• RECENZIE A ANOTÁCIE •

Stępińska, A. (ed.): **Populist Discourse in the Polish Media**, Poznań: Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Faculty of Political Science and Journalism, 2020, 180 p., ISBN 978-83-65817-87-7

This is a rather unusual and selective review of the book. The priority is given to in-depth elaboration of theoretical and methodological issues of the research on populist communication as discussed in the book, instead of providing a summary of results and detailed overview of structure of the book.

The book consists of four key parts and introductory chapter „Theoretical Background and Methods of the Study on Populist Discourse in the Media.“ Of the four key parts, the first part covers „Populism in Print Press“, the second part presents „Populist Discourse on Television“, the third part discusses „Populist Discourse in Social Media“ and the final part analyses „Us’ and ‘Them’ in the Polish Populist Discourse“. Obviously, populism in radio is missing – and this is unfortunate, considering infamous stories about Radio Maryja´s political role in Poland. For example, one of the first studies on this subject was published already in 2008 by Wysocka, clearly linking populism and this radio broadcast, while the 2017 study by Krzemiński even argues that Radio Maryja is a producer of the national-Catholic ideology (the latter perhaps better charaterises the current Polish politics and discourse rather than too general word „populism“).

Yet it should be noted that the Polish authors, or Polish science in general, seem to pay rather high importance to methodological issues, as it can be observed from inclusion of two (and a quarter) chapters of this type in this volume. This is certainly promising trend towards higher quality (validity and reliability). Thus, one can wonder, what can we learn from selected chapters?

Let us focus at the introductory theoretical chapter „Theoretical Background and Methods of the Study on Populist Discourse in the Media“ written by Agnieszka Stępińska, Marta Wrześniewska-Pietrzak, and Jacek Wyszyński, then at the chapter 7 - Theoretical Background of Studies on Populist Political Communication in Social Media, written by Jakub Jakubowski, and, finally, we should explore a few ideas from methodological-theoretical part of the chapter written by Jakub Jakubowski and Kinga Adamczewska „8. Populism and Social Media. Analysis of the Political Communication Activities of Paweł Kukiz and Citizen Social Media Users During the 2015 Electoral Campaigns.

This selection is justified by still challenging definition(s) of populism and populist communication as well as rather new research agenda on social media and populism. In other words, we have to be very careful when selecting our conceptual-methodological approach to the study of such contested research topic in a new research (and media) environment. Wrong or imperfect definition or selection of concepts and methodology can impact our results or their interpretation. To start with, the authors Stępińska, Wrześniewska-Pietrzak, and Wyszyński correctly note that „linguistic manifestations of populism may imply the occurrence of two phenomena: (1) an

internally established political orientation, i.e. populist ideology, and (2) a pragmatic linguistic attitude, not reflected in the political orientation of the producer of the statement (sender), i.e. populist style" (p.5). In other words, and somehow corrected, „substantial" populist rhetoric may reflect deeper populist messages as well as a typical populist style of „original" populists, while „pragmatic" populist communication may reflect just occasional populist(s) or rather demagoguery[1] communication produced by usually not typical populist parties or leaders (e.g. during an election campaign) or by subjects not primarily defined as populist (such as communists).

Similarly, the key to understanding the results is familiarity with initial coding approach which is - „the recognition of one of the three constitutive features of populism in at least one sentence: (1) reference to 'the people', (2) anti-elitism, or (3) the exclusion of 'out-groups' „(p.10). In other words, this is what the book considers as three key elements of populism – at the same time, any of these three elements is sufficient for considering something as being populist. Well, this is potentially highly controversial approach. Is any criticism of elites unfair or populist? Does any reference to „the people" mean by definition populism? True, the authors mentioned that they also used the historical-discursive approach which allowed them for the inclusion of contextual relationships. As such, this is intellectually highly demanding task.

It may be useful to review the process how the authors came to this research methodology. The first theoretical chapter defines populist discourse, citing Jagers and Walgrave, primarily as „a communication framework which includes references to the people, identification with the people and aspirations to speak for the people" (p.1). It is seemingly correct, but not complete or sufficiently precise definition. As it is stated, it may include both communist and fascist ideologies. Although both these ideologies include populist rhetoric (or, as mentioned, more precisely demagoguery) – and specifically as described by cited Jagers and Walgrave – we see that this definition by Jagers and Walgrave becomes over-inclusive or over-used concept. One could argue that communists primarily referred to the „working people", while fascists stressed „race" (Germany) or „nation" (Italy). Yet the most important (official) newspaper for Nazi Germany was the *Völkischer Beobachter* (National Observer) and for Italy it was *l Popolo d'Italia* ("The People of Italy"). Similarly, the *People's Daily* is an official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. Thus, clearly, communists, fascists and/or Nazi ideologies also refer to "the people". Are they primarily defined as populists? Fundamentally they can be seen as populists, but we do not define them primarily as populists.

