



FRANK STENGEL et al. (eds.), *Populism and World Politics: Exploring Inter- and Transnational Dimensions*, Mohammed Hemchi (trans.) (Beirut/Doha: ACRPS, 2022), pp. 532.

AYMEN BOUGHANMI, *"The People Want": When Democracy Is Eroded* (Beirut/Doha: ACRPS, 2022), pp. 280.

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The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies has published two books on populism: a translation of an edited volume titled *Populism and World Politics: Exploring Inter- and Transnational Dimensions*,¹ and an extended study titled *"The People Want": When Democracy Is Eroded*.² These books come within efforts by the Center, in conjunction with the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, dedicated to the study of populism,³ as a populist resurgence takes hold in several parts of the world, including the USA. In many countries, populism has taken control of state institutions and captured the minds of voters in every electoral context. Such a "populist assault", as it has been described, has recently surfaced in Arab politics.⁴

That populism today has reclaimed its lustre could be attributed, in one respect, to a fundamental political factor related to what Bishara regards as "the perpetual structural crisis of liberal democracy",⁵ the effects of which are evident in established and nascent democracies alike. In another respect, it may also relate to the deterioration of the political landscape in many countries.

Moreover, deteriorating social and economic factors produce inequity and anger among broad segments of the



1 Frank Stengel et al. (eds.), *al-Sha' bawīyya wa-l-Siyāsa al-'Ālamiyya: Sabr al-Ab'ād al-Dawliyya wa-l-'Ābira lil-Hudūd*, Mohamed Hemchi (trans.) (Beirut: ACRPS, 2022). The book was published in English in 2019 with the title *"Populism and World Politics: Exploring Inter- and Transnational Dimensions"*.

2 Aymen Boughanmi, *al-Sha' b Yurīd: Hīna Tākul al-Dīmuqrāṭīyya Nafsahā* (Beirut: ACRPS, 2022).

3 In the introduction of *Populism and World Politics*, the translator presents these research activities and provides links for electronic access (pp. 19-22, 32). The ACRPS has published three such works on the topic: Azmi Bishara, *What Is Populism? [Fī-l-Ijāba 'an Su'āl: Mā-l-Sha' bawīyya?]* (Beirut: ACRPS, 2019); Cas Mudde & Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction [Muqaddima Mukhtaṣara fī al-Sha' bawīyya]*, Said Bakkar & Mohamed Bakkar (trans.) (Beirut: ACRPS, 2020); Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Siècle du populisme: histoire, théorie, critique [Qarn min al-Sha' bawīyya: al-Tārīkh wa-l-Nazarīyya wa-l-Naqd]*, Mohamed Rahmouni (trans.) (Beirut: ACRPS, 2022).

4 Stengel et al., pp. 393, 31-32; *The People Want*, p. 247.

5 Bishara, pp. 12-13. Chapter 1: Populism and the Perpetual Crisis of Democracy, pp. 15-53.

population, and intensifies "socioeconomic trauma".⁶ These factors among others make populism above all a "crisis rhetoric", meaning a discourse born out of and fed by a crisis. Populist discourse, therefore, is invigorated by crises and subsists on the very rampant vulnerability to which it contributes.⁷

Despite their contrasting objectives, methodologies, and findings, both publications share three main traits explored below.

1. Contributing to the Diverse Academic Perspectives on Populism

Interest in populism is nothing new. It has been "well-established since at least the 1960s",⁸ usually with emphasis on two main dimensions. The first is theoretical; as the dominant literature has focused on addressing issues such as the concept, the substance of populist rhetoric, the intended strategy for mobilizing and influencing the masses, and the traits of populist figures. The second dimension is regional; the scholarship has either been limited to specific cases in specific countries or on the political trajectory of a particular leader, with a comparative analysis of leaders' personalities.

Populism and World Politics is distinct in its attempt to fill a gap in previous works on populism. The book considers the "international dimension" of populism's development and expansion as a "global, transnational phenomenon" that ought to be studied as it relates to regional and international foreign policy and one of an organic association with international relations according to how "the contemporary world generates overlap between domestic and foreign policies".⁹ This methodology necessitated comparative analysis to contrast the different manifestations of the populist rhetoric in domestic, regional, and international politics, as is evident in many cases expounded through each chapter of the book. The fascinating research approach gives grounds to reconsider a question in need of greater analysis, that is, the possibility of the rise of a global or transnational populism making a claim toward "transnationally representing underdog people".¹⁰

