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BENJAMIN MOFFITT, *THE GLOBAL RISE OF POPULISM. PERFORMANCE, POLITICAL STYLE, AND REPRESENTATION*, PALO ALTO, STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016.

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During recent years, several countries have witnessed the rise of political movements and parties which question to some extent many of the conventional values and rules of liberal democracy. Frequently referred to as “populist” by the media, public intellectuals and by other, more traditional politicians, political forces such as MoVimento 5 Estelle in Italy and Podemos in Spain have been identified by many as a symptom of a deeper and more general crisis in contemporary democratic politics. And yet, despite the use of the same concept to describe them, differences among these so-called “populists” are sometimes remarkable: for instance, one could hardly put Evo Morales’ left-wing government in Bolivia, prone to economic redistribution and to the reinforcement of social and cultural rights, in the same group as Viktor Orbán’s right-wing and authoritarian administration in Hungary, fervently opposed to immigration and always keen to undermine minority rights. And the same goes for Cristina Kirchner’s government in Argentina, Marine Le Pen’s Front National in France and Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s party in Mexico. So, if the actors and forces that fall under this common dominator of “populism” are indeed so different and diverse, why use the same concept to name them? What is the content and the

utility of the concept of *populism* today? In other words, what does one say when one talks of “populism”?

Drawing from the existing literature in social sciences, Benjamin Moffitt’s book *The Global Rise of Populism* addresses this and other key questions, going beyond the purely nominal discussion and trying to reach an updated, complex and comprehensive definition of contemporary populism. The main hypothesis of the book is that populism today has been changed by the developments in new media technologies and by shifting modes of political representation and identification. As a result, the author claims, it is more productive to analyze the phenomenon not as a fixed entity, but rather as a political style that is performed, embodied and enacted across different contexts. This definition, he sustains, not only unifies the aesthetic, discursive and ideological dimension of politics, but it also allows for populism to be thought of as a truly *global* phenomenon, beyond regional variations.

The study has both a strong theoretical ambition as well as an aspiration to set a number of operational criteria on which a comparative approach to contemporary populism could be built. With that aim, the author deploys a two-phase analysis, starting with a conceptual and terminological

definition of the object and subsequently developing an inquiry of the main features of contemporary populism.

Firstly, Moffitt resorts to developments in the field of political theory and political sociology to develop a notion of populism capable of overcoming the biases and shortcomings of the existing literature. In the first chapters of the book, Moffitt builds on the thoughts of authors such as Cas Mudde, Kirk Hawkings, Ernesto Laclau, Pierre Taguieff, Robert Hariman, Frank Ankermit and Dick Pels to finally advance a concept of populism as *a political style* that is performed by different actors in different contexts. The advantage of such a focus, the author claims, is that it does not only overcome the limitations of previous notions that conceived it as either an ideology, a discourse or a political logic, but that it also recognizes the constructed character of political performance, something that the author considers of key importance due to the ever more mediatized character of today's politics". Secondly, after having established his theoretical premises, the author draws from an examination of twenty-eight cases of political leaders coming from North America, Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia that have commonly been identified as "populists" by the specialized literature in English language in order to establish the main features of contemporary populism.

To begin with, the author focuses on one of the most salient characteristics of populist politics: the supremacy of one central character, the political leader. According to Moffitt, these mediatized times make the leader the dominant character of populist politics and it is through him or her that one can determine some of the main characteristics of populism. Among others, the author underlines the constant tension that populist leaders have to deal with: having to show him or herself as ordinary and as part of "the people", for example through the use of "bad manners", and at the same time having to present himself as extraordinary, for instance through the exaltation of strength, power and virility.

