Book Reviews

Book Review 1

Title: *Marketing The Populist Politician – The Demotic Democrat.*
By Robert Busby (2009). Palgrave MacMillan, New York, NY, p. 232.
ISBN 978-0-230-52227-5.

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Slightly ironic, populism as a political phenomenon, has become a popular research area in modern political science. Several political movements, opinions and ideas in Western societies are labeled as 'populist' or just 'popular' with a rather negative connotation[1]. In defining the concept of populism many different understandings are being used and confused. For instance, left-wing socialist populism in Latin-America differs considerably from right-wing populism in several West-European countries, which is rather close to extreme right. As an ideology, populism is considered as a claim of knowing what concerns 'the people' (as one entity) and the promise to respond to that concern. However, in responding to 'the will of the people', the ideology of populism lacks established ideas and is considered a *thin centered* ideology[2]. Many scholars tend to describe populism therefore as a style of political rhetoric: an electoral strategies of anti-elitarism, a persuasive technique to achieve as much electoral success as possible by pandering to different niche groups in society[3]. Actually, the term 'populism' in this context equals 'popular politics'. Although populism and popular politics both refer to a political style of propagandistic popular strategy, there is a slightly but essential difference between the two, because of the lack of an ideological embedding with the latter. In *Marketing the Populist Politician; The Demotic Democrat* Robert Busby examines the strategy of these popular politics and its demotic leaders (*demotic* means 'of or for the common people'[4]).

In just over 200 pages long, Busby, who has written previously on the field of political scandal in American politics (i.e. Clinton-Lewinsky scandal and the Iran-Contra affair), makes a comprehensive plea about the rise of political marketing strategies and the focus on popular politics by democratic leaders in both the United States and the United Kingdom in the last century. The intent of his work is to 'give a general profile of how the political marketing of individual character, especially that related to elitism and wealth in politics, has evolved in both sides of the Atlantic through selected case studies' (p. 3). Busby discusses the importance of presentation of political leader in order to create a successful political identity in modern democratic elections. The author illustrates the development of popular political marketing in particular eras by using different case studies of famous political leaders such as Richard Nixon, John F. Kennedy, Bill Clinton and

George W. Bush in the United States, as well as Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Tony Blair and David Cameron in the United Kingdom.

Robert Busby starts his work with a consideration about political marketing in the last century, including the changing media coverage across time, the evolution of celebrity culture and the willingness of politicians to use their personal background as a tool in election campaigns. Special focus is given to the relationship between personal wealth, social class and leadership. 'It [the text, ed.] argues that in the modern political era candidates and leaders, across a spectrum of political dispositions, have attempted to portray themselves as representing an imaginary and largely artificial class niche.' (p. 2).

The central statement that Busby makes in his book is that political marketing has a central role to play in contemporary politics. Politics and its voters has lost its partisanship, whereas interest of political parties (in its survival and search for success) has grown, so getting an understanding in how voters think, act and behave during election cycles has become more and more important. With the decrease of party affiliation, more research focuses on the emotional aspects of voting, such as the identification with political leaders. One of the most important voting criteria is the presentation of the candidate as a person who is similar to, and shares the experience of, the electorate. This is called the 'personification' of politics. The downside, however, is the superficial aspect to the presentation, it is this celebrity culture that threatens to reduce politics to a personality contest where policy discussion and understanding are secondary features.

Political parties respond to changes and demands in the electorate, i.e. in determining the type and character of the political leader the electorate requires (and thus will seek for that suitable candidate). The question that the author raises is to what extent is this leader totally makeable? Can a party search for a candidate who fits exactly into the gap in the political market? An important aspect of successful leadership is 'the right' socio-demographic and –economic background. The author pays special attention to the populist trend, that has arose over the past century, in which ordinariness and limited wealth has become common virtues for political leaders. Although social and economic background are rather settled facts, the consequences of political marketing gives 'candidates a challenge in accentuating the parts of their social and economic background that can honestly and legitimately be marketed to the mass' (p. 10). The essence of political marketing is that '[y]ou sell your candidates and your program the way a business sells its products' (Leonard Hall, Republican National Chairman, 1956). The visual image and the personification of the party's leader drown the role of the party: 'partisan affiliation is a feature which can be downplayed or minimized by accentuating leadership attributes which overtly appear to have no significant linkage to traditional class-based politics' (p. 13).

As a consequence, ordinariness has become a major electoral feature, whereas that contradicts in most cases the social(-economic) position of the politician. In other words: the 'problem' that most politicians face today is the fact that they are not 'ordinary' or 'mainstream' at all, even though it is perceived as required. Most political leaders derive from a wealthy and high standard background, often well educated, thus certainly not regular or mundane. Most of them posses significant wealth and occupy a socio-economic position far above that of the general populace (p. 24). Strategy of political marketing contains therefore the creating of the impression that the candidate comes from a mundane background, that they understand the issues which affect mainstream society and

that they are ordinary in their habits and hobbies as well. There are number of opportunities which make it easier to realize this impression for some candidates over others (and it is the political battle to play this game the most successful).