This distinction becomes somehow clear to the authors Stępińska, Wrześniewska-Pietrzak, and Wyszyński, who state that "the essence of populism is anti-elitism – an attitude of opposition to all those in power.." (p.1). This is actually very important distinctions since it recognises that populism can actually thrive only under democratic regime. Only then there are "elites" that can be opposed relatively freely. Yet, the conceptual definition is still blurred:" The people' can be a nation (right-wing populism), a class (left-wing populism), or a sovereign (in a specific vision of democracy based on a literal understanding of the power of the people)." (p.2). However, we observe left-wing populism in Latin America, but also in some European countries (Spain,

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[1]   Political rhetoric that seeks broad support by appealing to the desires and prejudices of ordinary people rather than by using rational argumentation.

partly Italy) that speaks about "people" or "nation" but not the class. Moreover, I would argue that populism is, indeed, only a specific vision of democracy based on a literal understanding of the power of the people. In all other cases mentioned here we deal with specific ideology *with* populist rhetoric, or, rather, demagoguery.

Be that as it may, the authors Stępińska, Wrześniewska-Pietrzak, and Wyszyński seem to accept Jagers and Walgrave´s 2007 definition of populism a style of political communication, distinguishing four types of populism: (1) empty populism, where references to 'the people' are the only element present, (2) anti-elitist populism, with references to 'the people' combined with attacks on 'the elite', (3) exclusionary populism, with references to 'the people' combined with the exclusion of 'out-groups', and (4) complete populism, which is a combination of the references to 'the people', attacks on 'the elite', and exclusion of the 'out-groups'/'the others'. Yet, considering that there is also inclusionary populism present (see Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013), this widely used concept has its own omissions. Indeed, the Polish authors used for coding only category of 'out-groups' (political, economic, geographical, etc.) (.p.8), but not 'in-groups'.

The authors then turn to discussion about populist communication as defined by the Polish ethnolinguists, especially by Kołodziejczak and Wrześniewska-Pietrzak. These ethnolinguists seem to capture the essence of populist discourse in a correct (or, at least, better way than previously cited authors: "(1) the mythically understood 'people' always takes the focal position in the constructed vision of the world, (2) 'the people' are always placed in opposition to those who are not members of this group (e.g. 'the elite' or 'out-groups'), (3) the linguistic image of the social world is simplified, which is accompanied by a high degree of intelligibility of the message, aimed at the greatest possible number of recipients, and finally (4) there is always a leader, acting as a real or self-proclaimed vox populi" (p.3). Interestingly, this definition seemed to be ignored in later analysis.

This is not an unimportant discussion. In conclusion, as the authors themselves acknowledge, the interpretation of research results by authors who used their own theoretical constructs and methods may pose a number of methodological (and often epistemological) difficulties (p.5). Indeed, for example, one can find among analytical categories „(5) social state (a note by reviewer - maybe better understood as "welfare state") calls for an increase in budget deficits to improve quality of life, especially among the poorest; promises to increase spending on social, educational, housing, and health purposes, etc.);" (p.9). However, such a call, without providing context or background, and, if available, assessment of previous and follow up public policies, does not mean to be by default seen as „populist", ie apriori negatively seen. The question that one had to ask first, would be - what kind of social policy is in a country? Is it fair? Does it reflect a proper re-allocation of resources? What are long-term consequences of up-to-date social policies? Etc.

Similarly, category „(11) intervention in the free market (negation of free market democratic institutions; critique of the free market; advocating an increase in the role of the state in the economy; market regulation)" (p.9) seems to be too much normative one. First, there is no free market – this is just mythology (see, e.g. Polanyi´s *Great Transformation*, or Houseman 2006; Schotter 1985). Instead, there is a regulated market economy. The whole concept of the European Union and national governments in most advanced societies is increasingly based on regulation of „free" markets. And if there is missing regulation, like in our example of social media

discussed in this volume, there are sooner or later important negative „externalities". Moreover, „free market" and „democracy" are opposite poles. Thus, we can hardly have „free market democratic institutions". Finally, there is no reason to believe that a „critique of the free market" is a unique feature of populism. It is well-known that it was the key argument of communists.

Thus, there is an important lesson here – conceptual and methodological issues should be given even higher priority than it was the case in already rather developed currently discussed case.

For chapter 7, it is interesting and should be acknowledged as a honest approach, but at the same time it is somehow disappointing to read that (*Italics* added): „It *appears* that populism and communication via social media have many common characteristics. On account of *the lack of proper analyses*, however, this statement remains *only an academic intuition*. These two phenomena are mutually related and they can support and complement one another for the benefit of politicians and the media as such. It can be *presupposed* that the nature of communication conducted via social networks supports the style and strategies of populists who are keen to use tools such as Facebook and Twitter." (p.115-116).

In other words, based on this text, we do not know much reliable information about this relationships. Although the author then supports this „academic intuition" by some statistical data, namely FB followers of selected Polish populist and non-populist politicians, the findings are inconclusive. For example, the author somehow ignores the fact that Jaroslaw Kaczynski showed zero followers on FB in 2019. This somehow undermines his hypothesis that „the nature of communication conducted via social networks supports the style and strategies of populists who are keen to use tools such as Facebook and Twitter." (p.116). In general, it is true statement, but there is this strange exception. Kaczynski is not keen to use social media, but still, he (or *PiS*, Justice and Law Party) was more successful than either J. Korwin-Mikke or P. Kukiz, each with hundred thousands followers on FB. A few sentences further the author suggests that "It is also worthwhile to verify the hypothesis that social networks provide a useful functionality to politicians and citizens who implement populism in their communication processes." (p.116). Well, maybe it is not necessary to check this because we see that social media indeed work in such as way – as „a useful functionality" - if they are used at all.

