

Jorge Tamames (2020) *For the People: Left Populism in Spain and the US*, Lawrence and Wishart, paperback, pp268, 9781912064441

There are three sections to this book, each of which contains three chapters, each of which begins with three quotations. This is a systematic author. The clear structure makes the text easy to navigate and a useful index makes it easier still. The third section fulfils the promise of the title, with analyses of the rise and considerable fall of the Podemos movement in Spain and Bernie Sanders' promising but ultimately unsuccessful 2020 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in America. The second section lays the ground for these two analyses, with accounts of the political economies of Spain and America, respectively, over the 35 years or so up to the recent financial crash; a major part of the argument of the book is that the current 'populist moment' can only be properly understood by locating it in its historical context, which dates back to the neoliberal turn of the late 1970s.

The first section presents Tamames' view of populism in general, including his argument that there can indeed be such a thing as left-wing populism. Populism is, after all, more usually viewed as a right-wing phenomenon, a strategy for gaining power by means of demagoguery, cynically feeding the resentment of the downtrodden and encouraging unfeasible expectations, all with a view to undermining democracy and serving the interests of (a section of) the wealthy. Political parties and movements, therefore, usually resist being labelled populist. However, Chantal Mouffe and the late Ernesto Laclau have elaborated a theory of populism, which is designed to serve the left. Theirs is the guiding theory of Spain's Podemos movement and the theory to which Tamames broadly subscribes. Mouffe herself supplies a Prologue for this book.

This is an academic text but quite stylishly written. 'Inability to anticipate the future is not Polanyi's only shortcoming,' he writes at one point (p67). Is this a joke? A rather subtle half-joke, I think. There is the occasional rhetorical flourish, too. Chapter 1 of Section 2, for example, begins by describing the election campaign of a former US president which had a populist message reminiscent of that of Donald Trump. Tamames asks: 'Who was this charlatan claiming to represent the entirety of his people? Why did he attempt to divide society instead of bringing it together?' We've probably realised, some time before the reveal, that it was Franklin D. Roosevelt but it is none the less

effective. This example also serves to illustrate a couple of other features of Tamames' argument about populism. One is that a populist party seeks to define a conflict of interest between a corrupt elite and the whole of the rest of society. In the context of the Roosevelt example Tamames writes of 'the polarising rhetoric that all populists *have a weakness for* [my emphasis]' but elsewhere he describes polarising rhetoric as a core feature of populism. The other is that populism is not an all-or-none attribute: even mainstream parties and leaders, like Roosevelt in this example, may on occasion adopt a populist approach.

Mouffe's work on populism (Mouffe, 2018) is heavily influenced by the writings of Antonio Gramsci. Tamames too, but his historicization of populism owes more to Karl Polanyi and also to the work of Peter Mair. I must confess to not having read Polanyi and I found the passages in which he applies Polanyian theory in tracing the origins of present-day populism to the neoliberal reforms of the 1970s, more difficult than anything else in the book. It is easier to understand how the changing relationship, from around the 1990s onwards, between national political parties and the peoples they (are meant to) serve, as described by Mair (see Mair, 2013), has provoked a populist reaction. Among the trends that Mair identifies, one is increasing managerialism, which he describes as 'a governing strategy in which decision-making authority is passed over to ostensibly non-partisan bodies and in which binding rules are adopted which deny discretion to the government of the day' (Mair, 2013, p51). Another is a loosening of the bonds of mutual loyalty between established parties and voters. The former has provoked an urge on the part of the people to reassert democratic control while the latter has provided the opportunity for new political figures to enter the competition for votes. Of course, these two types of historical explanation are compatible: it could be that the neoliberal turn in the 1970s shifted the ground so as to make the eruption of populism a possibility, while its actual recent eruption was prompted by the political changes identified by Mair and others (I use these geophysical terms advisedly because the author himself dwells at some length on an analogy with an earthquake, earthquakes being long in the making apparently).

The text of this book is peppered with the word 'democracy' ('democratic', 'redemocratization', etc.) but its meaning remains uninterrogated. When a book opens

with the sentence: 'Liberal democracy, we are told, is under siege', we are entitled to expect more discussion of what this democracy is and of its different forms, at least of the differences between Spain's and America's democracies. For example, it is notable that while Podemos and the Sanders movement both failed to gain victory at the ballot-box, Podemos, with 13% of the popular vote, is a coalition partner in the current Spanish government, something which could not (for good or ill) happen in America. Tamames seems to think it sufficient to assert that left-wing populists are aiming for more democracy while right-wing ones are aiming for less. However, two of the movements that Tamames identifies as left populist have questions of their own to answer on this score. He does not mention the Corbynite Labour Party's response to the Brexit vote and he blithely exculpates Syriza from the betrayal of the vote of the Greek people against austerity by attributing the entire blame for it to the European Union.

Another thing which leaves me uneasy (about this book and about populist parties) is the overwhelming emphasis on ways of appealing to the electorate, rather than elaborating a political programme. Podemos is more guilty than the Sanders movement in this respect, and it is one of the reasons Podemos seems more stereotypically populist than Sanders. An emphasis on electoral appeal at the expense of policy may be a defining feature of populism but it is one which left-wing versions of it should surely seek to moderate rather than embrace. Yet another reservation I have is that, while Tamames points out several times that left populist parties tend to rely on 'culture-sector professionals' for their activist support and core vote, he does not discuss it further. It deserves proper discussion because it is a feature which, at the moment, distinguishes left populism from right populism. It also inevitably influences which policies (insofar as there are policies—see above) are promoted. Is it an accident, for example, that Sanders promised free higher education in the United States but omitted any undertaking on training for skilled manual trades?

These criticisms are about items which Tamames does not address and which I believe any theory of left populism should. What he does address he addresses cogently and clearly, and he provides useful analyses of Podemos and the Sanders movement. This may reflect my own bias, but I think the latter emerges a bit more favourably than the

former. Tamames is complimentary about the organisational networks that the Sanders campaign set up and it might well be possible to build on these in a future campaign. This would not be headed by Bernie Sanders himself of course, because of his age, but perhaps he will turn out to have paved the way for an Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez presidency in years to come. Or perhaps not. The future, after all, is difficult to anticipate!

References

Mair, P. (2013). *Ruling the void: The hollowing out of western democracy*. London: Verso.

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