

## BOOK REVIEW

Stavrakakis, Y. and Katsambekis, G. (2024). *Research Handbook on Populism*. Edward Elgar Hardback ISBN: 9781800379688. ebook ISBN: 9781800379695



As we enter the quarter-mark of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, populism remains one of the most talked about concepts in academia, politics, media and society (Brown & Mondon, 2022; Hunger & Paxton, 2022). Populist politics - which centre a perceived antagonism between a (constructed) “people” and “elite” – have been an increasingly present feature on both the left and the right of the political spectrum over the past three decades. Yet, despite a proliferation of publications on this phenomenon, confusion and disagreement about populism and its implications for democracy still plague academic and public discourse. This is, in large part, due to ‘populist hype’ (Glynos & Mondon, 2019) i.e. the (mis)application of the term populism to a wide and often conflicting range of political projects and individuals which risks, at best, rendering it an empty signifier and, at worst, a euphemistic term for exclusionary ideologies and discourses. While some have suggested it is time to move ‘beyond populism studies’ (De Cleen & Glynos, 2022) others have posed the provocative question of whether such a discipline really exists (Mondon, 2022).

Enter Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis who, with their *Research Handbook on Populism*, provide a timely and powerful antidote to this confusion. Taking an innovative and refreshingly multi-disciplinary approach, the editors have curated a highly accessible and extensive collection of chapters which will prove essential reading for junior researchers and established scholars alike. In the introduction to their Handbook, the editors waste no time in tackling the thorny and by now seemingly age-old question: what exactly *is* populism? For the purposes of the collection, Stavrakakis and Katsambekis define the phenomenon broadly as:

*A distinct form of politics that champions “the people” and their sovereignty while antagonizing political – and/or other “elites” or a multi-faceted “establishment” that are seen as unresponsive to popular needs and aspirations (p. 2)*

The editors somewhat humbly attribute this definition to an “emerging consensus” in the field of populism studies. However, an arguably more accurate interpretation is that of a skilful and necessary compromise which reflects an editorial decision to invite a series of contributors from different – often conflicting – theoretical approaches and research traditions. This is, indeed, a key strength of this collection which I return to later.

Following the succinct and informative outline in the introductory chapter, parts I and II break from tradition in previous handbooks on populism by choosing not to throw the reader directly into definitional debates. Instead, these sections, entitled, respectively, “concepts” and “diachronies” introduce the reader to what constitutes some of the key recurring themes of this handbook. The three chapters in Part I, respectively, introduce the reader to the polysemic nature of “the people” and populism’s relationship with democracy, distinctions between populism and nationalism, and, the concept of anti-populism, defined by Savvas Voutyras in chapter 3 as “a distinct political discourse primarily aimed at delegitimizing challenges to the status quo” (p. 35) Part II, meanwhile, notes the importance of considering the socio-historical context of populist politics; chapters in this section focus on both past populist phenomena. At the same time, the reader is both reminded of key concepts from the previous section and primed for concepts which will emerge in subsequent chapters. For instance, in chapter 6, Charles Postel focuses, in part on an anti-populist and elitist reaction to the 1896 “Populist Party” in the United States. Meanwhile, Annie Collovald’s re-examination of the genealogical links between Poujadism and Le Penism in chapter 9, highlights how “populism” being used to define Le Pen’s Front National meant that his ‘party was no longer situated in relation to fascism but in relation to democracy’ (p. 114). This points implicitly to how “populist hype” – later examined in Part VIII of the Handbook – poses a clear threat to democracy.

In parts III and IV of the Handbook, the reader arrives at “theories and key thinkers” and “disciplinary angles”. These chapters are evidence of the editors’ commitment to epistemological pluralism. The chapters in part III on ideational, discursive and socio-cultural approaches offer fresh perspectives on otherwise familiar debates. These chapters are preceded by Anton Jäger’s

contribution on Richard Hofstadter, which complements previous sections on anti-populism, and Paris Aslanidis' chapter on Margaret Canovan which challenges the "conservative label" often applied to the late English populism scholar (p. 131). Meanwhile, part IV continues in this line of pluralism by engaging with a variety of disciplines, including a contribution from Ruth Wodak on (Critical) Discourse Studies which addresses how far-right actors attempt to normalise their ideologies via claims to be the sole representatives "the people" against a series of unresponsive "elites".

Part V turns the reader's attention to 'research agendas in the social sciences' which, looks beyond that of political science (the field which has dominated populism studies). Emmy Eklundh's and Thomas Zicman-Barros' respective chapters on how populist logic is articulated via affective and psychoanalytic practices dovetail well with William Mazzarella's focus on populism, leadership and charisma. Meanwhile, an important distinction is drawn in this chapter between the role of populism in political parties (Barbieri) and social movements (Della Porta & Portos). While this section, introduces readers to paradigms such as "radical democratic populism" and "polyvalent populism", section VI develops broader "typologies" which examine not only binaries such as "left and right" populism (Casullo) but also the fuzzy borders between national and transnational populism (Panayotu).

