

Thomas Frank: *People Without Power – The War on Populism and the Fight for Democracy*

New York 2020: Metropolitan Books, 307 pp.

The American historian, journalist, and author Thomas Frank is no ordinary liberal. He is wholeheartedly left-wing and a Democrat, but at the same time he is one of the starkest critics of the Democratic Party and the liberal punditry. Frank gained a somewhat prophetic status after his 2004 book *What's the Matter with Kansas?* managed to anticipate the success of Trumpism twelve years ahead of time. With his own home state of Kansas as a starting point, he described in the book how the white working class has left the Democratic Party and come down in favour of the Republicans and their cultural values regarding abortion, same-sex marriage, guns, and religion. As a result, the citizens of the once radical left state of Kansas have since the 1960s been voting against their own economic interests and the state has become a Republican heartland. Despite some empirical criticism, the book earned Thomas Frank international recognition as one of the most insightful analysts of American politics.

In *People without Power* (titled *The People, No in the United States*), Frank advances a thought-provoking claim: Ever since its invention in the 1890s, populism has been mischaracterised by its enemies to keep ordinary citizens from democratic influence. Frank follows the history of populism and what he calls anti-populism in the United States from its birth at the end of the 19th century and all the way up to the recent success of Donald Trump. Frank traces the term 'populist' back to its conception in 1891 as a reference to supporters of the agrarian People's Party and their demands for the reform of capitalism under the slogan 'Equal rights to all, special privileges to none'. The party's platform in 1892

was unmistakably opposed to the American economic system: 'The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few, unprecedented in the history of mankind; and the possessors of these, in turn, despise the republic and endanger liberty. From the same prolific womb of governmental injustice, we breed the two great classes – tramps and millionaires.' (p. 23) According to Thomas Frank, many of the People's Party goals – a government-controlled currency, government control of the railroads, regulation of monopolies, the income tax, the direct election of senators – are familiar to us today, because they have largely been achieved. The People's Party broke apart after a catastrophic election in 1896, but populism's ideas and demands lived on and had many victories in the following years. Historians later identified the key features of the populist ideology as equality, hostility to privilege, and anti-monopoly, and this – according to Frank – still ought to be the proper use of the term: 'The idea of working people coming together against economic privilege.' (p. 14)

Frank shows throughout the book how this notion of populism is quite different from how the 'respectable and highly educated' see it: to them, populism is 'a one-word evocation of the logic of the mob' (p. 2). He excellently lists the numerous books published in recent years that paint populism as the biggest threat to democracy in our time. The many book titles foreseeing the imminent breakdown of democracy serve to show how absent the opposite perspective has been in the debate on populism – that the current anti-populist narrative is the true anti-democratic mode of thinking because it represents a certain fear of the 'ignorant masses', fear of the people, fear of democracy itself. In addition, Frank shows that many of the connotations of today's populism – racism, authoritarianism, anti-free trade, backward-looking nostalgia – are upside-down com-

pared to the populism of the 1890s, which favoured free trade, was progressive, was open towards immigrants, and was committed to forming a political union between white and black farmers.

Frank shows that the elites' criticism of populism – the Democracy Scare – is not confined to the 1890s and the 2010s. It runs throughout the 20th century, including as a response to Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s. The Wall Street Crash in 1929 ushered in the Great Depression, and as a response to the crisis the Roosevelt administration changed the federal government's role in the economy. It handed out relief to the unemployed and hired them to build large public infrastructure projects. It created a national old-age pension scheme, bailed out farmers, regulated banks and other industries, protected unions, and encouraged people to join. As a response, the newspapers, business owners, and the economic expertise of the day – much like in the 1890s – came together in an anti-populist attack on Roosevelt. According to them, he represented the mob. He prioritised the shiftless and lazy over the capable and talented. Fundamentally, he represented the problem with popular sovereignty, which, as one representative of the then economic elite put it, was that 'it vests complete direct power in those at least endowed, least informed, have least, and thereby reduces government to the lowest common denominator' (p. 131). Frank's analysis shows that the opposition to populist movements takes the same form, regardless of whether the year is 1896, 1936, 1968, or 2016. The populists' followers are characterised as ignorant, irrational, anti-intellectual, and morally deplorable.

The essence of anti-populism is that if only the political issues could be kept from the people, the elites would make wise decisions. This mode of thinking is by no means new. The democratic principle that the uneducated masses ought to have as much say as the professors and intellectuals have always been regarded as a scan-

dal for the latter group. The intellectual discomfort with the idea that the few are thinking and the many are not; that the many are making mistakes that the few have warned against; that the many without insight won't listen to the few who have insight, is a well-known formula. This book's thought-provoking contribution is to view the contemporary deploring of populism in this historical light. We tend to think of populism and the accompanying anti-populism as very contemporary phenomena. Frank shows that this really is a reiteration of a more than a century old American trope. In addition, he shows that the anti-populist criticism often has been on the wrong side of history in the sense that many of the populist goals have been achieved and that they are regarded as highly sensible today, for example anti-trust laws, regulation of railroads, fiat currency, the income tax, and Social Security.

People Without Power brings a most welcome perspective on anti-populism as a fear of democracy, a perspective that has been suspiciously absent in the thousands of articles, opinion pieces, books, and podcasts on contemporary populism. Frank exclusively deals with the United States regarding populist movements, anti-populist reactions, and most of his historical and theoretical sources. It is a shame that he doesn't sufficiently engage the broader academic and political debate on populism, including in Europe. Even though there is no consensus on the correct use of the term 'populism', a very common definition includes an antagonism between the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite', as well as the idea that politics should be an expression of the *volunté générale*. This means that populism is fundamentally a moral claim about the right basis of politics – that is, *who* should govern, not *what* should be done. Consequently, most theorists agree that there are both right-wing and left-wing varieties of populism. According to Frank, however, only left-wing politics can be true populism, and populism and right-

wing policies are mutually exclusive: 'it takes a hallucinatory bravado to call yourself a populist while cracking down on workers and ignoring anti-trust laws ...' (p. 214). Trump is no 'genuine populist'; he represents 'right-wing demagoguery'. Frank convincingly describes 'the learned class' – professors, journalists, politicians, professionals, think tanks – and criticises its talk about demagoguery as a reflection of their fundamental opposition to include non-experts in decision-making. However, he doesn't disqualify the concept of demagoguery as such. He several times describes politicians as demagogues but avoids defining what is meant by this term. The selection of politicians he calls 'demagogues' hints at an understanding of demagoguery as closely related to racism. However, it is not clear whether left-wing politics *eo ipso* equals populism and racism equals demagoguery.

It is enjoyable to read Frank's razor-sharp criticism of his fellow contemporary liberals and the Democratic Party – especially his analysis of the modern liberal *scolding* of people who don't live up to the liberals' moral standards. Clinton's description of certain Trump supporters as 'deplorables' and 'irredeemable', of course, serves as the most revealing example in the liberal moral rebuke, but Frank includes many other examples of statements that reinforce the impression that liberals feel that they are better people. Unfortunately, Frank falls victim to a very common mistake in the political analyst business: allowing personal opinion to muddy a cool analysis. In the concluding chapter, Frank outlines what he believes a modern-day populism would and should look like. It would enlist millions of embittered voters 'with far-reaching proposals of the kind we haven't heard for many years: universal health care, no more grotesque student debt, banking reform, war on monopolies, a reimagining of our trade policy' (p. 254). But, indeed, we have heard those proposals recently in the 2016 Bernie Sanders

