

DEBATE AND REVIEW

Yannis Stavrakakis (2024), *Populism Discourse. Recasting Populism Research*, Routledge: Abingdon

Lazaros Karavasilis⁵

Keywords: Populism; Discourse Theory; Anti-populism; Democracy; Representation

In the current academic scholarship of political science, populism has gained unprecedented attention. Indeed, there hasn't been a similar time when almost the entirety of the political science field researched the same topic, either directly or indirectly. Populism's conceptual appeal to explain non-mainstream political forces that belong to a broad range and vary significantly among themselves has prompted its unfiltered use by politics, media, and academia to often attack or misinterpret any alternative to the established political system. Suddenly, everything is *populism* and/or *populist* in an attempt to equalise the left with the far right, to legitimise the mainstream's political decisions, and to brand the opponents as *irrational demagogues* and a *threat* to democracy and its institutions. If everything is populism, though, nothing can be populist in the end, and the term loses all its analytical value and importance for political science. This is where Yannis Stavrakakis' most recent book comes to demystify misconceptions and derogatory understandings of populism and clarify the reasons for its negative connotations.

From the very beginning, Stavrakakis focuses on the importance of language in understanding the pejorative uses of populism and poses the question of what if populism is used by power to discredit the importance of the "popular itself" (Stavrakakis 2024: 10) thus negating any people-based political alternative. This suspicion acts as a starting point to question populism's contemporary status as a mostly negative term that is used unreflectively and riddled with stereotypes that perpetuate this conception. Indeed, Stavrakakis begins his book with a much-needed

5 Institute for Intercultural and International Studies, University of Bremen, Mary-Somerville-Str. 7, 28359 Bremen, e-mail: lkaravas@uni-bremen.de

and often overlooked genealogy of populism to understand its historical roots, which can be found in the 19th century and in the important examples of the Russian Narodniki (Narod= people in Russian) and the People's Party in the USA's Gilded Age. However, he does not exhaust himself in a merely descriptive account but addresses his genealogy under the light of USA-based post-war academic accounts of populism devoted to ascribing the term with pejorative connotations and deeming its historical instances an enemy to economic, social, and political development. Against these accounts, Stavrakakis offers an analytical examination of populism's genealogy and challenges the established notion of populism as the root of all political evil. In fact, according to equally significant research, both old and new, populism has been a progressive and often left-wing force acting in a corrective manner within the liberal democratic context. From the 19th century to the Latin American pink wave and the development of the European populist radical left, the popular itself is at the forefront, not of reactionary politics necessarily, but as a reminder that it is a constitutional element in liberal democracies.

Following the same argumentation, Stavrakakis turns his analysis to exploring academic approaches to populism and how mainstream scholars have been responsible for creating and prolonging the negative aspects of the term. Said responsibility, though, extends beyond the academic confinements and has led to misunderstandings on the applicability of populism to describe non-mainstream political actors. The starting point of this analysis? The post-war academic accounts (most exemplified in the case of USA-based scholar Richard Hofstadter), who attributed populism with the characteristics of a *pathology*, abnormality, and *anomaly* to create a "*negative naturalisation and pejorative mythologisation of populism*" (Stavrakakis 2024: 57, emphasis in the original). The polar opposite of populism can be found in the form of modernisation theory, which Stavrakakis understands as an inherently flawed one due to its monolithic linearity, reductionism, and "*zealotist elitism*" (Stavrakakis 2024: 62, emphasis in the original). The latter prompts an in-depth examination of the anti-populist dimension that lies within modernisation theory and is responsible for a revisionist understanding of populism that attempts to diminish the democratic and pluralistic roots of the concept. Stavrakakis follows that thread from the post-war scholarship to contemporary mainstream perceptions of populism, which adhere to the corrosive picture that it has on liberal democracies. The morality factor and the homogeneity of the popular subject are key here, used for qualifying the two main components of populism, people-centrism and anti-elitism, but also as a tool to systematically examine populist actors. Stavrakakis cannot help but wonder about the analytical utility of these terms, stating that the moralization of politics is not a characteristic solely belonging to populism but can be found in any power relations and political identifications. Meanwhile, popular homogeneity can and has been disproven in empirical cases of populism, thus questioning the main attributes of mainstream accounts.

However, Stavrakakis uses this criticism of the academic mainstream as an opportunity to engage more with the notion of populism through his own proposal, which entails the further examination of populism through the analytical toolset of discourse theory. The latter will be his starting point to explore populism's political logic, articulatory performativities, power choreographies, and representation strategies, aiming at elevating its importance for highlighting inherent paradoxes in the liberal-democratic representative system and its post-democratic transformation. Inspired by Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's theories on the discursive approach to populism, Stavrakakis brings the analysis back to the basics, stripped of added elements that obscure the fundamental principle: the importance of *the people* as a political subject, its ability to represent social demands that are not met by the political system, and the meaning of *popular sovereignty* within contemporary liberal democracies. It is these elements that not only take populism back to its original progressive roots but also make its everlasting return possible, regardless of the socio-political context, party, movement, or country.

This analysis allows Stavrakakis to revert to the discursive utility of populism's two main elements as acknowledged by the majority of scholars: people-centrism and anti-elitism. Providing an extensive typological examination of populism's connection to egalitarianism, left-wing politics, and class, Stavrakakis challenges the use of the term "populism" to describe far-right and authoritarian actors and makes a strong case for a more restricted and calculated use to avoid potential misconceptions and the utilisation of the term by mainstream political actors who aim at discrediting any political alternative, either left or right. Towards the end of his theoretical, methodological, and political proposition, Stavrakakis makes a short note about what is not populism, including a brief commentary on the negative aspects of the discursive approach to populism, referring mostly to Ernesto Laclau's contribution. While the examination of what is not populism has taken place in other scholarly work that has examined populism in relation to other concepts (e.g. nationalism), the reader would benefit from a more extensive focus on the elements that have been conflated with populism but are in fact not the same. A similar criticism can also be made regarding the pitfalls of the Laclauian approach to populism. While Stavrakakis acknowledges them, it would be most helpful if there was an extensive critique or a response to existing criticisms of Laclau's understanding of populism.

Reading Stavrakakis' book and following his work for more than a decade, I realised the reasons behind my attentive and reflective approach to his analysis. His ability to offer structural clarity, analytical insight, and a constantly developing knowledge on a topic that is equally progressing at an accelerating rate makes Stavrakakis' recent book a crucial and timely addition to the ever-expanding field of populism studies. I hope that more people will engage with the book and become less rigid and more reflective on the terminology and use of populism, not only for academic purposes but for everyday politics as well.