The author comes back to his ambivalent thesis cited above at page 119, this time citing in support Engesser et al. work from 2016, who wrote that due to „the high degree of fragmentation of social media content, the populist elements become simplified, making it easier for social media users to interpret and complement them with their own ideological approaches. This significantly enhances the dissemination of populist messages."(p.119). Yet, in itself, there is no difference in that explanation from how tabloid media report and comment on both populists and non-populists. What is different, and it is not mentioned there, it is speed, the lack of gatekeepers, quick availability of feedback and communication possibilities, easy further dissemination, echo chambers, etc. Some of these factors are indeed summarised by the author in the Table 7 that represents „tangential points between populism and social media" (p.119). This list includes on the (right side) section „*Features of social media supporting populist strategie*s" (simplified): Social media as 'the media of the people', content independent of mainstream media, no political correctness, simplified and emotional nature of messages, online community as a 'homogenous and virtuous society' (better known as „echo-chambers"), criticism, limited gatekeeper functions,

multiple sources, the personalization of politics and emergence of a star-like online system, image, Pop-culture language.

This list is potentially useful, but it is apparently imperfect. It is not clear what it is based on (except „ Own elaboration"). In particular, the left part of the table - *Populist ideological factor/style* – includes, for example, „Exclusion of 'the others' . Yet, as mentioned, we know that there are inclusionary populist movements, especially in South America, but also in Europe such as *Syriza, Podemos* and *the Five Star Movement* or *5SM* (Font, Graziano & Tsakatika 2021). Similarly, „The principle of "more leadership, less participation" is against what we can observe, at least formally, in the case of the 5SM. Vittori (2020) calls it 'plebiscitarian' movement party. I do not hide the claim that – nonetheless - one could observe „increasing centralization within the 5SM (Deseriis 2020).

The author also briefly discusses „new (network) media logic" (p.120). However, it is not clear how it works except that „one of its important elements consists of politicians encouraging media users to be active (creating a so-called "buzz" around a given issue and helping attain their goals)." But what are the other elements? It is not at all clear why this is then called network media logic when it looks like something similar to old-fashioned gossiping – the difference being that it is done in public, live and *en masse*. Furthermore, the author adds these aspects to „the media logic": means of emotionalization, shocking language, and other tools of populist narration." (p.120). Again, this can be seen as an old-fashioned tabloid „media logic", or, even theatre-like acting or performing style, somehow similar to Goffman´ suggestion about the nuances and significance of face-to-face social interaction. Moreover, it is not clear what is a difference between „new (network) media logic" and „the media logic".

What the author brings as a relatively original (this idea has been expressed by other authors, including citations in the first chapter of this volume) but ultimately controversial idea is that he „ recognizes that citizens/media users are fully-fledged senders in the classical communication model." (p.122). Yet, from the perspective of a populist subject (be that a party, a movement or a leader), citizens are, by definition (just considering their sheer number), usually less relevant actors.

In summary, this theoretical background is rather under-developed. It is promising, but at the moment it looks more like a rough review of highly selected books and ideas on populism and social media with some tentative own author´s theoretical contribution.

Jakub Jakubowski and Kinga Adamczewska discussed additional theoretical-methodological issues in the chapter „8. Populism and Social Media. Analysis of the Political Communication Activities of Paweł Kukiz and Citizen Social Media Users During the 2015 Electoral Campaigns. They by and large summarised some ideas of well-known researchers with following observations on the role of social media in populist communication (adjusted by the author of this review).

a) social media enable much more direct and immediate, short, simplified posts, and interactions among users than allow traditional media. Thus, social media are becoming (de facto) a tool for free of charge expression of anti-elitist attitudes and for frequent reference to 'the people'.

b) this process is supported by the algorithms and overall design of social media (instead of

„media logic" as argued by Jakubowski and Adamczewska, referring to other researchers) that tend to support direct and open conflict framing, strategic framing, and personalization".

c) in effect, social media exacerbate the division between 'the political and media elites' on the one hand, and 'the people' on the other hand.

It should be noted that this is still somehow normatively negatively framed. There may be a positive contribution or result – social media may be seen as facilitating expression of salient issues in a society to potentially politically relevant actors (read „populists"). I know, this sounds a bit pro-populist, but is n´t it also a true statement?

In conclusion, we see that inspite of great attention paid to theoretical-methodological issues in the research on populist communication in the reviewed volume, there may still be found some bits of liberal bias in theory and methodology of research on populist communication. Moreover, theory as presented here, and follow up methodology, are inevitably a little bit challenging from perspective of validity and reliability of results. Nonetheless, it should be acknowledged that this appears to be qualitatively rather high level academic mainstream in research on populist communication.

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