Marco Revelli,
The New Populism: Democracy Stares into the Abyss,
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Age of the Void

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How are we to understand and explain Trump, Orban, Brexit, the League, the Alternative for Germany, and so on, the 'earthquake' that has shaken the political systems of Europe and the USA? In liberal commentary, 'populism' has been the predominant way of grasping and opposing the phenomenon. Marco Revelli's *The New Populism* goes beyond this liberal commonsense in a careful, thorough portrait of this multifaceted object, drawing together a wide range of data and argumentation to provide, as William Davies notes in a back-cover endorsement, 'The first definitive analysis of post-2008 populism'.

Certainly, this is the most expansive, sober treatment of the object to date, I think. It is full of detail on populism's constituencies, as well as some daring and compelling interpretative suggestions. Nevertheless, an immediate objection concerns the guiding concept itself. As Marco d'Eramo has noted, the term, used with increasing frequency since the collapse of 'really existing socialism', is highly politicised. It is used as a contrast to a reasonable, consensual liberal centre, a brake on the imagination of alternatives. Resonant with class hatred, populism connotes fears of a 'mob' or 'rabble', viewed as virulent, aggressive, and irrational.[1]

1 Marco d'Eramo, 'Populism and the New Oligarchy,' *New Left Review* no. 82 (2013): 5–28.

Revelli is well aware of these issues, the emptying of the term, its use to condemn everything challenging consensual neoliberalism, and of the way 'populism' is used—like 'totalitarianism'—to equate far right and far left.

Still, he goes with it. 'Populism' is never clearly defined. Revelli briefly looks at the history of the term and the difficulties of definition, and arrives, ambiguously, at a more recent, three-featured ideal type: (1) the people as an organic entity, set against an extraneous, hostile element—an above-and-below logic; (2) the notion of betrayal, with political conflict interpreted primarily in moral terms; and (3) an imaginary of upheaval, an upheaval necessary for the restoration of popular sovereignty. Throughout these early pages, a cautious and variegated approach is suggested: a distinction between 'populism as context' or 'generic mood' and 'populism as project'; a note on populism's 'various souls'; the inherent interlinking of populism and democracy; and a distinction, despite congruencies, between our populism—populism 2.0—and its 19th-century antecedents.[2] In the end, Revelli settles on populism as an 'impalpable entity': 'It is a formless form that social malaise and impulses to protect take on in societies that have been pulverised and reworked by globalization and total finance . . . in the era in which there is a lack of voice or organization'.[3] While a culturalist emphasis on atmosphere or 'structures of feelings' seems vital, the concept remains troubling, especially in the way it sections off a much wider far-right atmosphere that belongs together with the formal political forces of the right that Revelli focuses on.

When it comes to the latter, Revelli's analysis is brilliant and convincing. It is also wide-ranging, with chapters devoted to Trump, to Brexit, to France, to Germany, to the 'Third Europe' (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Austria), and to Italy (a 'collective laboratory' of populism).[4] Across these cases, Revelli insists on the power of maps in thinking through to whom populism is appealing and why. Exploring the

2 Marco Revelli, *The New Populism: Democracy Stares into the Abyss* (London: Verso, 2019), 26.

3 *The New Populism*, 11.

4 *The New Populism*, 32.

'Trumpocalypse', Revelli underscores the pivotal interpretative pairing of centre and periphery, Clinton taking the centres of metropolitan America by a wide margin, Trump triumphing in rural areas and in small and provincial cities. This was not, as is often suggested, a revolt of the poor; Clinton led easily with those earning under $30,000 per annum, and Trump had a clear advantage among those earning over $50,000, this advantage especially pronounced among those earning between $100,000 and $200,000. What the vote represented was more like 'the revenge of those who had been divested of something': 'their male privilege, part of their (however high) income, their societal status, recognition of their work, respect for their faith or their country, their place in the world, their power, their hegemony'.[5] Those posited as doing the divesting are various:

> Finance, the banks, the 'swamp' of Washington, gays and lesbians and transgender people, Hollywood celebrities with no morals, the Hispanics who eat in their gardens, the Blacks who drop empty bottles in the streets, Muslims who have more faith than they do, the Arab oil magnates who buy up their cities and finance the throat-cutters.[6]

Place and class are intertwined here with race and gender, Trump winning 67 percent of the non-college-educated white vote against Clinton's 28 percent, and only 37 percent of women against Clinton's 54 percent.