By placing populism in a framework that transcends the local and the individual, the chapters of this book serve as a catalyst for an interdisciplinary investigation of populism, in theory and praxis (e.g., political science, history, economics, political sociology, political discourse analysis) in a way that recognizes it as a complex, multidimensional, and transnational phenomenon.¹¹ By comparing and contrasting different different cases (the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, El Salvador, Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, New Zealand, India, Russia, and Germany) and various issues (e.g., domestic and foreign policy, international economics and commerce, opposition to genetically modified organisms (GMOs), media, migration) and ideological currents (national, transnational, and global populism; Latin American populism, whether normative-classical, neo-(liberal), or progressive-Bolivarian; etc.), the articles provide "a theoretical framework that enables us to conceptualize the relationship between populism, nationalism, and ideology as well as the nexus between populism and foreign policy".¹² This approach challenges established conventions in the study of populism.

6 Boughanmi, pp. 18-19, 24, 27, 232-234; Bishara, pp. 18-19, 22, 33-34.

7 Bishara, p. 189.

8 Stengel et al., p. 129.

9 Ibid., pp. 29, 248.

10 Ibid., p. 98.

11 Ibid., pp. 29, 32.

12 Ibid., pp. 363, 287-288.

Meanwhile, the author of *The People Want* first undertakes a theoretical-methodological review to remedy common misconceptions and reductive mainstream narratives on democracy. According to the author, the book's objectives do not include the study of democratic transition; rather, "the phenomenon of democratization whose aim is to transcend representative democracy by drawing closer to direct democracy".¹³ Here, Boughanmi aims to convey a rational, objective academic understanding that clarifies how democracy is broadly understood, in values and in practice, and debunks widely-held assumptions about democracy that are plagued by oversimplification and inconsistency, to say nothing of their appeals to impulse and emotion.¹⁴ The author also critically deconstructs a characteristic contradiction of populist rhetoric, which appears in two incompatible yet indivisible traits. First, there is the adoption of democracy as an aim and aspiration in the context of dictatorial regimes, placing it at the core of the democratic transition period by calling for its institutionalization while disregarding its liberal aspects. Second, once democracy has taken hold in many countries, it is followed by a rejection of the institutions of liberal representative democracy as an outright betrayal of popular sovereignty.¹⁵

In both cases, Boughanmi argues that this contradiction, regarded as a hallmark of those who call for "democratizing democracy", progresses to the level of what he terms "obsession with democratization" [*al-hawas bi-l-damaqrata*], a populist ideal that calls for revolt against liberal representative democracy in practice, inciting the masses against it in theory, as well as unreasonably expecting "the people" to bear the responsibility for reform and its consequences. Hence, it comes at an exorbitant cost, perhaps most dangerously at the risk of "sliding toward the collapse of democracy as a system of governance".¹⁶ Experience has shown "how often the belief in democracy's superiority carries the seeds of despotism".¹⁷

At various points in his book, Boughanmi defends the argument that "democracy is the least bad political system"¹⁸ and that its outcomes and costs must be weighed relative to other systems of governance. It is neither a solution to all problems nor "a cure for all political ailments", and under no circumstances is it acceptable to treat it as dogma.¹⁹ On the other hand, he argues that amplifying calls to "democratize" and wholly radicalize democracy is not, as populists and their supporters insist, a solution to the all-consuming crisis of the day. Rather, it should be believed that the only escape from the spectre of representative democracy's perpetual structural crisis, according to Boughanmi, is by upholding authentic democratic values. To do so necessitates the objective study of democratic experiences, guided by a deep, critical awareness of their limitations based on the methodological distinction between democratic "ideals" and the institutions that embody them.²⁰ The objective here is to understand the structural causes that block the way of nascent democracies (to be consolidated) and impede the function of established democracies (to be more deeply entrenched).

Here, it should be mentioned that this book, which has not explored any Arab country, Tunisia included, has a peripheral objective of "responding to Tunisian exceptionalism" – a conviction that may indicate that

13 Boughanmi, p. 36, note 59. Boughanmi takes care to differentiate between "the democratization of democracies" and "the democratization of dictatorships" (p. 17); see also: pp. 27-28, 34, 37.

14 Ibid., p. 26.

15 Ibid., pp. 15-16.

16 Ibid., p. 28; see: pp. 120, 129.

17 Ibid., p. 18.

18 Ibid., p. 39.

19 Ibid., pp. 17-18, 28-29.

20 Bishara, pp. 113-116; see the issue of citizens of "fledgling democracies in developing countries" not distinguishing between the government and the democratic system. Populism exploits this conflation to mobilize against democratic institutions and deepen the chasm between the masses and the political elite.

its proponents do not actually understand what is going on in their regional and international environment.²¹ More than a decade after Tunisia's "gentle"²² democratic transition, those familiar with the country's political situation may notice that, through Boughanmi's analyses of the question of "democratizing democracy" and its theoretical and procedural requirements, *The People Want* intends on some level to call into question (or, to refute) the notion of the Tunisian exception in transitology. In so doing, Boughanmi relies on developments in Tunisia that have been accompanied by much discussion of representative democracy's faults and the need to overcome them through novel political formulations.