Moreover, if the leader is the main character of the theatrical representation of populism, claims the author, the media should be considered its central stage, and a very wide one indeed. Moffitt holds that the use of the media and communication strategies by populist leaders should be in the center of our reflection on contemporary populism, especially due to the emergence of new decentralized media that allow for leaders to reach their audiences ("the people") in a low-cost and efficient manner. What is more, the author claims, the importance of the media in contemporary politics not only explains the intensive use and concern for the media by populist leaders, but also the tendency of many traditional and non-populist politicians to imitate or emulate features of populists in order to compete with populist leaders and try to increase their own popularity. At the same time, according to the author, the analysis of the media should go beyond the mere study of how leaders use and abuse political communication, and should in exchange scrutinize what he called "the process of mediation": in other words, the countless ways through which "the people" is rendered present in a never-ending process of representation that involves leaders, constituencies, audiences and media, and in which populists leaders and other political actors struggle over who "the people" actually are and what are their true aspirations.

Furthermore, Moffitt's study focuses on a key dimension of contemporary politics: the meaning and the role of crises in the political process. The author advances here an interesting and challenging notion: that crisis is thus not *external*, but *internal* to populism. According to Moffitt, a key component of contemporary populism is the ability of populist leaders to interpret certain political and economic failures as a "crisis" that demands their intervention, them being the spokesmen of the true "people" and the only ones capable of confronting "the elite" and any other actor that poses a threat to society. In other words, contrary to authors who view the emergence of populism as a result of a

preexistent crisis, the author proposes to analyze populism not as a consequence of crisis, but as its main performer.

Finally, the author also addresses one of the main debates surrounding populism: its unclear and controversial relation to democracy. As most of the literature has claimed, by underlining majoritarianism and the sovereignty of “the people”, populism can endanger the rights of the individual and thus democracy itself. At the same time, as other authors have noted, populism can be not only a threat, but also a corrective to democracy, since it encourages the participation of the masses in the political process. According to Moffitt, interpreting populism as a political style allows us to a certain extent to deconstruct these dilemmas and it allows us to see it as a phenomenon that is torn between two competing directions: it can both render politics more understandable for everyday citizens and offer effective critiques of the shortcomings of democratic systems, as it can also lead to a radical personalization of politics and deny the complexity of problems and offer simplistic solutions. The populist character of a political project, claims the author, actually tells us very little about its democratic content, and populism as a political style is thus able to endanger democracy as it is capable of making it richer and more inclusive.

The book *The Global Rise of Populism* certainly presents interesting and challenging debates regarding one of the mostly discussed political phenomena of our times. Nevertheless, in spite of the many virtues of Moffitt’s work, a number of problems arising from his treatment of populism should be underlined.

Firstly, one cannot but question the limited nature of his sources, which are composed exclusively of secondary sources in English. This poses at least two problems: one the one hand, analyzing a globally

extended phenomenon through the lens of only one language will inevitably lead to some degree of bias; on the other hand, aspiring to overcome the problems of the existing literature on the basis of a theoretical framework that builds exclusively on that same literature also seems methodologically unconvincing.

Secondly, another objection should be directed at one of the book’s fundamental hypothesis. The study is built on the notion that, since the media are much more developed now than ever before, and politics are to a large extent channeled through those media, politics have thus become more “stylized” and therefore the aesthetic and performance dimension of political representation has become more important than in the past. However, bearing in mind the works of historians such as Louis Marin or George Mosse, one could claim that aesthetics has been a key dimension of political representation all throughout modernity, in contexts as diverse as XVIII century France or 1930s Germany. Therefore, if current populism is essentially different from what it used to be, and it is partially as a result of the role of the media, the rising importance of aesthetics is not the key feature of this novelty. Analyzing the media’s influence on contemporary politics should thus go beyond the simple confirmation that “aesthetics matter”.

The aforesaid objections, however, do not question the great value of *The Global Rise of Populism* as an original and stimulating contribution to contemporary political theory. Benjamin Moffitt’s book constitutes an excellent and challenging work: through its clarity and its drive to challenge old and dates notions of how politics work, the book pushes us not only to renew our thoughts on populism, but also to challenge traditional approaches to politics in the global age.