**The Progressive Case for Populism**

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BOOK REVIEWED: *Performing Left Populism: Performance, Politics and the People*, edited by Goran Petrovic Lotina and Théo Aiolfi. London, Methuen Drama, 2023

Many mainstream political commentators use “populism” as a pejorative term to evoke images of thoughtless mobs dazzled by politicians offering simple solutions to complex problems (“Build the wall!”). This edited volume of essays challenges this caricature of anti-democratic politics by using performance studies as a critical lens to examine the progressive uses of populist discourse and embodied representations of disruptive politics. The editors Goran Pertrovic Lotina and Théo Aiolfi convincingly argue that the rise of the far-right in Europe and North and South America in the 2010s has led to political science scholarship becoming myopically focused on fascist and other rightwing authoritarian iterations of populism. Populism is not an inherently reactionary or oppressive set of ideas and values. As a performative mode of politics that articulates ideology as performance, it seeks to shape new subjectivities by embodying radical change outside official democratic systems.

Reid Kleinberg’s comparison between the 2016 Presidential campaigns of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump illustrates how both politicians built vibrant insurgent movements by designating Washington as a corrupt system run by a political class who no longer represented the interests of the American public, despite the profound ideological differences of the two leaders. The promise of change articulated by Trump and Sanders served to unite diverse grievances and demands through the performative naming of the public into “the people” and “the elite.” This articulation activates the mobilization of a collective consciousness sustained by a belief that they – the “people” who sit outside and beyond centers of power – can participate in the creation of a future yet to be determined. All of the authors in this volume ably show how this foundational dichotomy allows populist politicians to configure perceptions of who or what represents the greatest block to meaningful change in their lives. For the Sanders campaign and other leftwing movements, Lotina and Aiolfi's definition of populism as a style that constructs a people “through the ritualized performativity of knowledge”[[1]](#endnote-1) enables marginalized identities to demand recognition as political subjects who assemble to transmit knowledge of social injustice to the wider public.

The argument that populist politics are inherently performative holds important lessons for how the left can deploy spectacles of outrage, defiance, mockery, and anger to identify the causes of public disaffection and alienation and, in more explicitly anti-democratic, authoritarian contexts, the sources of oppression and persecution, in order to build committed coalitions of activists and voters. Drawing on theories of performativity in the work of JL Austin, Judith Butler, Erving Goffman, Ernesto Laclau, and Richard Schechner, the editors interrogate how populism describes a “style” not a political philosophy or codified set of beliefs and objectives. Each of the seven chapters address how the populist style manifests as political events (rallies, social media campaigns, protests, festivals); in language (the use of slang, catch-phrases, swearing, and pop culture references in speeches and interviews); and non-normative appearance (Volodymyr Zelensky’s ubiquitous combat fatigues, for example) which represent and, in terms of their performativity, activate a disruption of the status quo. Building on the work of political scientist Benjamin Moffit, who states that populism as a performative style “relies on the symbolic performance of crisis”[[2]](#endnote-2) Lotina and Aiolfi also turn to performance studies for what they consider to be its historical links with othered and minority communities and non-conformist and transgressive sub-cultures. The innate radicalism of performance studies as a discipline requires further explication to be convincing. Further, whilst the subjects of investigation performance scholars attend to may (but not inevitably) be othered and exist on the margins of society, the methods of analysis and formats by which knowledge claims are traditionally disseminated align closely with other academic disciplines.

Investigating the affectivity of populist performances on political discourse is the most valuable application of performance studies to an investigation into the progressive potentials of the populist style. The volume proffers a definition of populist performativity as an articulation of democratic crisis through the embodiment of an antagonistic identity. This critical framework enables the authors to locate pertinent contemporary instances where left populism is practiced in Argentina, Spain, Peru, Ukraine, and Bolivia. This international perspective allows the reader to identify consistent motifs in the populist style with the book’s emphasis on the importance of theatrical representation in political discourse as opposed to the specific ideological terrain of a specific performance's occurrence.

Only two chapters, by performance scholars Sam Cermak and Danae Theodoridou, include theatrical case studies. This may make it difficult for theatre and performance academics and students to immediately understand the relevance of the relatively dense political science content to their field without a more explicit interdisciplinary framing. Many of the authors do not reference performance studies scholarship, which also limits the potential to expand disciplinary horizons. The does, however, have the potential advantage of demonstrating to political scientists, sociologists, and media studies scholars the epistemological value of using performance studies to understand how the performative materiality of ideology operates in contemporary politics. Moreover, the analysis of the populist style regarding the representation of the people and the promise of change through the embodiment of a leadership rooted in the lives of ordinary people highlights the importance of role-play in establishing closely empathetic relationships with the public.

