

# ESSAYS ON THE SEVEN ESSAYS: POPULISM, ONTOLOGY, FEMINISM AND MORE INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

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## **ABSTRACT**

The paper provides a succinct introduction to the special issue of *Ethics and Politics* dedicated to the book *Seven Essays on Populism. For a Renewed Theoretical perspective* written by the Argentine duo Paula Biglieri and Luciana Cadahia. To this purpose, it firstly outlines the growing scholarly tendency to conceptualise populism as an ontological phenomenon. Secondly, it provides some basic information about the scope of the text under analysis. Finally, it introduces two of the most discussed issues of the book, ie. the choice to consider populism as being inherently emancipatory based on a different way to conceive ontology and the connection between populism and feminism, with a brief overview of the contributors' positions involved in this critical exchange.

## **KEYWORDS**

Populism, ontology, feminism, Ernesto Laclau

Populism studies is a thriving field of in-depth analyses on a contemporary phenomenon that, despite some recent ups and downs, seems to be here to stay. The vitality of such studies would thus appear to be secured by the persistent character of their object of inquiry as well as by the polemical talk and fuss it engenders on a number of levels within our societies. However, populism studies harbour much more than strictly empirical examinations of the antagonistic rhetoric of some political leaders and the unsettling electoral successes of once unlikely contenders of the status quo. In fact, some of the existing approaches are ever more inclined to relate populism to the working of the political as such, that is to regard it as an ontological category. The Essex-school tradition inaugurated by Ernesto Laclau has been at the forefront of such efforts. As he famously stated, if populism is about providing a radical societal alternative, it cannot but become synonymous with politics. While such an equivalence may sound strained to some, it nevertheless throws light on the far-reaching implications that populism carries in thinking about a number of vital political questions, such as democracy, antagonism and hegemony, just

to name a few. Not a fringe phenomenon whose heightened relevance today will eventually give way to a return to politics as usual tomorrow, but something that permeates politics through and through.

Convinced that the notion at stake has something very important to say about politics both conjuncturally and ontologically, and operating in the wake of Ernesto Laclau's thought although, as we shall see, with some important departures, Paula Biglieri and Luciana Cadahia have written a book that adds much to the comprehension, interpretation and potential applications of populism. Throughout seven essays – enshrined in the very title of the book in honour of the most notable work of the Marxist Peruvian thinker and politician José Carlos Mariátegui – the authors perform a number of bold and innovative moves that are likely to generate much discussion for the years to come and which this special issue of *Ethics and Politics* intends to initiate and trigger. The very premise on which the book is founded, ie. the situatedness of the authors' intervention along with their attempt to seize what is universalisable from their own experience by shaping it into theory rather than passively receiving and applying Anglo-Saxon theoretical canons, is either implicitly or explicitly praised by all the texts gathered here. As Biglieri and Cadahia reiterate in their concluding remarks of this symposium, the politics behind the book is indeed predicated upon the militant engagement of the two as well as upon the regional (ie. Latin American) situation that they witness and experience on a daily basis. But if the politics that the authors defend and promote is by and large upheld by all the contributors of this exchange, the same cannot be said insofar as their philosophical insights are concerned. This makes the present collection of reviews all the more promising for furthering the investigation on the theoretical entanglements of populism.

But, to begin with, what are the theoretical operations that Biglieri and Cadahia perform in *Seven Essays on Populism*? Even though this is not the place for an exhaustive recap, it will be useful, in the guise of an introduction to the critical exchange, to mention in passing the two main contentious points that have been raised, either in form of praise or problematisation, by the various contributors and which arguably point at the nitty gritty of the book under analysis. The first issue regards the ontological character of populism, as constitutive of the political. It is only thanks to the stimuli of Marchart, Barros & Martínez Prado, and Bosteels that their position on ontology is fully spelled out in their final text of this critical exchange. The twist that the authors of *Seven Essays* operate to the position of Laclau is notable. Following in Jorge Alemán's footsteps, they hold dear ontology, but rather than having it as a meta-historical and meta-political tool, they prefer, not unlike Hegel and Foucault, to tie it to actual history and politics, and in this sense they deem Bosteels' criticism as directed towards a Heideggerian version of ontology that they themselves fully repudiate. In so doing, that of the Argentine duo becomes a theory of populism that offers an ontology of the people founded upon an