Despite Boughanmi's attention to deconstructing the discourse of advocates for "democratizing democracy" in various contexts (e.g., the United States, France, Argentina, Venezuela, Britain, Germany, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, the Nordic states, Japan, Belgium, Switzerland), he nevertheless writes as a Tunisian citizen with the indelible memory of Tunisia's unfolding experience of democratic transition following the 2010-2011 revolution in mind.

In the book's conclusion, titled "One Final Note",²³ we find a candid disclosure of the goal to which Boughanmi alludes in his introduction:²⁴ working toward an answer to the question of how to move from democratic *transition* to democratic *consolidation* to prevent democracy from "falling prey to many of democratization's pitfalls".²⁵

2. Evaluating Constants and Variables: Pro-populist Ideological Discourse and Populist Political Praxis

Authors of both books do not overlook, in their methodological choices, the theoretical investigation of the concept of populism. Hardly a chapter does not identify a set of attributes associated with populist rhetoric: theoretically in its distinct relationship with liberal democracy, and practically as it relates to political praxis at the domestic, regional, and global levels. Of these traits, the following are most notable:

1. The ambiguity of the concept of "the people", the discursive core of populism. It cannot be precisely defined despite its centrality in populist rhetoric because "the people" is a broad, vague concept. It is an amorphous, imagined, hypothetical entity, an "empty signifier", something opaque with no actual basis in reality. The term, if it is to mean anything at all, refers merely to a theoretical depiction of one group (the 'us'), characterized as pure, virtuous, real, and homogeneous, standing before another group (the 'them') represented by a renegade, corrupt, artificial elite that poses a threat to the unity of the national ranks and an imminent danger to the people's interests. Regarded as a lurking enemy of the state and the public, this elite becomes the subject of conspiracy theories. It may then be said that, in populist rhetoric, "the People" is no more than a "discursive structure" that perpetuates a dichotomy dividing society into an imagined "us" and "them" that are susceptible to discourse manipulation. It ought to be further further said that the concept of "the Elite" is no clearer or more precise than its counterpart, "the People".²⁶

21 Boughanmi, p. 13.

22 Ibid., p. 247.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., pp. 13-14.

25 Ibid., p. 247; see also: p. 37, note 60.

26 Stengel et al., pp. 89-90, 97, 222-223, 233, 248-249, 361-362, 366, 368, 371, 474-476; Boughanmi, pp. 23, 110. For more, see: Bishara, pp. 14, 31, 33, 62-63, 74, 82, 134, 190-191. Mudde & Kaltwasser, pp. 27-34.

2. The lack of a functional manifesto that proposes tangible, realistic, and effective solutions to the crisis and helps solve actual problems, here and now. Populist rhetoric generally evades political responsibility, as well as the distinctive oversight and accountability of the democratic system.
3. Coinciding with the lack of a manifesto, there exists an established tendency to view the crisis as the product of representative democracy. On this basis come slogans of "democratizing democracy" and calls for direct, participatory, local, or de-centralized democracy to embody the dream of "giving power back to the people". In contrast, another rallying cry that has been a mainstay of populist rhetoric is "the people want..." [*al-sha'b yurīd*], in reference to the people regaining their power beyond the traditional constraints of political action. These mechanisms have been depleted (if not eliminated), their work disgraced, their connection to "the people's interests" severed, and themselves labelled as "harmful to democracy" to such an extent that, after this purification and elimination of party activity is complete, we will arrive at "democracy without parties" [*dīmuqrāṭiyya bilā aḥzāb*].²⁷

One of the constants of populist praxis is that the leader must be "pure", "clean", unpolluted by conventional party activity, and from outside the regime. Generally, this figure is a political "outsider" who has never held office or has no experience in statecraft (e.g., coming from the business world or the media). Still, the moral characteristics (integrity, honesty, etc.) of the nation's "charismatic leader", "patriotic military man", and "social leader" – a liberator who represents the people's rightful will, sovereignty, and disposition (which he embodies and, thus, has the legitimacy to represent) – are what qualifies him to monopolize how "the routes to national liberation" are defined, using the most effective methods to resolve crises and lead the charge against "corrupt, treasonous" elites "opposed to the forces of good".²⁸

