

# Commissioned Book Review

Political Studies Review

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**For the People: Left Populism in Spain and the US** by **Jorge Tamames**. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2020 £17.00, ISBN 9781912064441.

Earthquakes mock the very idea of solid ground, of trustworthy geology

(Manauagh, 2019)

There was a lot of fuss a few years ago about the landing of left-wing populism in the global North at the hands of Syriza, Podemos, La France Insoumise, Corbyn and Sanders, but there has not been as much critical evaluation on their breakthroughs and limitations after their electoral defeats. Jorge Tamames' book *For the People* attempts to do so by focusing on two particular case studies: Spain and the United States. It is well known that studies on populism today stand at a crossroads between two seemingly irreconcilable methodologies: *the ontic*, on the one hand, based on the empirical content one can find in disciplines like history or sociology, and *the ontological*, on the other hand, more interested in discovering the formal logics of populism *tout court* (Biglieri and Cadahia, 2021: 5). In this sense, perhaps the greatest merit of Tamames' book is its dual and hybrid nature: not only he *compares* two different case studies (Spain and the US; Podemos and Sanders), but he also attempts to *combine* two different theoretical frameworks (populist theory and political economy; Laclau and Polanyi). To the extent that discursive analyses of populism usually lack context, and the economic more than any other, Tamames' overarching thesis – that left-populism can be best understood as a Polanyian 'countermovement that seeks to contain market logics' (p. 11) – will be of interest to any studious of *On Populist Reason*.

Interestingly, Tamames' starting point is not so much building a robust theoretical edifice as

the search for the perfect metaphor to describe the 'populist moment'. Such a gesture could be disregarded as nothing more than a literary patch stitched in order to suture the intrinsic and inevitable 'faults' of social sciences, but I would like to add that Donna Haraway's (2004: 1–33) not much well-known PhD thesis, for instance, already demonstrated decades ago the immense role that metaphors play in shifting Kuhnian paradigms even in so-called 'hard' sciences like biology. Metaphors matter and, drawing on Paul Pierson's work in *Politics in Time* (2011), Tamames identifies the two key variables in meteorological analogies: 'an event's "time horizon of cause" (i.e. the time it takes to build up) and its "time horizon of outcome" (how long before its effects become noticeable)' (p. 55). In this sense, earthquakes are chosen to be the perfect metaphor for populist irruptions because their effects are short, fast and sudden even though they are the result of the slow movements of tectonic plates. In the end, Tamames concludes that he has sought to 'capture the balance of structure and agency in the image of the earthquake' (p. 239), but one is kept wondering whether an earthquake is any better than a tornado (or, in fact, any meteorological analogy) in this respect, since *contingency* is not yet exactly the same as *agency*.

In his road towards developing a 'political economy of populism' (p. 11), Tamames sets the task of organically combining the works of Laclau and Polanyi, which is not an arbitrary experiment because they are both thinkers of 'social indeterminacy' (p. 67) against any economic 'class reductionism' (p. 68), which is why they can be both aligned in a 'sociological Marxism' à la Gramsci (in Michael Burawoy's terms, p. 69). Despite all these similarities, it is at this point that I would like to express what is perhaps my biggest criticism of the book, without undermining its analytical value. It is my understanding that the Polanyian analysis would have to *end* where the populist construction

should *begin*, since it is Tamames' project to close that gap. Now, what is the missing link between the two? It must be the notion of *demand*, what Laclau (2007: 72) defines as the 'minimal unit analysis' of populism. It is the *demand* that stands as the vanishing mediator between political economy and populism. In this sense, *For the People* presents a skilful and almost exhaustive narrative from the post-war consensus to the neoliberal counteroffensive unforeseen by Polanyi, going through the complicity of the 'Third Way' and much more, but the book would have been even more useful, both theoretically and politically, if it had culminated its analysis with the clarification of the particular demands, short or long term, that make possible the jump from political economy to populism, and from Polanyi to Laclau.

In the end, *For the People* does not have or seek a strong political proposal, partly due to the fact that the book legitimately stays at the level of socioeconomic analysis. But whenever one can read between the lines an overarching thesis about the present that would transcend the moment of diagnosis, I would venture that the author is aligned with Peter Mair's *Ruling the Void*. To put it in his own words first, Mair (2013: 18) wants to ask the question why there is an increasing *indifference* in Western democracies and his conclusion is that 'both the citizenry and the political class are withdrawing and disengaging from one another, and it is in this sense that there is an *emptying* of the space in which citizens and their representatives interact'. Similarly, in the last pages of *For the People*, Tamames dissects that Podemos' organisational model 'paradoxically could be seen as an extreme variant of the cartel party' (p. 247). It is not the case that these analyses are incorrect (they are not) but, if we take a step back, we can ask a previous question: has this *void* come here to stay or will any proclamation for the lost social *substance* do the job of making it come

back? This question sets up a new and crucial dilemma for populism studies at a time when the food delivery precarious worker has displaced the unionised industrial worker: is the empty signifier of 'the people' a transitory mode that will disappear once we regain the mass organisation that was demolished by neoliberalism, or has this 'ethical life' – as Hegel would call it – disappeared, leaving populism as the articulatory principle of the 'lack' in Western democracies?

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