neglect', which is a propensity to treat information sources as if they are (conditionally) independent. This effect contributes to polarisation and at the same time increases the randomness and unpredictability of moderate voters' voting behaviour. These findings are consistent with new data on the evolution of US voters' opinions in the last five decades, which show a significant change in the trajectory of the opinions of moderates versus extreme voters starting in the mid-1990s. This is consistent with the rise in the ability of campaigns to target voters through social media, exacerbating voters' tendency to move into echo chambers and increasing the risk of political polarisation.

Local politics and uneven regional development played an important role in the populist surge, and the last two chapters of the book focus down on how this phenomenon operated in developed countries. The once prosperous but now 'left-behind places' that have experienced long-term economic and demographic decline form the focus of Andrés Rodríguez-Pose's geographical analysis, which goes beyond the characteristics of individual voters. The discontent behind populist voting does not result simply from growing economic vulnerability, but also from people's anger at their loss of status, and the perception that residents of left-behind places are considered 'expendable'. This 'geography

of discontent' offers a more accurate explanation of recent trends, argues Rodríguez-Pose, than analyses connecting populism's ascent to growing intrapersonal inequalities. This has clear consequences for policy: addressing the causes of anti-system voting requires re-thinking strong place-based policies.

The digital revolution in information technologies has spatial consequences, argues David Soskice in his chapter on England's weak regional- and city-level policies, and they in turn help explain the rise of populistic politics. Reducing the allure of populism requires a transformation of left-behind places, which in turn requires policy changes like a more interventionist approach to higher education management and introducing arms-length regulation over a private sector focused only on maximising shareholder value. Policy in England is still largely made in Westminster despite the new city-regions architecture now emerging. Policy ought to restart the 'transmission belt' of the ICT revolution, developing long-term plans based on city-regional agglomerations, with networks linking knowledge-based companies, research universities and city-regional administrations, and travel-to-work areas incorporating those 'places that don't matter'.

All the chapters here relate to very recent phenomena that are still rapidly evolving, and the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020–22 has changed or at least wobbled the picture significantly. Some recent analysis suggests that the challenges of dealing with the pandemic have reduced the appeal of populist parties and leaders in liberal democratic countries [4]. And indeed, many populist leaders grossly mishandled responding to coronavirus, and their popularity suffered as a result – among them Donald Trump in

the United States, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico, and Narendra Modi in India.

But the conclusion that the Covid-19 pandemic put an end to the populist pandemic may well prove premature. Populist movements, parties and politicians are particularly adept at manipulating and changing the narrative. Many of the 70 million Americans who voted to re-elect Donald Trump also believed that China, rather than failings in US policies, was to blame for the persistence of contagion in their homes and neighbourhoods. Moreover, satisfaction with the workings of democracy continues to erode in many countries, and that provides fodder for populists, both now and in the future. This will not be the last book seeking to ascertain both the causes and the consequences of populism. What the inter-disciplinary approach used here highlights is that the social sciences must 'scale up' and link across single disciplinary siloes if we are to understand and address the populist challenge to the stability of liberal democracies.

Original versions of these chapters were commissioned for an issue of LSE Public Policy Review (https://ppr.lse.ac.uk), a journal that encourages inter-disciplinary commentary on contemporary issues, based on frontier-level research. Some updates to the chapters have been made since they were first published in 2020 to reflect subsequent events.

References

1.   Ionescu, G. and Gellner, E. *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics*. New York: Macmillan; 1969.

2. Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

3. Mudde, C. Populism in the Twenty-First Century: An Illiberal Democratic Response to Undemocratic Liberalism. Paper from Andrea Mitchell Centre for the Study of Democracy; 2022. Available from: https://amc.sas.upenn.edu/cas-mudde-populism -twenty-first-century

4. Foa, R.S., Romero-Vidal, X., Klassen, A.J., Fuenzalida Concha, J., Quednau, M. and Fenner, L.S. *The Great Reset: Public Opinion, Populism, and the Pandemic*. Cambridge, UK: Bennett Institute for Public Policy. Report; 2022. Available from: https://www.bennett institute.cam.ac.uk/publications/great-reset/