

The Populist Century: History, Theory, Critique

Pierre Rosanvallon, translated by Catherine Porter.

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The Populist Century is Pierre Rosanvallon's most comprehensive study of populism, one that simultaneously probes the phenomenon's anatomy, its historical origins, and its relationship with representative democracy. As such, it is both a work of conceptual clarification and critique. From the outset, the French political historian is rather unsparing of fellow populism scholars: To him existing studies of populism are confined to exploring the 'underpinnings' of the populist vote. The typologies of populist movements constructed by comparativists are disparaged as a 'list without rhyme or reason' (2021: 2, 3).

Despite such criticisms the anatomy of populism advanced in Part I of *The Populist Century* is remarkably consistent with the state of the art in contemporary populism scholarship. Populism, so Rosanvallon, entails a conception of the people as a singular body, a theory of democracy that is direct, polarized and immediate, the people's embodiment by an individual leader, a security-seeking politics of protectionism and a skilful appeal to the passions and emotions of those disenchanted with representation by conventional political parties. Individually, each of these purported characteristics of populism has been widely studied. Rosanvallon, nonetheless, adds important nuances to the existing debates. For instance, he enriches discussions of the populist notion of the people as a homogenous and unified body by distinguishing between the people as a civic body (i.e., the people of a nation, a general and somewhat abstract category) and the people as a social group (with discernible characteristics). While these categories are distinct, their shared association with a common narrative and vision of democracy, both as a political regime and a form of society, allows populists to conflate the latter group with the former and, thus, to delimit the people from its enemies (on this process see Laclau, 2005).

Rosanvallon's analysis of the adverse effects of populism in power is consistent with insights in Jan Werner Mueller's 2016 book *What Is Populism?* – especially populists' tendency to weaken, politicise and dismantle ostensibly nonpartisan intermediary institutions, such as constitutional courts. Rosanvallon situates his analysis in a robust defence of the liberal elements of representative democracy, which act as guarantors of the 'power of anyone' against the tyranny of majorities (2021: 130). His

staunch defence of liberalism and his association of populism with the perpetual risk of ‘democratorship’ puts Rosanvallón at odds with populism scholars such as Laclau and Mouffe, who take seriously the potential of populism to revitalise democracy. Adding to this disagreement, Rosanvallón stresses what he views as the overwhelming consistencies between rightist and leftist populism, phenomena distinguishable – so Rosanvallón – primarily because of their stance towards migrants and refugees.

The history of populism at the heart of Part II of *The Populist Century* is distinctive both in its strong focus on French political history dating back to Rousseau, Robespierre and Napoleon III and its focus, less on widely acknowledged examples of populism, than on their proto-populist precursors. Rosanvallón’s account identifies the years between 1890 and 1914 as a double turning point, in which in early globalisation and the first crises of the democratic model would confront national protectionism and a belief in referenda as a ‘panacea’ for the ‘flaws and failures of the representative system’ (2021: 74).

I would argue that Rosanvallón’s strongest contribution is neither the anatomy of populism in Part I nor the history of populism in Part II of *The Populist Century*. Rather, what makes Rosanvallón’s account of populism stand out is its articulation of populism with the structural challenges confronting representative democracy (a project that dates back, at least, to his essay on LePen and the National Front in 1988, see Selinger, 2020). As a student of the late Claude Lefort, Rosanvallón has written extensively about the indeterminacy of the political, a result of what Lefort refers to as the ‘empty space’ at the heart of democracy. Lefort and Rosavallón recognise the importance of intermediary institutions to compensate for the inadequacies of electoral representation (because of its intermittent nature and the lack of distinctive options that citizens are, at times, confronted with). These institutions are weakened by the increased individualisation of society and a shift from party democracy to what Manin referred to as audience democracy – a system in which political parties exercise a diminished role and in which political leaders appeal directly to individual voters (1997). Populism for Rosanvallón is closely connected to the decline of intermediary parties and unions. Populists address resultant crises of representation by promising “true” political representation, through a single leader who embodies a unified people and takes on the corruption of the existing political order.

The *Populist Century* ends with several proposed remedies to the inadequacies of contemporary democratic representation. What Rosanvallón refers to as ‘interactive democracy’ would go beyond elections to better engage with citizens, for instance, by putting their own experienced realities centre stage (2021: 156). These expressive elements of representation might be augmented by giving individuals a direct say on politics through citizens councils. Rather than simplifying popular sovereignty into populist dualisms between us and them, Rosanvallón invites us to hazard a more complex form of people power that combines notions of the ‘power of no one’ and the ‘power of anyone at all.’ Multi-faceted and challenging, *The Populist Century* is important reading for scholars of populism and democracy alike.

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