In my opinion this popular aspect of political marketing has undeniable negative effects. Firstly, politics that searches for adaptation of the mainstream voice causes a superficiality in policy making, since almost every policy decision is tempered by compromise (or even pandering) between different groups in society. Besides, the rhetoric of populism tend to simplify politics and policy issues, since simple language is (incorrectly in my view) often supposed to be the 'language of the people'. Secondly, and probably more important, popular rhetoric has certain side effects that are almost unfair with respect to the voter. How can a populist leader argue for sincerity and transparency in politics whereas that person has at least a doubtful identity him- or herself? To what extent can a populist leader plea for complete change in policy making, that he or she can fix the problems in society that previous politicians could not and that it really is that simple, in the knowledge that policy making in reality is much harder, mostly a matter of negotiation and compromise? The strength of populism (but at the same time fallacy for the voter) is the fact that many people are – unaware – being fooled by the promise and claim that every policy decision of the populist leader is being made on behalf of 'the people'. Playing the populist (rhetorical) card, so I believe, provides regularly short-term electoral success at the expense of the ordinary people. The downside for the populist leader, however, lies in the fact that those promises often cannot be fulfilled and that its leadership therefore does not last for a long time.

The offspring of political marketing is often attributed to the American presidential campaigns half way last century. Richard Nixon was one of the first political candidates who directly benefitted from his ordinariness, mostly due to his famous Checkers-speech (about his dog Checkers). Many people perceived him as a warm and emotional personality, as well as a family man with which they could identify themselves. However, as a result of the emerging mass media (especially nationwide television broadcasting) in the early 60s, Nixon lost his advantageous image (and the presidential elections) to John F. Kennedy, who entirely fitted the presidential role as a celebrity. Kennedy showed that wealth only has a minor (negative) influence when an 'ordinary' image is created carefully through the right mainstream looks and appearances.

Later US presidents followed Kennedy's footsteps in a similar 'celebrity presidential' way. Ronald Reagan, as a former Hollywood actor, was a natural born performer and entertainer, who appealed to a variety of people throughout the country (both Republicans and Democrats). Similarly, Bill Clinton appealed to different kind of groups, through a carefully planned niche marketing strategy. Clinton obtained an image which many voters could identify with, by strategically use of personal issues and background stories. Personal allegations of (his famous) infidelity did not change that image (rather the opposite). Moreover, Clinton identified himself with the electorate – and avoided the issue of wealth at the same time – by stressing the aspect of association with the impoverished people and feeling the voters 'pains'.

Presidential campaigns in the USA over the last decades show that the most important aspect voters seek in candidates is that the candidate is "a regular person just like me". In search of votes, practically every candidate nowadays is using autobiographical aspects

and the private life in order to show their 'ordinariness', whereas the issue of wealth has to be downplayed. Wealthy and a high-class background were 'problems' that George Bush jr., like his father, was facing when running for presidency. However, he managed to use other methods to appear ordinary, e.g. by showing vulnerability and thus his human side (regarding his alcohol abuse, similar to Clinton's infidelity accusations) that created even more sympathy among voters than before. Moreover, he focused on his 'guyness' by, for example, expressing his love for NAZCAR (motor sports). Bush's opposing Democrat candidates at that time are mainly characterized by the emphasis they put on advantageous autobiographical aspects. John Edwards portrayed himself mainly as a mainstream family man, Howard Dean appealed to his working-class background as being an ordinary American, while John Kerry in a way succeeded – in reaction to his disadvantageous personal wealth – through presenting himself as unaffected by that wealth. In recent years Barack Obama proved that, with a right amount of charisma and authenticity, negative influences of the private life only play minor roles in presidential campaigns. Finally worth mentioning is the case of Republican running mate Sarah Palin in the 2008 elections. Whereas Palin is the paragon of the ordinary populist – with an unashamed folksy character, directly appealing to the middle-class voter and to women as heads of their households (so-called Wall-Mart moms) – the case showed that playing the superficial populist card, without concern for policy and political knowledge, rather distrust the electorate. Image has not entirely replaced content (fortunately).

Similar to the marketing evolution in American politics, also British politics is known for its improved marketing system the last decades, including spin oriented presentation of politics and political figures. The run for the position of prime-minister resembles more and more the presidential campaigns in the States, in which autobiographical features, family issues, daily life preferences and personal past matters, as it shows potential voters the 'ordinariness' which people can identify with. Special attention in British populist politics is given to personal background (social class) and lifestyle, e.g. common popular passions (such as sports and music).

The entrance of political marketing in British politics can mainly be subscribed to the identity crisis that the Conservative party had during the 70s and early 80s. Automatically, people linked ordinariness and 'touch with the people' to Labour. When Margaret Thatcher entered the run for office this changed significantly. Multiple different marketing strategies were used to (re)shape her image, in particular by referring to her middle-class background. Thatcher's successor John Major appeared to be a man of the people in a more natural way (people called him 'Honest John'), also by referring to his (somewhat impoverished) background. Major gathered, due to his life experience and reputation in politics too, more credibility as an ordinary politician than Thatcher's questionable romanticized ideas of her own 'ordinariness'.

When Tony Blair entered the political scene he took advantage of the fact that he had a relatively blank sheet. Under his reign the Labour party got a serious image transformation after years of Conservative dominancy. With the 'New Labour' campaign, Blair focused on new image strategies and marketing techniques, close to the presidential campaign in the US. This is related to the work of Peter Bull, who describes Blair's strategies as the 'rhetoric of modernization[5]'. Despite his personal wealth and high-class education, Blair appeared successful in creating the mundane look. With special attention to his role as a family man

he gained a lot of credibility as a mainstream person, unlike – for instance – William Hague, his Conservative opponent, who played the 'ordinariness card' rather poorly and (as a consequence?) failed in gaining electoral success. A wise lesson that politics learned from this, is that pretending being ordinary will not necessarily improve a candidate's connection with the electorate. 'The image must be consistent with the family group, past and presented in such a way that it remains plausible to the watching public' (p. 134).

Gordon Brown, