

Introduction to the dossier *What's left of left populism? Theoretical and empirical reappraisals*

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This dossier gathers a selection of revised and edited contributions stemming from the conference “*What's Left of Left Populism? Theoretical and Empirical Reappraisals*”, held at the Catholic University of Milan on 23–24 May 2024. The conference, which convened scholars from political science, theory, and philosophy, fostering a rich interdisciplinary dialogue, aimed to scrutinise the validity and contemporary relevance of the left populist hypothesis as a strategic blueprint for progressive politics. It took place at a moment in which left populist strategies appear to have come to a standstill, offering a forum for interdisciplinary reflection on the historical trajectories, theoretical foundations, hybridations and impasses, and practical pros and cons of left populism. Particular attention was given to European and Latin American experiences, while theoretically the dossier significantly engages with the enduring work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.

The resurgence of left-of-centre, antagonistic actors during the Great Recession in Europe and the Pink Tide in Latin America has prompted renewed scholarly attention to populism, democracy, and hegemony. While some scholars have celebrated left populism as a vehicle to radicalise democracy and empower previously excluded constituencies, its actual impact has been debated, and today these movements face structural and situational constraints, from institutional co-optation to the erosion of social bases. The dossier provides a critical evaluation of left populism's impact, tracing its legacies, successes, and limitations, and examining how its trajectory has diverged across regions. In Latin America, the Pink Tide has largely receded, yet the strategies, narratives, and political lessons of left populism continue to inform political practice and remain a vital reference point. In Europe, by contrast, left populism has largely disappeared as a durable political force, leaving behind a more contested and ambivalent legacy.

To explore these questions in depth, the dossier presents six papers that navigate the theoretical,

historical, and empirical dimensions of left populism. From a theoretical standpoint, Damiano Palano's contribution, “*The (Too) Small Prince of Left Populism: Rereading Laclau and Mouffe*”, examines Mouffe's project through Laclau's lens. Palano highlights left populism's distinctive potential to radicalise democracy while showing how, in practice, the logic of populism has often flattened the political to a single dimension, while weakening the 'left' element that should define it.

Enrico Padoan's “*Anti-Austerity Parties Ten Years Later: A Framework for Analysis*” provides a comparative evaluation of anti-austerity and left-populist parties across Southern Europe, including Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, and France. Padoan identifies electoral participation, ideological and organisational adaptability, and the strategic responses of mainstream centre-left actors as key factors explaining divergent outcomes. He outlines scenarios of continuity, mainstreaming, and opposition consolidation, offering a systematic framework for assessing the medium-term impact and legacy of these European movements.

Maria Esperanza Casullo's “*More Alive than Ever: Lessons and Legacies of Twenty-five Years of South American Populisms*” examines the legacy of the Latin American Pink Tide, interrogating the definitional boundaries of populism and leftism, and assessing the durability and resilience of these governments. Casullo argues that left populism remains politically and theoretically relevant in the region, with strategies and narratives that continue to shape contemporary politics and have even influenced global trends.

In the European context, Samuele Mazzolini's “*Left populism is dead, long live left hegemony. Lessons from European politics*” charts the rise and decline of left populism during the 2010s. Mazzolini distinguishes between situational and agent-related constraints that curtailed the transformative potential of European left populist projects. While these movements influenced political discourse,

their limited impact underscores the need for a strategic shift toward hegemony as a durable guide for left politics.

Jacopo Custodi's "*Otto Bauer, Left-wing Populism and the Challenge of Right-wing Nationalism*" revisits early twentieth-century Marxist reflections to illuminate contemporary European debates. Drawing on Bauer, Custodi traces parallels between his engagement with national identity and the strategies of early Podemos. He argues that reclaiming national belonging as a platform for progressive, inclusive politics exemplifies a counter-hegemonic approach whose lessons remain pertinent, even as left populism declines across Europe.

Finally, Óscar García Agustín's "*Transversal Politics. Podemos between Populism and Radical Left*" examines the theoretical and practical implications of transversality as deployed by Podemos. García Agustín analyses how efforts to integrate societal pluralism and civil-society actors can both expand and constrain leftist projects. By distinguishing

between 'core' and 'peripheral' transversality, he shows how attempts to transcend the left-right axis can inadvertently reproduce tensions between radical and moderate factions, contributing to a nuanced assessment of European left populism's limitations and legacy.

Taken together, the dossier illuminates the achievements, failures, and enduring significance of left populism. By juxtaposing European and Latin American cases and weaving together historical, theoretical, and empirical perspectives, the contributions collectively offer a critical evaluation of its impact, highlighting the persistence of its strategies in Latin America and the relative disappearance of the model in Europe. While the dossier underscores the constraints and ambiguities inherent in populist strategies, it also affirms the continuing relevance of their lessons for understanding democracy, political inclusion, and the pursuit of progressive hegemony in a changing global landscape.