

BOOK REVIEWS

John B. Judis, *The Populist Explosion. How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*, New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016, 182 pages

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Debates on populism have intensified in recent years, with the rise of populism movements that are a challenge to political stability and democracy across Europe and in the United States. As political scientist Cas Mudde points out (in his book *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge University Press, 2007), in its original form, populism is an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups- “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”- and argues that politics should be an expression of the “general will” of the people. And if until couple of years ago there was a consensus among elites on the left and right that populism is inherently bad, more recently there are voices arguing that populism is good for democracy (and eventually it is liberalism that is the real problem).

The book of John B. Judis, *The Populist Explosion. How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*, briefly review here, is very useful for understanding the significance of populism, its roots, how it appears on the left and on the right and how it works. The book is structured in six chapters, examining the rise and the spread of populism in the United States and European countries. In introduction, trying to answer the questions “What is populism and why is it important?”, the author emphasizes that populism cannot be defined in terms of right, left of center, because “it is not an ideology, but a political logic- a way of thinking about the politics” (p. 14). There are rightwing, leftwing and centrist populist parties. An important feature of the populist parties is that they often function as warning signs of political crisis, arising in circumstances when people



see the prevailing political norms as being in contradiction with their hopes, fears and concerns. The populists express the neglected concerns and frame them in a politics that puts the people against intransigent elite, becoming thus catalysts for political change. Problems as increased immigration (seen seedbed of crime and terror) or protection of workers against global capitalism are taken by populists who give voice to people's concerns. They signal that the prevailing political ideology is not working and needs repair and the standard worldview is breaking down.

The author tackles the subject in its historical perspective, explaining how a kind of populist politics that originated in the United States in the nineteenth century has recurred in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and in the 1970s began to appear in Western Europe. He emphasizes that American Populism really begins with People's Party in 1890s, "the first major salvo against the worldview of *laissez-faire* capitalism", and continued in the twentieth century especially with the manifestations of the rightwing populism as George Wallace's presidential campaign in the 1960s, who created a variety of populism (called by sociologist Donald Warren "middle American radicalism") that would migrate into the Republican party and become the basis of Donald Trump's challenge to Republicans traditional supporters in 2016.

John B. Judis investigates the role of the 2008 economic recession in discrediting the neoliberal agenda, both in the United States and Europe. The global financial crisis, rooted in long-term, systemic problems, became visible in September 2008 when the New York investment bank Lehman Brothers had to close its doors. The crash helped elect Barack Obama, but he could not create a new enduring Democratic majority and almost immediately felt the pressure from a new populist movement on the right. The initiatives in his first year (especially the plan for national health insurance) addressed the needs of the lower-income groups, but didn't appear to offer as much to the middle class and spawned the Tea Party movement, which attacked neoliberalism from the far right. Later, in 2011, Obama had come under attack from the left for not moving aggressively against Wall Street. "We are the 99 percent that will no longer tolerate the greed and the corruption of the 1 percent"- was a slogan which framed the protest in populist terms, defining the movement as an attack on growing political and economic inequality (p. 60). The Occupy Wall Street movement had a huge symbolic impact, bringing to the fore the issue of political and economic inequality and inspiring the

populist parties in Greece and Spain.

The following chapters describe the rise of populism in Europe, where the first were rightwing populists, accusing the elites of coddling communists, welfare recipients or immigrants. In the last decade, leftwing populist parties have arisen in Spain, Greece and Italy, directing their anger against the establishment in their countries or against the European Union headquarters in Brussels. The author underlines that many populist organizations in Western Europe can trace their ancestry from the anti-tax groups of 1970s (which resemble the American anti-tax movement of those same years) and from nationalist organizations with questionable ties to former fascists and Nazis (p. 98). Many of them (e.g. The National Front in France, Danish People's Party, the Austrian Freedom Party, the Swiss People's Party, the Norwegian Progress Party), by electoral score, became players in Western European Politics. They turned their attention, starting with last two decades of twentieth century, from communism and taxes to immigration, widening their political base (given the growing popular disapproval of non-European immigrants and asylum seekers).

The Great Recession has led to rising unemployment, which has reached 11.4 percent as EU's average rate in 2012 and far worse in Southern Europe (reaching up to 25 percent in Spain and Greece). In these circumstances, a new leftwing populism emerged in Spain, Greece and Italy. Chapter five of the book ("The limits of leftwing populism: Syriza and Podemos") explores Syriza's ascent to power in Greece (with a message against the Troika- European Central Bank, International Monetary Fund and the EU ministers, led by Germany) and the success of a new party, Podemos (We Can), created in January 2014 in Spain (also an anti-austerity party contesting the EU's rules and the Spanish government's capitulation to them). Syriza abandoned its populist stance when it had to decide how to govern, becoming another left-center party with incremental ambitions, while Podemos turned to a center-left reformism no longer demanding a frontier between the people and "la casta".

The concluding chapter ("Past and future of populism") emphasizes the differences between populism today in the United States and Europe and the interwar fascist movements. While fascists and Nazis blamed democracy and sought to replace it with dictatorship, today's populist movements operate openly within the democratic electoral system, winning and losing power like normal parties. And while interwar populist movements were inherently expansionist,



today they are opposed to supranational formations and want to reassert national control of their currency, fiscal policy and borders. As foreign policy analyst George Friedman has pointed out, these movements are “nationalist as opposed to imperialist and globalist”. They exert a centrifugal rather than centripetal force on European and global politics.

The book ends with the warring conclusion that if the pressure that rightwing and leftwing populist parties have created on the European Union will grow (and could reach the point where several other countries besides Great Britain decide to bolt), then the European confederation, called by former American president Barack Obama “one of the greatest achievements of modern time” would suffer an attempt which could be fatal.