

fact that Swedish Social Democracy was nationalist in inception. Sweden is the People's House and there is no guarantee that the house is socialist. Sweden's social welfare regime was aimed at ethnic Swedes. One has only to read prominent Social Democrat Alva Myrdal's *State and Nation*. Written in the 1930s and translated into English in 1941, the translation conveniently eliminates the chapters on eugenics that focus on the sterilization of biologically inferior Swedes. This is not a far cry from Sweden's controversial and *laissez faire* Covid policy.

The cases clearly illustrate the basic parameters of CST theory. A central question remains. CST theory aims at exploring how a vital democratic discourse and political space emerges. Its principal interest is civic repair in the face of extremist threat from left and right. While this is not a book on political

practice *per se*, it does reflect recent social science work such as Daniel Ziblatt's book on *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy* whose main point is that centrist parties are more important to the development and sustaining of a democracy than parties of either the left or the right. This brings me to my core question. The idea of a Vital Center is crucial to democratic political space as I read CST theory. The concept for me evokes equilibrium theories that are both Durkheimian and Parsonian. My question would then be how does CST theory and the Vital Center enable us both in theory and in practice to be both centrally democratic and to give voice to excluded others. But I am picking here. In the end, *Populism in the Civil Sphere* is a "vital" analytic and theoretical contribution to our current political moment whatever you wish to call it.

SSHA "Author Meets Critics" Comments

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I came to this book considerably more familiar with the populism literature than with *Civil Sphere Theory* (henceforth, CST); and so, it was a genuine pleasure to take this opportunity to consider what the latter might stand to contribute to the former. While I will forego a general summary, I want to begin by flagging two common themes that are particularly relevant to my comments here today. First, all of the essays share a deep sensitivity to and engagement with questions of culture. This, in itself, is a major contribution to the populism literature. As Bernadette Jaworsky notes in her chapter on the 2018 Czech presidential election, most populism scholars operate with a very thin—some might even be tempted to say impoverished—understanding of culture (p.155). The present volume, in contrast, begins from a worked-out theory of the civil sphere

that is grounded in an explicitly cultural sociology. The second throughline that I want to highlight from the outset is the fact that most of these essays see populism not as a departure from or a distortion of democracy, but as emerging out of, responding to, and ultimately revealing itself to be deeply intertwined with it. This idea—that populism is not anathema to democracy, but more like one of its many shadow sides—is by no means new; yet it stands in stark contrast with the prevailing tendency (especially in political science, but also at times in sociology) to treat populism as always necessarily and essentially anti-democratic. As will become apparent, I am not yet entirely convinced of this position. But I can say with confidence that anyone interested in reflecting in a fresh way on the relationship between populism and democracy

would do well to read this book. In what follows, I will first identify a significant contribution that was not particularly emphasized in the introduction or conclusion; I will then lay out what is for me the most vexing point of mismatch between CST and the current populism literature.

The Social Consequences of Populism

The contribution that I want to elevate for appreciation is the fact that Civil Sphere Theory directs our attention to the social and cultural *consequences* of populism and provides us with valuable tools for understanding these. For decades (and for good reason), the populism literature has focused overwhelmingly on its *causes*. But this has often come at the cost of careful attention to what actually-acting populists *do*, and of failing to investigate systematically the consequences of these actions. By “consequences,” I mean more than just the formal policy agendas that any given populist might succeed at implementing while in office (which one might map relatively easily onto a left-right axis). I mean, instead, the sometimes less direct or obvious (although, in the contemporary political moment, distressingly apparent) social and cultural consequences of politicians relying heavily on populist rhetoric, performances, and mobilizing practices to achieve their aims—regardless of what these aims might be (That is, as I have argued elsewhere: if populism is a practical means that can be used to accomplish any number of substantive ends, it raises the question of whether the practice itself has patterned consequences that are independent of the ends toward which it is directed (Jansen 2017:213)). For example, how does the *practice* of populism *itself* (i.e., whatever its content) contribute to social polarization, the erosion of civic norms, and the destabilization of social (and not just political) institutions? Are there other social and cultural consequences to which the literature’s preoccupation with the *causes* and (insofar as it

attends to the consequences at all) the *political* consequences of populism have blinded us? Overall, the authors here recognize that when populists take to the stage, they are not only doing *political* work, they are doing *cultural* work as well—and thus their actions have broader social consequences that we are only now beginning to recognize and unpack.

Further, not only does this volume direct us to the *question* of the consequences of populism, but it supplies us with a theoretical framework that might point the way to some answers. As Celso Villegas explains in his chapter on Duterte’s populism, in the context of lamenting the “lack of depth and integration” of the existing populism literature: “what hamstringing populism studies is a lack of an integrative theoretical perspective” (p.45). Civil sphere theory promises to provide such a framework. To state, as plainly as possible, the implicit proposition that emerges from these essays: *if you want to understand the social consequences of populism, you have to start from a theory of how the civil sphere works*. Ateş Altınordu argues something along these lines in his chapter on Erdoğan’s populism:

A distinctive strength of civil sphere theory (CST) is its understanding of the culture and institutions of liberal democracy in relationship to each other: the regulatory (elections, courts, office) and communicative institutions (journalism, civil associations, public opinion polls) of the civil sphere ultimately refer to the same “code of civil society” that serves to symbolically articulate civil solidarity in the wider society. This complementary understanding of the culture and institutions of liberal democracy based on a shared normative logic allows a

parsimonious analysis of the simultaneous threat that many populisms pose to the culture of civil solidarity and the organizational autonomy of democratic institutions (p.76).