Certain convergences and discrepancies are to be found across the other populist case studies. Brexitland converges with a map of UK Independence Party support—weak in wealthy London, strong in sparsely populated peripheries as well as in medium and large cities with the 'deepest industrial roots', those that have been hardest hit by neoliberal transformations and austerity; weak among the young and more educated, strongest in areas where wages were lowest and public services less available, and among skilled and semi-skilled manual workers.[7] In France, Paris and

5 *The New Populism*, 72–73.

6 *The New Populism*, 73.

7 *The New Populism*, 87.

other large cities showed little openness to Marine Le Pen, although the vote share of the National Front (renamed National Rally in June 2018) has advanced significantly across the electorate and has increased its appeal with blue-collar workers, the less-educated, and those on lower wages. The map of Alternative for Germany support, meanwhile, once more signals the angst of the peripheries, with greater support generated in the east, in lower-density areas, among older citizens, the less educated, those on lower incomes, and men, alongside some exceptions in westward areas with high levels of manufacturing. The harder-right and more successful populists of the 'Third Europe' are treated more briefly by Revelli, but their support conforms to the predominant patterns already noted.

Revelli turns at some length to Italy, his homeland. With Berlusconi's 1994 electoral victory, Italy was an early laboratory of populism, until recently governed by the peculiar 'bipolar' populist coalition between the anti-establishment Five Star Movement and the far-right League. The Italian case draws our attention to a crucial feature of the post-Global Financial Crisis populist earthquake: the devastation of the mainstream parties of both the centre-right and centre-left. Beginning earlier in Italy with the political scandals that engulfed the mainstream parties in the early 1990s, the general crisis of the centrist parties is pivotal in the rhetoric of the populists who set themselves against this supposedly distant cartel of political elites. Connected to commentary on the rise of 'anti-politics' in the West in the 1990s, and to contemporary discussions of post-politics and post-democracy (falling voter turnout, declining party membership, and growing distrust of politicians, bureaucrats, and parties), this is precisely the moment specified by Gramsci as hegemonic crisis: where 'social groups become detached from their traditional parties'; in which:

> The traditional parties . . . are no longer recognized by their class (or fraction of a class) as its expression. When such crises occur, the immediate

> situation becomes delicate and dangerous, because the field is open for violent solutions, for the activities of unknown forces, represented by charismatic 'men of destiny'.[8]

The erosion of the old 'political containers' (political homelessness the result) is a significant factor in Revelli's explanatory repertoire.[9] On one score, then, populism is a 'senile disorder of democracy', provoked by a 'deficit of representation'.[10] This, though, is intimately tied to the effects of neoliberal globalisation: the *déclassement* of the middle class (the 'ballast' of the formerly stable and moderate Western political sphere); the pulverisation of secure work; class disaggregation; class war from above and the massive polarisation it has engendered (a €120 billion a year shift of wealth from wages to profits in the West between the early 1990s and the mid-2000s); and the entrenchment of oligarchy.[11] All of this has left a disoriented mass of people 'consigned to resentment and rancour'. These people experience a 'diffuse feeling of rage, unease and suspicion' and are without an available language to map these feelings to social conditions; they are prepared to 'entrust themselves to a winner', that is, to those who 'stand *up above*'.[12]

Despite his quite mordant tone throughout, for Revelli, populism, the 'awkward guest' at the liberal-democratic party, might at least get us talking again about redistribution, social services, and wages, of a reformism that 'now seems so "revolutionary"'.[13]

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8 Antonio Gramsci, *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916–1935* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 217–218.

9 *The New Populism*, 10.

10 *The New Populism*, 3, 4.

11 *The New Populism*, 200.

12 *The New Populism*, 202, 203.

13 *The New Populism*, 30, 204.