

MIRIAM RONZONI &  
TIZIANA TORRESI

## INTRODUCTION

**EDITORS DISCLAIMER.** We would have liked to write a more in-depth introduction. Unfortunately, however, these unprecedented times have put significant pressure on the time of our contributors, our reviewers, and our own – so that our pipeline (like that of many other journals) ended up suffering significant delays. At the same time, tackling the issues addressed in this special issue has become all the more urgent. We have therefore opted for not delaying its publication even further, and letting our contributors largely speak for themselves.

•

Populism characterises the politics of our times. Actors across the political spectrum are accused of engaging in it, whilst others celebrate it as the only kind of politics that can realise genuine rule by the people and justice for all. Opponents of populism – whether on the conservative, liberal, or radical end of the political spectrum – most typically criticise it as a threat to the institutional and conceptual foundations of contemporary democracies.

On the one hand, liberal-democracy – so the claim goes – relies on a delicate and complex equilibrium between different claims and considerations; it seeks to cater to popular sovereignty as much as possible, whilst trying to secure guarantees for minorities and more generally for the plurality of voices that inevitably characterises modern societies. Such complex equilibrium, it is argued, is of paramount importance, as its loss inevitably means the suppression of dissent. By reducing all meaningful social differences to the one between the people and the elite; expressing distrust for representative institutions; and dismissing the need to manage disagreement whilst respecting it; populist leaders and movements, so the story goes, threaten the very idea of a democratic form of government that remains respectful of individual freedoms and differences. Those at the progressive end of the political spectrum often make the additional, and crucial, claim that the appeal to the people against the elite is often nothing but a masquerade which further entrenches existing power relations – thus further exacerbating inequalities.

On the other hand, disaffection for the actual practices of liberal-democratic institutions makes populism attractive to many – and in a renewed way at that – in the current political climate. If we are living in a post-democracy (Crouch,

2004), where formal democratic institutions are still in place but the real action and institutional innovation actually goes on elsewhere (and, most notably, in informal and often unaccountable governance networks), then maybe new ways should be sought for the people to be represented (Urbinati, 2019)<sup>1</sup> and for their claims to be advanced? And could it be that, perhaps, progressive political agendas in particular, at both domestic and transnational level, may find an unlikely ally in the language and narrative of populist politics (McKean, 2020).

Thus, populism raises numerous and urgent theoretical questions. First of all, despite its centrality to politics today, it is still far from clear how exactly populism is to be defined and understood, let alone how ‘new’ and distinctive contemporary populism actually is. Secondly, for scholars of global justice in particular, populism raises specific challenges. Its association with nationalism and authoritarianism, its anti-globalization and anti-immigration rhetoric, and its critical if not outright hostile stance towards supranational institutions, seem to pose insurmountable challenges to the realisation of principles of global justice. How are global justice scholars to respond to this challenge? Does the rise of populism show the unfeasibility of cosmopolitan solidarity and a renewed vitality of localised identities and allegiances, or does it rather embody and dramatically prove the dangers of growing inequality and indeed the failure to realise principles of global justice? What does it entail for projects of cosmopolitan democracy and fairness in migration? Finally, can there be a populist politics that avoids racism and nationalism, and can instead successfully promote global justice aims – by, say, mobilising citizens against transnational elites?

The present issue of *Global Justice: Theory Practice Rhetoric* has the ambition of addressing this wide and diverse range of issues. Some of its contributors seek to establish the very conceptual contours of the populist enterprise (Fumagalli, Meckstroth, Spiekermann): what is populism exactly? What is distinctive about it? Why exactly is it so dangerous and what is its real counterpart? Others jump straight into the relationship between populism and the demands of global justice by asking whether there can be such a thing as a ‘transnational’ form of populism and the extent to which this is or is not something to be welcomed (Kuyper and Moffitt); or, more broadly, conceptualise populism and global justice movements as unlikely allies in the fight against neoliberalism, whilst remaining vigilant on how difficult a partnership between the two still remains (Mc Kean). Finally, several contributors address specific issues and policy areas

<sup>1</sup> To be clear, Urbinati does not endorse populism in any way whatsoever, but she proposes a novel understanding of populism which does not, as many argue, aim to replace representative institutions with direct, plebiscitarian democracy, but which, instead, puts forward a new understanding of representation itself, whereby the populist leader constitutes the only legitimate ‘representative’ of the people (Urbinati, 2019).

where the tension between populism, justice and/or solidarity comes to the fore, with respect to migration and refugees (Amantini and Milazzo), welfare benefits (Efthymiou) and the role of European institutions in countering the democratic backsliding of its member states (Theuns and Wolkenstein).

The current pandemic has made more apparent and arguably deepened as well as worsened many of the challenges faced by liberal-democracies and the global community, while at the same time highlighting the crucial importance of protecting democratic institutions and the capacity for global co-operation. Thus, the need for reflection on the questions addressed in this special issue has probably never been greater or more urgent, and the articles here contained are therefore a timely and important contribution to one of the most crucial debates of our time.

---

*Miriam Ronzoni*  
*Professor of Political Theory*  
*Department of Politics*  
*(Manchester Centre for Political Theory)*  
*The University of Manchester*  
*email: miriam.ronzoni@manchester.ac.uk*

---

*Tiziana Torresi*  
*Lecturer in International Politics*  
*Politics and International Relations*  
*The University of Adelaide*  
*email: tiziana.torresi@adelaide.edu.au*



## **Bibliography**

Crouch C (2004) *Post-democracy*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

McKean B (2020) Populism and Global Justice: A Sibling Rivalry? *Global Justice: Theory Practice Rhetoric* 12/2: 1-26

Urbinati N (2019) *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.