articulation of differences, attentive to the fundamental heterogeneity of the social, that cannot be confused with their suppression, as in the case of fascism. The consequences are momentous: it follows that populism can no longer be distinguished between its left and right variants, but can only be emancipatory in character. The question of how to conceive antagonism surfaces here as of utmost importance: while according to Marchart it can present itself in different guises, Biglieri and Cadahia hold that right-wing politics cannot be populist because it distorts the basic antagonism, which they identify in the people/dominant bloc opposition. According to Barros & Martínez Prado however, the risk here is that, by taking up a normative character, populism slips into the ontic register and comes to occupy the semantic terrain of notions such as equality and inclusion. Surely, this point is likely to generate further heated discussions and analyses within the Essex-school camp and beyond.

The second issue is the audacious connection that the authors draw between populism and feminism. Albeit it is fair to suppose that this move will attract much critical attention from those sectors of feminism, such as the autonomist one, that Biglieri and Cadahia take issue with in the book, the contributors of this exchange find themselves on the whole in agreement with the predicaments of the two Argentine authors, although with different nuances. Marchart, for example, while finding their proposal particularly valuable, highlights that such an association has so far found little echo in concrete political subjects. Barros & Martínez Prado centre almost their entire piece on the issue. They question that Biglieri and Cadahia retain the centrality of the notion of care in that, despite unquestionably being a rallying notion of many contemporary feminisms, it reinforces a certain position of women in the labour force – an objection to which the authors of *Seven Essays* respond by stating that their choice was dictated by practical and strategic reasons. More in general, the take of Barros & Martínez Prado is that, by foregrounding heterogeneity and indeterminacy, feminism provides an important de-totalising antidote against all essentialisms and binarisms. Yet, they nurture reservations on the actual compatibility between feminism, characterised by horizontality and open-endedness, and populism, insofar as the latter tends to involve a moment of closure and fullness. The possibility that they work in tandem seems to be feasible only if one accepts – but they do not seem well disposed in this sense – that populism, divested of its possible authoritarian and fascist drifts and invested with an emancipatory elan, is supportive of the constitutive heterogeneity of differences within the people. A similar line of friendly criticism is elaborated by Gunnarsson Payne who, after recounting the mutually reinforcing effects between right-wing populism and anti-gender movements, and the de-politicising repercussions of neoliberal feminism, warns against the risks of subsumption of feminism by some ‘more important struggle’ in the context of articulation with other differences. Her disagreement is stronger on the question of the leader. She prefers to locate the status of the leader at an ontic-

empirical level, and not at an ontological one. Accordingly, the presence of a leader is not considered to be essential in order to constitute a people as in the account of Biglieri and Cadahia. Even more fundamentally, for Gunnarsson Payne the figure of the leader is strictly tied to patriarchy and, as such, considered to be an obstacle for a happy marriage between intersectional and transversal feminism and populism.

But there are many more issues that Biglieri and Cadahia's book raises and that in all likelihood will spark much debate in a variety of scholarly (and possibly also not-scholarly) literatures. These include, among the others, the proposition of a republican populism that forges novel institutions out of the conflict-ridden character of society, the reflections on how to build an ethic of populist militancy, the compatibility of populism with a transnational project and the critical analysis of the reluctance of other strands of the left to fully embrace populism. The task of this special issue is then only that of providing a preliminary approximation to the richness of arguments contained in *Seven Essays* that we anticipate will orientate the theoretical conversation on populism in the foreseeable future.