

Understanding Contemporary Practices of Populist Mobilization

Tuukka Ylä-Anttila:
 The Populist Toolkit. Finnish Populism in Action 2007-2016. Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2017, 206 pages.
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The study of populism(s) still carries the burden of old definitional struggles, rooted in the endeavor of “discovering populism” in various empirical settings as basis for conceptualizing an overarching theory of populism. Until the late 1960s, such an approach inspired the academic literature to either reduce populism to highly

particularistic set of features informed by disciplinary borders or generate unwieldy lists on characteristics that have marked populist mobilizations in different historical or geographic contexts. By virtue of hindsight, it is easy to see how both angles were sorely lacking in their ability to provide an *understanding* of populism as the ubiquitous constellation of claims-making practices and styles that currently challenges the more institutionalized forms of doing politics around the globe.

Tuukka Ylä-Anttila’s dissertation *The Populist Toolkit. Finnish Populism in Action 2007–2016* seeks to escape many of the definitional struggles, indeed challenging the notion of populism as a particularly contested concept. Pointing to the expansive consensus among academics that the word “denotes politics that posits a positively connoted ‘people’ against a negatively connoted ‘elite’”, the dissertation promises to advance *Verstehen* on populism by analyzing the populist toolkit as a set of cultural tools that constrain and facilitate social action based on this anti-elitist and anti-institutionalist orientation to social world. Embracing the practice turn in cultural and political sociology, the dissertation focuses on performative and deeply mediatized rep-

ertoires of action through which both grassroots-level actors and politicians in Finland pit “the people” against “the elite”.

In presenting the theoretical framework of the dissertation, Ylä-Anttila emphasizes the significance of populism’s anti-elitist core over its arguably peripheral affiliations. In particular, he argues that populist movements tend to be anti-immigration oriented less commonly than anti-immigration movements are populist. Although he briefly mentions the recent resurgence of non-right-wing populism in Greece, Spain, Italy, and the United States, he develops the argument theoretically, rather than empirically. According to Ylä-Anttila, when “a larger societal consensus is explicitly anti-racist [...] one *has* to be populist [...] to publicly oppose immigration and multiculturalism”. The assertion is strong, yet theoretically sound, and convincingly argued. However, Ylä-Anttila does not directly address the question of why particularly anti-immigration-oriented claims-making – rather than some of the other available narrative framings for tapping into the populist anti-establishment sentiment – has become so common and successful strategy for mobilizing populist advocates and constituencies in Finland and around the globe.

The dissertation is based on four independent research articles that triangulate between a range of qualitative and quantitative approaches to different types of textual data: the Finns party publications, the electoral candidates' answers in voting advice applications, and journalistic output on issues the Finns party supporters feel particularly strongly about in mainstream and *countermedia* settings. Although all of the data analyzed originates in and pertains to Finland, Ylä-Anttila does not focus on concrete issues relating to the Finns party's agenda and its thematic underpinnings – welfare nationalism, racism, anti-immigration activism, or radical right. While these epithets have been commonly linked to populism, conclusions on how they feed and feature in populism beyond a given national context have been notoriously difficult to extrapolate. Instead, Ylä-Anttila investigates a more abstract dimension of populist political communication, studying in the four articles how *crisis*, *gender*, *emotions*, and *knowledge* are narrated to and by populist advocates within a mass-mediated public sphere. This solution elegantly ties the theoretical framework to the research articles, lucidly structuring the analytical narrative advanced in the dissertation, and rendering conclusions concerning

the toolkit of populist *practices* more readily comparable to populist mobilizations outside Finland as well.

The first research article, co-authored with Tuomas Ylä-Anttila, sets out to analyze how the populist mobilization in Finland was affected by the Euro crisis, comparing the Finns party agenda setting between 2007 and 2012 in party manifestos and pre-election issues of the party newspaper. The Finnish case study finds support for the hypothesis that the presence of a crisis enhances the success of populism in Europe but carefully qualifies the finding with a caveat on the causal mechanism linking the crisis to political fortunes of populism. As the economic crisis contributed to very few direct or structural effects on Finnish voters, the value of the crisis to populist parties should be understood not as an exogenous factor, but as a *discursive opportunity*. The Finns party harnessed this opportunity with the populist toolkit, giving the crisis a resonant nationalist interpretation that brought forth the party's electoral breakthrough in 2011.

Analyzing the data collected in voting advice applications in his second article, Ylä-Anttila then illustrates (together with co-author Eeva Luhtakallio) how conservatism is mostly ad-

vanced by the male candidates in the party's hardline rightwing asserting that "gender equality is already achieved" and effectively positioning feminism as an "elitist project".

The third and fourth articles, authored by Ylä-Anttila alone, form a dialectic pair that fleshes out the empirical manifestations of the populist toolkit in more detail. First, analyzing over a decade of mediatized controversy around the Christian hymn *Suivivirsi* traditionally sung in school graduation ceremonies, Ylä-Anttila identifies the politicization of this affective *commonplace* as a populist means for exclusionary people-building. In the last article, Ylä-Anttila complements this picture by challenging the long-standing notion of populist epistemology being predominantly built on layman's logic and anti-intellectualism. Using computational analysis to study over 330,000 articles and forum posts within populist-dominated online spaces, particularly the countermedia, he acknowledges that contemporary populism is deeply invested in promoting "alternative experts'" efforts to deconstruct the "false truths" that are seen to be contaminated in the mainstream sphere by liberal, leftist bias.

Tuukka Ylä-Anttila's dissertation is a welcome and long

overdue contribution to the academic scholarship on contemporary populism. Explicitly challenging the conflation of populism with the political agenda of radical right and (welfare) nationalism, it produces empirical findings that are fresh and methodologically innovative, not least with regard to the operationalization of the big data for computational analysis. It is not always entirely clear which theoretical implications are invoked in Ylä-Anttila's call to study the populism's *core* separately from its supposedly *peripheral* affinities such as nationalism and racism – especially given that populist opinion leaders tend to rank high in the party apparatuses at least partly by the virtue of remaining acrimoniously vocal on these topics. Even so, the dissertation will certainly inspire future research – not only on populism movements, but also concerning the extent to which political mobilizations at large can benefit from harnessing the populist toolkit.

Niko Pyrhönen