campaign – whom Frank also quotes for calling the campaign a blueprint for a 'political revolution'. It seems, however, that Frank is guilty of the same crime as the elites he has spent the rest of the book condemning: not accepting the choice of the people. Frank notes how new-style Democratic leaders 'delivered a version of national health insurance that, amazingly, did not inconvenience Big Pharma or private insurance companies' (p. 226). This way, he makes it seem like the Democrats were pandering to the economic elite against the wishes of the ordinary citizen. He doesn't leave room for the possibility that people for the most part didn't want to lose their private health insurance. In general, it seems difficult for Frank to acknowledge that the voters – the average American, the people – may not support the 'complete reversal' that he is advocating – for example, a single-payer health-care system and student debt cancellation. He argues that the key to making it work is movement-building on a massive scale and enlisting millions of ordinary people who have lost faith in democracy. This underlines his one-sided view of democratic politics: the democratic promise can only be redeemed through left-wing policy. This of course constitutes a paradox if 'the people' are not interested in a radical left-wing vision. The consequence of this viewpoint risks becoming an echo of the 20th-century Marxist bewilderment at the fact that Western workers did not want a revolution.

Another shortfall in the book relates to its description of Emanuel Haldeman-Julius's Little Blue Books publications in the 1920s. The pocket-sized left-wing essays, famous works of literature, and self-education tracts represented, in Haldeman-Julius's own words, 'a democracy of literature' because they were made available at a price so low that virtually anyone could afford them. This meant that 'tramps read Zola and dirt farmers wanted to know about Goethe' (p. 249). Although the publication and wide consumption of liter-

ature is hailed by Frank as populism in its best form, we are still left with the unsolved paradox of democracy: It is a democratic ideal that no one is better than anyone else, but at the same time everyone acknowledges that something is better than something else. We are opposed to hierarchies between people but have no problem making hierarchies of things, such as art, food, music, literature, and academic work. The example of Haldeman-Julius' Little Blue Books shows that even though a whole-hearted small-d democrat would never restrict the suffrage to include only the people who read, he, in casu Thomas Frank, still considers it a democratic victory when the 'common man' shows his 'love for learning'.

People Without Power – The War on Populism and the Fight for Democracy is a very convincing counterargument to the talking heads' present debate on populism, and it presents a thought-provoking thesis on the relationship between populism, democracy, and the elites. The book should be understood as Thomas Franks rallying cry to the Democratic Party and American liberals: they need to remember how their populist +tradition thought and how it talked in the years of its peak liberal greatness – in order to figure out how it might do so again.

Jakob Skoffer
Danish Ministry of Employment,
Copenhagen
jakob.skoffer@gmail.com

Michelle Jackson: *Manifesto for a Dream: Inequality, Constraint, and Radical Reform*

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Extraordinary times require extraordinary solutions. In recent years, the attention to social inequalities has been growing, shining a light on both its causes and the relat-

ed social and political consequences. The COVID-19 pandemic has made the discussion of inequality even more poignant. Disparities between the rich and the poor appear to be increasing as unemployment and distress particularly affect the already vulnerable. This book is not about the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for social inequalities, but it is appearing at a timely moment when there is a pressing need for radical ideas for social policies that will help the most vulnerable and reduce inequalities. The book's aim is to be a manifesto for academics, researchers, university students, and policy-makers. And it is a manifesto to inspire change. Academic research in the social sciences is criticised for negligence in the promotion of radical change in the social structure of current societies.

Jackson proposes four causes to explain the deficiency in radical ideas in academia. The first is pragmatism and it implies that individuals are incentivised to research and promote policies that are marketable to citizens and public institutions. Consequently, small policies that are easier to implement and have low economic costs are simpler to market in the public sphere. Second, scientific research on the impact of large institutional change on an individual's life is more difficult to test. The effects of large reforms cannot be easily assessed causally using randomised control trials or field experiments, making them less researched. Moreover, the specialisation of academics in narrow fields of studies disincentivises approaches that consider the larger institutional and societal picture. Conversely, narrower questions are preferred. Third, ideological barriers are present when competing interests reduce the incentive to support large societal change. For example, an academic might want to fight inequalities but has incompatible economic values or is attached to existing institutions, making it difficult to dismantle the organisations in place. Fi-