Alina Mozolevska identifies how fashion and social media help to create this emotional connection by citing the co-founder of Spain’s Podemos Party, Pablo Iglesias. Iglesias’s signature open-necked shirt and ponytail projected an image of ordinariness that, conversely, also signaled his exceptionalism from the grey suited political class Podemos was seeking to overthrow. President Zelensky’s former career as a successful actor provides a further fascinating case study in the same chapter. The public’s knowledge of Zelensky’s politics was indissociable from the fictional politician he played in the highly successful Ukrainian sitcom *Servant of the People* (2015-19). The anti-elitist platform he won the presidency on was a further enunciation of his television performance. Zelensky represents the hyperreal identity all successful populists must embody if they are to successfully play the role of the familiar outsider, as Maria Esperanza Casullo states: “The followers must believe not only that the leader is one of them, that they share their demands and aspirations, but that they are at one and the same time exceptional in that they have the superhuman ability to bring those aspirations to fruition.”[[3]](#endnote-3)Assembling in semi-choreographed events creates anti-elitist sentiments amongst participants who embody an anti-elitist style by “[c]onstantly breaking the rules and performing ordinariness on the political stage.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Casullo compellingly outlines the duality of leaders who perform the populist style with reference to South American politicians Evo Morales, Alejandro Toledo, and Pedro Castillo.

Sam Cermak's insightful analysis of Alex Mlynarcik's Happenings in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the former Czechoslovakia demonstrates the value of incorporating performance studies into theories of leftwing populism by positioning performance as a rehearsal for the kinds of futures populist leaders promise they will create. Understanding participatory performance forms like Happenings as iterations of the populist style shifts the emphasis away from individualistic notions of leadership and rhetoric towards notions of populism as a means of experiencing joy and happiness – feelings sorely lacking in the present era of permacrises – through the co-creation of possible utopian societies. Writing on a similar theme, Danae Theodoridou considers the uses of participatory performance as a vehicle to reinvent how democracy can be practiced. Her ongoing project *The Practice of Democracy/An Analogue Campaign* (2019-) theatricalizes political debate, languages of protest, and public speaking to position embodied encounters in public spaces as a vital means for citizens to engage with local and global polities. Performance, she argues, turns space into a “commons”[[5]](#endnote-5) that the participant-citizen can only stake a claim to through their presence. Transforming public spaces into avatars of alternative social and economic systems is a feature of the leftwing populist movements spawned in the wake of the 2008 financial crash. As Anton Jäger states, these movements did not achieve long-term political aims because their activism was disconnected from the materialist and class analysis fundamental to leftwing ideology.[[6]](#endnote-6) The political utility of the dialogue Cermak and Theodoridou proffer as a progressive expression of populism rests in evoking the immanence or possibility of changing society through social relationships but is not sufficient in itself to bring about that change *sans* ideological structures and programmatic dismantling of capitalist hegemony.

*Performing Left Populism* will ignite lively debates concerning the role performance studies can play in political science scholarship and media analysis of current affairs. Situating performance – in the broadest sense of the word – as a vital practice of civic engagement undergoing a messy yet vibrant revival in reaction against the technocratic, neoliberal orthodoxy which has dominated western public discourse for over four decades, is its most significant contribution to cross-disciplinary political scholarship. While more work is needed to foreground performance studies theories in the analysis of unorthodox and non-conformist expressions of democratic participation and political antagonism, Lotina and Aiolfi have done an admirable job of laying the groundwork for further research into the radical potentials of populism for the internationalist left.

1. Goran Petrovic Lotina and Théo Aiolfi, “Introduction,” *Performing Left Populism: Performance, Politics and the People* (2023), 10 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Goran Petrovic Lotina and Théo Aiolfi, “Introduction,” *Performing Left Populism: Performance, Politics and the People* (2023), 7  [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Maria Esperanza Casullo, “The Democratic Productivity of Populist Bodily Representation,” *Performing Left Populism: Performance, Politics and the People* (2023), 77 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Alina Mozolevska, “Performing the People: Discourses and Performances of Pablo Iglesias and Volodymyr Zelensky,” *Performing Left Populism: Performance, Politics and the People* (2023), 113 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Danae Theodoridou, “Left Populism and the Revival of Demos through Performance: Four Tasks for Practicing Democracy,” *Performing Left Populism: Performance, Politics and the People* (2023), 169 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Anton Jäger & Vincent Bevins, “2010-2020: The Decade of Discontent,” *The Verso Podcast*, accessed 7 February 2024 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)