The targeting of democratic institutions and forms of traditional political organization and the rejection of pluralism coincide with a systematic undermining of the role of mediating bodies (e.g., unions, associations, and civil society organizations). These institutions have begun to lose their allure and usual appeal due to their inability to update their discourse, align it with the demands of the present, as well as to democratize their management procedures and propose creative, realistic solutions for the successive crises rocking society. Further, most are unable to solidify their visions against mounting precarity in all domains.²⁹

3. Broadening the Horizons of Academic Research on Populism

These two important publications leave ample room for the discussion of their ideas, promoting the establishment of an objective, sober academic discourse on populism in its various dimensions – in isolation from trite ideological categorizations and hasty media coverage via attitudes that most resemble "superficial" commentary or politicized reactions shaped by the logic of derision and skulduggery. It is well-established that inheriting conventional wisdom and inclining toward spreading "preconceived notions" and "simplistic", reductive views on populism would surely prevent us from transitioning "from seeing to understanding".³⁰

As such, several issues that both books cover, or that can be derived from the books' readings of populism,, are worthy of consideration. These fit into two categories.

The first category relates to populism as such:

27 Boughanmi, pp. 30-31, 92-93, 104, 142, 158.

28 Stengel et al., pp. 105-125, 264, 224-225, 366; Boughanmi, pp. 16, 30-31. For more, see: Bishara, pp. 34, 39, 41.

29 Stengel et al., pp. 224-225, 264; Boughanmi, p. 102. For more, see: Bishara, chapter 4: "Has Democracy Lost Its Appeal?", pp. 151-187.

30 Boughanmi, p. 231; Stengel et al., pp. 29, 46, 49.

1. Removing the ambiguity of the concept of "the people", which would:
 - a. Give value to this "empty signifier", such that it may serve as a concept in academic research, and in critiquing the exploitation of its amorphousness in populist discourse and its debates.
 - b. Deconstruct the intended meaning of buzzwords such as "the people's will", "the people's sovereignty", and "giving power back to the people" and reveal their ideological foundations and procedural, institutional, and political consequences for established and nascent democracies alike.
 - c. Attend to the demands of academic rigour when determining populism's nature, identity, and areas of intervention (politics, economics, culture, etc.); its mode of operation and proliferation among the masses; and the ways in which it intersects with other movements with which it may share several determinants, the particularities of which must be considered in cases ranging from populism in Western democracies, in dictatorial regimes, or in democratic transition processes. The goal here is not to put contrasting populisms all in the same basket and, thus, fail to attend to their varying times and places of emergence, different waves, contrasting national and transnational dimensions, nor to their assorted right- and left-wing ideological authorities. To avoid conflating them with other political movements from whom they differ more often than they resemble, the "foggy boundaries" that separate them must be removed;³¹ in this way, we may discover what separates *populist* policies from their *popular* counterparts.³²
2. Appreciating the academic value of studying populism(s) by attending to their international and transnational dimensions.
3. Not restricting research on populism to (albeit valuable) theoretical consideration. It is useful to direct attention to analysing populist discourse (written, spoken, and visual, across different media) as produced by populist leaders via media platforms and public speeches, during election campaigns, in propaganda leaflets, and other components that could constitute an inclusive corpus of populist narratives.
4. Testing the validity of the hypothesis that populism has a strong presence, in a state of latency, and may come to pass in practice when the conditions are met. This hypothesis argues "that populism is an always possible logic of the political. Every political situation can always become populist".³³

The second category relates to the issue of democracy in general:

1. Delving deeper into the link between democracy and populism and the extent to which the populists' calls to abandon democracy are sound.
2. How might a shift occur from a democratic transition period with the goal of establishing democratic institutions, toward a democratic consolidation process?³⁴
3. Assuming that democracies truly are in need of democratization, what are the options to pursue in order to develop the democratic process and steer it away from structural faults and away from the discourse of "democratic scepticism" and casting doubt upon its processes?

All in all, the two books are alike in that each offers a thoughtful academic contribution to bridging the documented "gap" in the literature on populism while avoiding hasty, superficial remedies. There is

31 Stengel et al., pp. 37-38, 99, 129, 258-261, 287, 322.

32 Bishara, pp. 12-13.

33 Stengel et al., p. 92.

34 Boughanmi, p. 247.

no doubt that both projects seek, theoretically and practically, to diagnose this phenomenon in its national and transnational dimensions. They critically deconstruct its discourse to determine its rules of production and its publicity strategies – not to mention exploring the causes of its success and failure.

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