

Christopher J. Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti: *Technopopulism: The New Logic of Democratic Politics*
Oxford 2021: Oxford University Press, 218 pp.

Using theoretical frameworks from Maurice Duverger, Francis Fukuyama, Ernesto Laclau, Seymour M. Lipset, Peter Mair, Roberto Michels, and Cas Mudde, to name a few, Christopher J. Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti introduce the concept of technopopulism in an accessible yet comprehensive way. To demonstrate their concept of technopopulism, they focus in particular on three politicians: Emmanuel Macron, Tony Blair, and Beppe Grillo. Chapters 1 and 2 introduce their novel concept and analyse these cases. Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti understand technopopulism as a form of political logic in the sense that contemporary politics are structured through contextually and historically specific incentives and constraints that shape the way in which contenders for public office compete with one another for votes (p. 21). That is precisely their main point of interest: the way in which technopopulism encourages all political actors to adopt both technocratic and populist narratives and modes of action. However, even though technopopulism has, according to their analysis, changed the way in which politicians compete with each other, it has not entirely replaced the ideological competition that dominated politics in the past.

Technopopulism, as a structuring logic, dates to the 1990s, but certain changes, which are described in chapter 3, took place between 1965 and 1989 that allowed this political logic to flourish. Before that and since the 1890s political parties had played the role of mediating the relationship between politics and society. They achieved this by generalising and articulating some overarching objectives, clear messages on how to govern, to whose benefit and to what ends. By the mid-1960s, 'deep

sociological transformations whose translation into political life was partial at best' (p. 88) had started to undermine the ability of parties to do this. The growing disconnection between society and politics started to undermine the legitimacy of existing party systems. The resulting mix of disintegrated social values and emerging notions of *popular will* and the *common good* gave rise to a relationship between politics and society that the authors call technopopulism.

In the last chapter of the book, the authors normatively evaluate the technopopulist logic and they reach the conclusion that technopopulism is weakening democracy. They claim that technopopulism may not necessarily weaken democracy in terms of eroding democratic institutions and the system of checks and balances, but it does so mostly in terms of the quality of democratic representation (p. 173). One of the reasons for this is that technopopulism is making the political competition not about certain parts of the population pursuing their legitimate interests (i.e. an ideological competition), but about finding the right expert leader of *the people*, who will implement the right efficient policy and hence secure the *common good*. Once you have found this leader (or at least you believe you have found her), there is no other legitimate option, and therefore every other remaining choice is wrong (p. 175).

Throughout the book, Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti describe several cases of technopopulism, which they divide into two general categories: 'pure' and 'hybrid' cases. Pure cases include examples of technopopulism through the party, technopopulism through the electoral base, and technopopulism through the leader. Among hybrid cases are examples of left-wing and far-right technopopulism. The authors do this to demonstrate that there are a variety of ways in which technopopulism can be implemented into a political party and that it can be combined with a clear ideological

line. This is precisely why the authors claim that technopopulism has not (perhaps not yet) replaced ideological political competition. It just created another logic of competing for votes. Even though pure cases of technopopulism have distinct modes of operation, they all share a similar logic, which is to represent *the people's* desire for a good life and embody the expert figure of an efficient leader/party that will, without unnecessary delay, craft the optimal policy and secure the *common good* for the nation. These actors usually employ public opinion experts in order to find out what *the people* desire and either use this knowledge to formulate the party's political programme or to create an agenda for the leader. Alternatively, the party can develop a direct way in which to poll the people and create this sort of expert base of common sense, as is the case for parties that embody technopopulism through an electoral base. Strong importance is increasingly being placed on the marketing of political agendas by the public and by the parties of all technopopulist cases themselves.

