

BOOK REVIEW

Christopher J. Bickerton ve Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, **Technopopulism: The New Logic of Democratic Politics**

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The social, political and ideological -even class- struggles “occur in the realm of concepts too” (Patnaik 2017 and 2020). Especially relevant for the social sciences in general and political sciences in particular, it is a well-known fact that concepts are not innocent. Specifically prevailing in the times of crisis, they are called, questioned and revitalized in order to change and/or transform political theories and horizons (Yücesan Özdemir 2020). By giving concepts wholly different connotations, they either “come to mean something entirely different from their original meanings” or “become fuzzy and useless” for some parts of the society. Thus, as D’Eramo noted, inspired by Bourdieu, concepts “should be regarded not merely tools but as stakes” in the struggles (2013).

In terms of dialectical research “a new concept is often admitted if and only when a new relationship emerges” (Yücesan Özdemir 2020) or “a qualitative transformation takes place” (Ollman 2003: 16-17) within a process. The attempts at addressing “unchanging relations by changing concepts” –without paying due regard whether there appears a “new qualitative change that has become something else in terms of its constituting relationships” or “quantitative increases in size and number in one or more of its aspects”- are always problematic and not devoid of political significance. Thus, one has to be cautious enough in dealing with the “temporally differentiated moments (before and after) within the same process” because nondialectical approaches have a tendency to “treat them separately or even causally” (Ollman 2003: 17).

The debate on how to make sense of the current “crisis of democracy” in the contemporary times has produced important conceptual entries into political vocabulary such

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as “post-democracy”, “populist moment”, “post-truth”, “the ‘end’ and ‘death’ of democracy” etc. *Technopopulism: The New Logic of Democratic Politics* written by Christopher Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti is an ambitious and invaluable attempt at concept formation, the concept of technopopulism, in order to make sense of contemporary democratic politics. Locating itself into the idea of a transformation in the structuring logic of democratic regimes, *Technopopulism* departs from the arguments highlighting the end and/or death of democracy (p. 2). Rather than the mainstream accounts which argue that there is a sense of opposition between populism and technocracy, authors search for the affinities between the two. Being abstract from substantive interests and policy commitments, both populism and technocracy share “unmediated conception of common good” (p. 3) and arguments for the “representation of the interests of society as a whole (p. 34). In a nutshell, Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti propose that a new logic “combining both “appeals to the people” (populism) and “appeals to the competence and skills in realizing the peoples’ will” (technocracy) has structured the democratic politics in the contemporary times especially in terms of electoral competition.

Taking the intellectual interests of Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti into consideration, the move to define “technopopulism as a party type” in their previous work (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2018) to a “structuring logic of contemporary democratic politics” is striking. With the coming of this book, the authors broadened the scope of the concept of technopopulism, not a new party type any more but a new structuring logic—a system of political incentives and constraints—of mainly “electoral competition and political action” in contemporary times. Engaging with the well-established literature of party politics and burgeoning literatures of populism and technocracy, Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, in this book, have provided rich historical accounts on the “origins of the concept” (Chapter III). The Chapter II is devoted to the “real life/empirical paradigmatic examples” – combining populist and technocratic discourses in multiple ways such as through the party (New Labour in the UK), electoral base (Five Star Movement in Italy) and figure of the leader (Macron in France) - (Chapter II). The conceptual clarification and illustrative examples are followed by the consequences of technopopulism on the electoral competition and broader contemporary politics and society (Chapter IV) and some remedies (Chapter V) to the rise of technopopulism.

The authors claim that the traditional left/right ideological logic (in which the medium of struggle among political parties and actors was mainly ideological) was “in part replaced and in part superimposed itself upon” by the technopopulist logic (simultaneous appeals to the people and claims of possessing necessary skills in translating peoples’ will into policy) (p. 88).

With the decreasing salience of political ideologies and parties due to sociological transformations, such as the growing individualization, decline in class identities, fragmentation of organized interest, end of the Cold War and financial crisis of 2008-11, in mediating the relationship between state and society, the vacuum was filled by the technopopulist logic which favours unmediated, personalistic and direct bonds.