These typologies segue into the penultimate and in some ways more traditional section of this Handbook in the form of "Hotspots". While, as previously mentioned, attention to geography forms a central theme of this Handbook, section VII, focuses specifically on four distinct regions of the globe. Worth close attention here is the under-researched topic of "Populism in Africa" by Sishuwa Sishuwa, a chapter which also forms an important connection in terms of colonial legacy, to a chapter in the final section of the book entitled "Colonialism and populism" by Dani Filc. This latter chapter forms part of section VIII "Research Challenges", a section which covers a variety of issues including, but not limited to gender, feminism, digital politics, and populism. Of note in this section is a co-authored chapter on "populist hype" (Goyvaerts, Brown, Mondon, Glynos & De Cleen) which builds on the handbook's previous threads of anti-populism. The final chapter on "populism and experts" by Liz Sunnercrantz also calls into question the perceived wisdom that all populists are arbiters of common sense against "experts" (Moffit, 2016).

This collection holds several over-arching strengths, three of which I will comment on in the following paragraphs. The first relates to the

book's structure. At 584 pages (including the index), the Handbook is of a substantial length when taken as a sum of all its parts. However, the chapters, are shorter, sharper, and more concise than what one might have come to expect of handbooks in political thought and the sections flow seamlessly into one another. Furthermore, in the words of the editors, the reader should "feel free to start reading from any part they prefer" (p. 7). While this editorial decision does mean that some chapters/sections do not speak as clearly to one another as they could,<sup>1</sup> it ultimately makes for a more accessible and enjoyable reading experience. The reader is not restricted to a path-dependent, chapter-by-chapter approach and the importance of this potentially time-saving innovation in an increasingly time-pressured academic environment should not be underestimated.

Second, is a focus on a comparatively under-researched aspect of populism studies vis-à-vis anti-populism. This is another considerable strength which extends beyond Voutyras' chapter on this concept and into specific case studies of anti-populism in the USA and Argentina, and on "populist hype". The focus on anti-populism points, in turn, towards the potential of "anti-anti-populism" i.e. discourses which oppose the conservative discourse of anti-populism, as a promising new research agenda in populism studies. It is partly for this reason that the lack of a conclusion chapter to tie together these and other overlapping threads throughout the Handbook feels slightly jarring. Such a chapter might have offered some important reflections on potential research agendas of populism studies. Nevertheless, one can surmise that any such a chapter was sacrificed on the altar of "methodological pluralism and epistemological cross-fertilization" insofar as its absence allowed space for more chapters and reflected the editors' commitment to methodological pluralism (p. 3).

This brings us to the contributions and contributors. Here again, there is much to be praised. Not only is generous space afforded to a plurality of ontological and epistemological approaches, but the Handbook also manages to navigate a fine balance between emerging/early career researchers and more established scholars. While the editors' self-critique of a gender imbalance in the list of contributions could be extended to the Handbook's predominantly white authorship, the list of contributors does represent, at least, a more progressive and forward-thinking shift. The book includes contributions from non-white scholars and looks at issues

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1. Some of the most palpable examples of this are in terms of anti-populism and populist hype which represent recurring features throughout the book.

about the Global South, such as colonialism. However, with whiteness as a defining feature of academia in general, and political science in particular (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008; Mondon, 2023), critical populism studies, as a discipline, arguably, holds a particular responsibility to forge increasingly diverse networks. This is due to the potential of populist politics to create space for the inclusion of marginalised groups in emancipatory projects (Vergara, 2019). This Handbook has, in the editors' words made a "small and modest, yet meaningful contribution [...] in the direction of enhanced inclusiveness and pluralism" (p. 4). It is now incumbent on future projects to build on this and ensure even greater ethnic and gender diversity in its networks. This may help sharpen analyses of the role of both populist and anti-populist logic in racialised constructions of the people (Begum, 2022; Saini, Bankole & Begum, 2022) social movements for racial justice (Hesse, 2022; Tillery, 2023) as well as organised transphobia and anti-gender movements (Amery & Mondon, 2024).

In sum, Stavrakakis' and Katsambekis' *Research Handbook on Populism* represents a brilliant scholarly achievement and will surely continue to act as a key reference point for populism studies for years to come. It is to the enormous credit of the contributors and the editors alike that the Handbook helps to clarify much of the confusion cited at the start of this review. This Handbook is essential reading for anyone researching populism or who is simply curious about a vitally important yet often misunderstood concept and signifier.

George Newth  
University of Bath

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