In this quotation, Altinordu makes the case that CST can facilitate a clearer understanding of the *threat* that populism poses to democratic institutions and civil society. At the same time, other authors lean in to the provocative suggestion—as Marcus Morgan does in his chapter on “populism’s cultural and civil dynamics”—that populism can also (under the right conditions) be a force for civil *repair*. Indeed, given the various forms that populism can take, it may be that it is only “fatal to democracy” when it comes from the extremes of the political spectrum (as Jeffrey Alexander suggests in his introductory chapter, p.1). Regardless, it is the authors’ engagement with CST that enables them to venture into this largely unexplored territory of populism’s social consequences.

The Universe of Cases

My main reservation about the overall agenda that this book sets out, however, follows directly from this point of greatest enthusiasm. In short: if what CST offers populism scholars is a robust theory of the social, what are we to do about the many cases that have been studied under the rubric of “populism” that have lacked modern, institutionalized civil spheres? Another way of putting this would be to say that CST’s scope conditions seem to be considerably narrower than those of the currently fashionable populism theories. If so, this would leave many putatively populist cases twisting in the wind (Either that, or it would require that we understand these cases as being of a fundamentally different kind—a position that comes with its own risks).

In my reading, the authors remain somewhat divided on this critical point. In his chapter on the leftist populism of China’s Bo Xilai, Andrew Junker makes a valiant (and, in my view, quite compelling) attempt to adapt the insights of CST to a non-democratic society. But Junker appears to be in the minority on this point. As already suggested above, more than one chapter explicitly references Margaret Canovan’s argument that, “instead of being a symptom of ‘backwardness’ that might be outgrown, populism is a shadow cast by democracy itself” (Canovan 1999, p.3). This is evocative language. It also strongly implies the formulation, *no democracy, no populism*. And in their conclusion, Peter Kivisto and Giuseppe Sciortino seem to double down on this stance, making what I take to be an even stronger argument that populism is “a shadow cast by the *civil itself*” (p.291, my emphasis). It would certainly be possible to read such statements as implying that CST has something to offer populism scholars only insofar as they are studying contemporary Western democracies.

If this is indeed the consensus position, it limits the usefulness of this volume (and of CST more generally) to populism scholars (many of whom—especially those who view it as a “thin ideology”—take a quite expansive view of the phenomenon). It also grates a bit against my experience as a Latin Americanist. The study of Latin American populism attunes one to the fact that not only are populist rhetoric and mobilizing practices quite flexible in terms of who might use them (a point on which I take the contributors here to be largely in agreement), but they are also quite flexible in terms of the settings in which they might be successfully deployed (or, at least, in which they might be seriously attempted)—including countries where democracy is weak, poorly institutionalized, or even non-existent. So, while I am sympathetic to the insight that populism is the shadow side of democracy, I am also concerned that

this view leads us to assume that it is exclusive to fully democratic societies (and, thus, that CST has nothing to offer those of us studying it under other social and political conditions).

I would tentatively propose an alternative understanding of the relationship between populism and democracy (which, I believe, resonates most with Junker's position). What if it is not the soil of democracy *per se* that germinates the seeds of populism, but something more general—like any form of political authority that is at least nominally premised on popular legitimacy? I suggest that wherever a leader's ability to hold and exercise power is (at least potentially) *premiered on, buoyed by, or constrained by a lack of* popular support, populism is possible. Another way of putting this would be to

suggest that just because populism might be a quite natural response to tensions emerging within the civil spheres of contemporary Western democracies, this does not mean that these are the only conditions under which we might expect savvy political actors to attempt it—or the only cases of populism upon which CST might be in a position to shed meaningful new light.

References

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The Study of Populism as a Challenging Case of Theory Meets Object

Comments on *Populism in the Civil Sphere*, eds. Alexander, Kivisto and Sciortino

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In ethnographic research, we talk a lot about constructing or "casing" our object of study. There are always choices to make about how we conceptualize what we are studying, and we want our theories and the actors' meanings to articulate well together. Comparative-historical research invites similar efforts (Isaac Reed and Paul Lichterman, forthcoming. "Pragmatist comparative-historical sociology." In *The New Pragmatist Sociology: Inquiry, Agency and Democracy*, edited by Isaac Reed, Christopher Winship and Neil Gross.

New York: Columbia University Press). I see this volume as a fruitful case of theory meets object, and I think that is a good way to appreciate the double challenge that the co-authors have taken up.

First there is the challenge of the object itself. Populism is tricky. As Mabel Berezin pointed out recently, sociologists have been struggling for an analytically cogent approach to the topic (Mabel Berezin, 2019. "Fascism and Populism: Are they Useful Categories for Comparative Sociological Analysis?" *Annual Review of Sociology* 45: 345-361). Marcus Morgan's essay does a nice review of the many definitions, or usages: Is populism a "discourse"? a performance? both, and more? The object is slippery and that would challenge any theory.

But populism might make special trouble for civil sphere theory (CST). That is because CST is what I will call a theory of the center. It is concerned with certain cultural codes, morally and emotionally