

# BOOK REVIEW

## Right-wing populism: can it be stopped?

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*The Little Black Book of the Populist Right: What it is, Why it's on the March and how to Stop it*, by Jon Bloomfield and David Edgar. Byline Books. 142 pp. £9.99.

This very readable little book explores the rise and spread of national populism, examines the features of this ideology and the discourse of its proponents, and identifies some of the organisations and figures that have promoted national populist beliefs and views and sought to reshape the tone and content of contemporary political debate. It then seeks to 'fight back' by unpicking the national populist narrative to expose its flaws, and by making the case for why it is so important to consider the rise of national populism a threat—and a very dangerous one at that. It closes with suggestions from the authors about 'how progressives can address the concerns that national populists exploit'.

In terms of its content, the book's coverage of the ideology of national populist parties and organisations, and of the discourse of the leaders and proponents of national populism, is good, and the authors explain clearly how the various facets of this worldview and narrative weave together. What is more, the discussion of how and why these parties and figures are similar yet different to fascist ones of the twentieth century is particularly useful and accurate.

Perhaps less exact is the explanation for the rise of national populism. The authors put great emphasis on the 2008 financial crisis, arguing that it was this that spelled the end of the consensus between the working classes and the traditional social democratic parties, and that this ushered in real opportunities for the national populists to court this section of the population. While it is undoubtedly true that the national populists have made hay as economic conditions have worsened and have also been able to focus their ire ever more on international finance since the crisis, many previous studies have shown us that segments

of the working class were politically abandoned and experiencing social and political disaffection well before 2008. Piero Ignazi noted this way back in 1992 ('The Silent Counter-Revolution: Hypotheses on the Emergence of Extreme Right-Wing Parties in Europe', *European Journal of Political Research*), when he spoke of a section of voters feeling disaffected with established parties and institutions, losing confidence in traditional channels of representation and being wooed by right-wing extremist parties that offered a radical alternative to the establishment's political discourse. Similarly, in his *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* (1994) Hans-Georg Betz explored rising disenchantment with social and political institutions and weakening electoral alignments, and identified 'losers of modernisation' as those who were particularly attracted to the radical right-wing populists that had made their electoral breakthroughs in the late 1980s. In that sense then, national populism is a phenomenon that goes back much earlier than the authors of this book often suggest (even though, to be fair, they do at times acknowledge this), and it is something that was alive and well long before the 2008 financial crisis.

The emphasis on economic and financial developments and on their consequences also shines the light away from social and value changes experienced in society, and by some communities and individuals in particular. The authors do explain that the decline of traditional industries had a traumatising effect on certain communities, and they do speak of alienation and dislocation, but these topics are not explored in perhaps as much depth as they might have been. This is important because, as the authors themselves rightly argue, national populism's main and most

1 fruitful appeal has been focussed on culture,  
2 tradition, nationhood and identity, rather than  
3 on economics. What would have been wel-  
4 come, then, is more discussion of how commu-  
5 nities became disaffected, how they began to  
6 break down, and how this made for increas-  
7 ingly fertile ground for the national populists.

8 Relatedly, the importance of immigration in  
9 the rise of the national populists is not  
10 accorded as much space as it might. The book  
11 is strong in its discussion of the national popu-  
12 lists' emphasis on national identity and on  
13 their xenophobic utterances and policies, but  
14 it is less forthcoming on why immigration  
15 has become an issue that ordinary people seem  
16 more and more concerned about, and what it  
17 is in particular about immigration that worries  
18 them. There is no discussion of the 2015  
19 migrant crisis, for instance, nor of the more  
20 recent 'small boats' and of how and why many  
21 voters report being anxious about immigra-  
22 tion levels. This seems important, because if  
23 more and more people are worried about  
24 migration, it would follow that there is a  
25 potentially expanding audience for the  
26 national populists. And if that is the case, then  
27 the 'progressive alternative' outlined in the  
28 book's last chapter arguably needs to find a  
29 way of addressing these concerns.

30 From the outset, it is very clear that this book  
31 is not a regular 'academic book'. Instead, the  
32 authors, who are both distinguished journal-  
33 ists, commentators and, in the case of Edgar,  
34 a major playwright, use the book to speak  
35 from the heart, to uncover what they see as  
36 the naked and ugly truth of national populism,  
37 and to advocate for a particular way to fight  
38 back against it. This makes the book much  
39 more engaging and accessible than regular  
40 academic books that can often be stuffed full  
41 of over-complicated theories and impenetra-  
42 ble language. As such, this is a book that will  
43 appeal to an interested and politically engaged

55 general readership, as well as being something  
56 that an undergraduate student might pick up  
57 or be asked to read as an introductory text.

58 But with that comes a flip side. First, the  
59 book is very much a UK-centric one. This is  
60 no criticism, and in fact is a welcome change,  
61 given that most of the fairly recent publica-  
62 tions on this topic have taken a wider perspec-  
63 tive. But, it probably means that the interested  
64 and politically engaged readership just men-  
65 tioned will be a UK one, and perhaps one  
66 familiar with some of the less-than-  
67 mainstream publications discussed in the  
68 book, and some of the right-wing organisa-  
69 tions that inhabit 55 Tufton Street. But sec-  
70 ondly, that readership is also most likely to  
71 already be in agreement with the arguments  
72 presented in the book. The authors do not pull  
73 their punches, particularly in their coverage of  
74 the UK-based influencers of national  
75 populism—the so-called Four Gs: Matthew  
76 Goodwin, David Goodhart, Maurice Glasman  
77 and John Gray. In that way then, there is a  
78 sense that this book is probably preaching to  
79 the converted and that there is limited scope  
80 for any widespread Damascus moments.

81 Be that as it may, and notwithstanding the  
82 potential gaps identified above, this little book  
83 achieves a great deal in about 120 pages of text.  
84 It makes a complex topic understandable and  
85 presents it in a digestible and very engaging  
86 way; it covers a lot of ground and provides  
87 an excellent explanation of how the different  
88 elements of the national populist narrative knit  
89 together; and it makes a strong case for why  
90 national populism constitutes a real and  
91 increasing danger to liberal democracy. What  
92 is more, given that the subject matter is hardly  
93 uplifting, it is particularly welcome that the  
94 book closes with a call to action and on a note  
95 of optimism.

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