As far as the methodology of the book is considered, which is the backbone of the Chapter III (pp. 89-94), although it is not explicitly stated but tacitly implied, the book falls into the broader category of an “interactionist approach”. The interactionist approaches admit that the actor operates within a system/structure but he/she cannot be merely considered as the hostages of it. So, the book pays due regard both to the preferences/goals of agency/actor and incentives/constraints of the structure which provides certain shape and regularity to the behaviours of actors acting within it (p. 21). This methodological choice forces the authors, first and foremost, to account for “what a change in the structuring logic of democratic politics means for political action and competition” (p. 91). In order to lay down the distinctiveness of the technopopulist logic, Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti attempted at comparing the ideological logic of previous era (1890-1960s) with the technopopulist logic of contemporary times, especially relevant since the 1990s. Thus, the technopopulism is a “historically specific phenomenon” which directs attentions towards the idea that electoral competition is not structured around ideological logic anymore but around technopopulist confrontations (p. 8).

There seems to be two problems in the methodological premises of the book. First, the balance between the structure and agency, or in the words of the book, “between the political logic and electoral competitors”, has been turned out be in favour of the structure. Secondly, the narrowing down the structure into a political logic and agency/actor into electoral contenders primarily in search for “maximizing their chances of winning” (p. 21) have kept authors away from dealing with broader structural and agency-based developments at some depth.

Nevertheless, in order to rescue the political science from the “language of dependent and independent variables” and being “too ahistorical”, the authors dare to bring more history to political science for explaining “why things happen when they do”. For this reason, they principally focus their attentions to the origins of technopopulist logic. The following part is worth quoting at length:

Our overarching narrative aims to explain the shift from an ideological logic to a technopopulist logic. Within this shift, we identify a series of different moments, with a

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complex interplay between the social and the political and changes within each respective domain. The most important causes we highlight include the decline of organized interests, the process of cognitive mobilization, and the cartelization of national party systems. By developing our account chronologically, we try to account for the uneven development of these factors (p. 94).

In addition to these vital contributions, I just want to bring three points to the attention of authors. First and foremost, although the idea of technopopulism as the structuring logic is mainly proposed to make sense of contemporary politics, politics in this understanding, to a certain extent, seems to be reduced and/or narrowed down into an “electoral competition and political action”. This seems to be a reductionist view which, just to name one, does not consider the broader power relations in contemporary politics in its entirety. Although the authors consider the consequences of technopopulism for also the broader politics and society (such as democratic discontent, the new authoritarianism and closure of the revolutionary horizon and the rise of identity politics) (pp. 154-168), it is done in a few pages and does not deeply engage with the issues at hand. This is a missed opportunity for the authors because these consequences are worth dealing with at some more length.

Secondly, although the authors are very careful not to be falling into a periodization trap (p. 89 and specifically the footnote 1), it is impossible to argue that they provide compelling arguments in separating the ideological logic of previous era from the contemporary technopopulist logic. As noted at the very beginning, whether the quantitatively increasing manifestations of technopopulist discourses pave the way for a qualitative transformation in the structuring logic of democratic politics is still unsolved and the authors seem to be arguing the middle way between the two. It is especially visible in their conceptual choices of technopopulism is “in part replacing and in part superimposing itself upon the ideological logic” (p. 88) and “technopopulist logic has not entirely replaced the previously dominant logic of partisan competition” (p. 24). Thus, if it is not easy to argue for a total transformation, then the entry of a new concept is hardly convincing.

Finally, technopopulism understood in the way the book proposed, as the structuring logic of contemporary democratic politics, indicates merely the absence and/or decreasing salience of intermediary bodies such as political parties and ideologies and is limited to argue for a more party democracy, albeit in new ways, or to use the words of authors, “revitalization of partisanship” (democratizing the internal structure of existing political parties) (p. 170) as the remedies of it. Thus the technopopulist logic which, authors rightly argue, is incapable of “envisaging radical transformation to existing social and political systems” (p. 164) does not

carry a revolutionary potential in itself in coping with the contemporary problems of democracy.

Despite these shortcomings, *Technopopulism: The New Logic of Democratic Politics* is a must read for the students of democracy, party politics and populism. It is very instructive in tracing the historical origins of current challenges democracies face and showing the shortcomings of mainstream approaches trying to make sense of it. In addition, in order to just only follow the current debates on the political reactions and discourses in dealing with the Pandemics and Coronavirus crisis, in which the populist discourses and technocratic appeals are so extensive, the book is worth reading.

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