These new modes of approaching political competition have several consequences, which the authors describe in chapter 4. Concretely, they talk about the increasingly conflictual nature of political dialogue, desubstantialisation, democratic discontent, new authoritarianism, closure of the revolutionary horizon, and the rise of identity politics. When you are presenting yourself as the only expert capable of solving the issues of *the people*, it is difficult to have a civilised debate with anyone who opposes you. This is because if your persona is about to withstand this confrontation, your opponent must either be stupid or morally corrupt (not acting in the name of *the common good*). Desubstantialisation is in turn strongly connected with what Tony Judt termed 'the unbearable lightness of politics', referring to the shift of politics from intellectual debate to market-

ing terms, short messages, and high-impact images (p. 149). Democratic discontent is best described as a continuous trend of declining trust in politics (p. 154). Closely connected with this is the idea of the new authoritarianism, which is best described as an increased monitoring of the people (pp. 161–162). Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti argue that these processes epitomise the undermining of democracy that is taking place under the political logic of technopopulism. 'If the ultimate foundation of political legitimacy is assumed to be the democratic principle of collective self-government, the fact that the rise of technopopulism tends to weaken the sense of effective representation that citizens feel with respect to the government implies that it must also weaken the grounds for their compliance with it' (p. 158). This results in lower participation in elections but rising participation in protest events.

The authors put forward a daring but compelling theory that frames the current political era in a concise, clear, and versatile way. Technopopulism carefully contextualises 'the end of history' that we have been living since the end of the Cold War. It offers an explanation of how we got here, makes sense of the confusion this era often brings, and suggests some steps that can be taken to move forward from here. It is important to note that Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti believe that we should try to overcome technopopulism, as they see it as dangerous for democracy. They suggest concrete actions that would make political parties 'more democratic' in their words, and they explain why this is desirable and why it would help bridge the divide that they observe between the political sphere and society and that they blame on technopopulism.

Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti take the opportunity to contemplate a contemporary 'big event' in the light of their theory at the conclusion of the book. They discuss the coronavirus pandemic and the re-

sponse from politicians, emphasising that science and its personification, scientific experts, have taken a central place in politics during the global crisis. The authors point out that the technopopulist tendency to be doing something, whatever that something may be, has been clearly visible at political briefings, informing nations about the next policy that will last for several weeks, until new evidence arrives. These briefings have been distinct for the number of experts who surround politicians when they are announcing the news, supposedly to lend legitimacy to the new sets of guidelines. The politicians have embraced the roles of solving problems, containing the virus, and saving the economy all at once. They consult virologists, public health scientists, epidemiologists, economists, and perhaps even sociologists, and these scientists provide the framework within which the politicians can act. The authors demonstrate in this way how technopopulism can be used as a lens through which to analyse the crisis.

Even though Technopopulism is a compelling theory that has the potential to bring about a paradigm shift in political science, Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti are inconsistent with their research method throughout the book. In the first part, they start the discussion by methodically describing examples and then use these examples to demonstrate their claims. But in the middle of the book they change course and start to describe the historical circumstances that led to the evolution of technopopulism. This would have been appropriate if the authors had used the method of examples in this historical approach as well. However, they are not trying to describe the era preceding technopopulism, they are just describing that era to explain what led to the current situation. Therefore, though I would suggest that the method of examples should have been used even in

this historical excursion for the sake of methodological consistency, as it does not undermine the legitimacy of their argument. Nevertheless, it could result in confusion about what is the most suitable methodology for researching technopopulism, and future researchers who use the authors' concepts will have to deal with this dilemma.

Overall, I find *Technopopulism: The New Logic of Democratic Politics* to be a refreshing read. As mentioned above, it has the potential to create a paradigm shift in the way political scientists think about the contemporary political era. Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti manage to put forward a new, persuasive, and sufficiently complex theory within the space of a fairly thin volume that, thanks to contemporary references to current political figures and events, keeps the reader engaged and contextualises the topic in an approachable way. Technopopulism has the potential to be a new middle-range theory in the best sense of the term and one that will reshape our understanding of politics.

Reading *Technopopulism* in the context of the 2021 Czech parliamentary elections campaign, the concept seems rather familiar. Technopopulism captures this environment of parties criticising each other over the management of public affairs, with the coronavirus pandemic playing a central role in this criticism. A huge part of the political campaign of all parties is based on a narrative of criticising the competence of others, instead of formulating concrete ideas and uniting the electoral base behind a common goal. The question that arises throughout a reading of this book is whether this is possible or even desirable anymore.

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