

4-3-2020

## Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism

Derek Hrynshyn

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/democratic-communication>

---

### Recommended Citation

Hrynshyn, Derek (2020) "Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism," *Democratic Communiqué*: Vol. 29 : Iss. 1 , Article 28.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/democratic-communication/vol29/iss1/28>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Democratic Communiqué* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@library.umass.edu](mailto:scholarworks@library.umass.edu).

D E M O C R A T I C C O M M U N I Q U É

## **Book Review**

*Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism*

Edited by Jeremiah Morelock

Xxxvii + 259 pp., ISBN: 9781912656219 paperback, US\$ 28.99,  
University of Westminster Press 2018.

The electoral success of challenges to principles of liberal tolerance in recent years surely calls out for a thorough rethinking of how our democracies work. This collection of essays is a welcome reminder that political theory can be an important part of that rethinking. Jeremiah Morelock has assembled a set of discussions here that makes a valuable contribution to our efforts to understand where the political world is headed. Its 10 essays, some written by well known scholars such as Douglas Kellner, Stephen Eric Bronner, and Christian Fuchs combine insights from the work of the Frankfurt School with explanations of concrete political developments in the contemporary era, and provide an important foundation for further explanatory work.

The included contributions apply concepts drawn from thinkers such as Adorno, Fromm, and Marcuse to the political development of Authoritarian Populism in recent years. For the most part, the essays are highly readable, and are accessible to those without advanced background in the Frankfurt School's brand of political philosophy. They will be of considerable value to those with interests in Critical Theory or Marxist approaches to politics and psychoanalysis, or to all those who seek some explanation of the recent slippage away from democracy in so many countries. It will also be helpful for those familiar with the general direction of Frankfurt School theory and looking to explore ways to make that tradition relevant to the explanation of today's politics.

On the whole, the collection does an admirable job of demonstrating the necessity of going beyond reductionist economic explanations of the rise of the new political movements in the world, and relying as well on cultural and psychological factors. Samir Gandesha, for instance, points out that "The anxiety wrought by neoliberal globalization has created a rich and fertile ground for populist politics of both right and left along the lines suggested" (p. 62) by the early critical theorists. Yet he suggests that this anxiety is insufficient as an explanation, and in his critique of attempts by others to explain populism, notes that it must be seen as both an economic and a cultural phenomenon.

The choice of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School is made all the more plausible by the clear similarities between the rise of today's demagogues and the emergence of Authoritarian Populist leaders in the middle of the last century. This comparison, though, is drawn carefully here; the differences between Fascist dictatorships of history and the politics emerging in the industrialized democracies today are not perfect. In particular, Kellner is very careful, in his preface, to explain that while there are similarities in attitudes and appearances, there are important differences as well; the lack of a well-organized popular movement with a consistent ideological backing today is important to note.

One strength of the collection is its coherence. The essays approach similar ideas and events from different perspectives, and many of them end up referring to some of the same literature. This goes beyond the obvious Frankfurt School authors, and includes Carl Schmitt and Leo Lowenthal, convincingly showing that these others deserve renewed attention.

While there are a great many discussions of President Trump in the volume, Authoritarian Populism is not interpreted solely in the context of the US. Fuchs' contribution provides a rich discussion of the discourse surrounding the support for the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), and

Morelock's essay, written with Felpe Ziotti Narita, provides a very original synthesis of Jurgen Habermas theory of communicative action and Immanuel Wallerstein's World Systems Theory, applying it to the history of authoritarianism in Latin American in the mid-20th Century.

Perhaps the most interesting contribution is that of Forrest Muelrath (whose details are unfortunately omitted from the list of contributors). His exploration of parallels between Trump's politics, Wagnerian opera and the 19th century pre-cinematic technology known as 'phantasmagoria' makes a very imaginative and thought-provoking case for seeing what is happening now as neither entirely new nor entirely rationally comprehensible. The comparison between the 'pizzagate' scandal and *Tristan and Isolde* might be a bit strained, but it points to the necessity of paying attention to the relation between aesthetics and politics.

While a number of the contributions are genuinely valuable, the end results of the essays sometimes appear as if they are more descriptive than explanatory. To take an existing set of theoretical principles such as, for instance, Horkheimer and Adorno's explanation for the rise of fascism, and then to find that similar things could be said to be true of certain contemporary developments is not the same thing as to argue that the contemporary world ought to be explained in this way. This is the case with the inclusion of Fuchs' argument, in which empirical evidence is collected from contributions to social media responses to the posts of authoritarian politicians to show that there is extremist sentiment behind the FPÖ's popularity. This works at a certain level, but the outcome does not really imply what the inclusion of the chapter in this collection might lead a reader to conclude: that there is some explanatory power in the description.

The collection also expresses what is perhaps a dangerous tendency, as if a pendulum is swinging too far in the opposite direction, away from economic reductionism. Psychological explanations are an essential part of a full theory of politics, but too often these explanations are not sufficiently contextualized. Kellner clearly demonstrates in his essay, for instance, that Donald Trump suffers from something like extreme narcissism, but psychological diagnosis is not the same as effective political critique. It cannot answer the crucial questions of why such a person is not only able to win an election but to maintain his hold on power and popular support. This essay disappoints on a number of grounds; there is a lack of scholarly citations, and the attempt to provide a mental health diagnosis without access to personal life appears to be more than can be supported.

Bronner's brief essay that follows Kellner's also contains insights worth exploring, but it argues the simple conclusion that bigotry is simply a reactionary backlash against modernity. While no doubt true, it is hard to see how such a claim furthers an understanding of the relationship between Critical Theory, which it neglects to discuss, and Authoritarian Populism, which is a much more specific thing than bigotry. The essay makes a convincing case, but it does not strengthen this collection.

Charles Reitz's discussion probably should have been omitted for similar reasons. His insistence on the continued relevance of Marcuse's ecological critique of welfare-state democracy is persuasive, but without more connection to either the specific character of contemporary capitalism or some reference to the authoritarian populist politics that is emerging within it, there

is little here that contributes our understanding of these topics. His conclusions, about the need for a mass movement against capitalism, are probably already familiar to anyone who has an interest in the book, and in the context of this particular collection, seem either to be unhelpfully general, or to be arguing a much stronger conclusion than is warranted.

What we are left with is a sense that there is a collective process in the psychological development of many citizens in the world's democracies which is undermining that democracy. More discussion of why this is happening, and why in so many places all at once, would require a volume that is better connected and more coherent. More connection to political economy would most likely be helpful, in order that the psychology is not fetishized as some kind of autonomous process. It would be a shame if the valuable work done here were to lead to a kind of theory that is too general to be useful and then veer towards its own kind of reductionism in which everything is seen as a manifestation of a cultural or psychological tendency that transcends historical context.

In the end, the essays in this anthology provide many important insights, but despite its efforts to achieve a valuable coherence, they do not connect the insights together sufficiently to present an application of a sustained and developed theory about the dangers to today's democracy. It does succeed at arguing that explanations of the same form as the early critical theorists' explanation of the rise of fascism should be developed, and gives more than adequate indication of what such an explanation might look like. And it succeeds at identifying the needs for a specific and grounded type of explanation; but too many of the essays stray too far away from the specificities of the real dangers that are being faced here.

---

*Dr. Derek Hrynyshyn* (derekh@yorku.ca) teaches in the department of Communication Studies at York University, in Toronto, Canada.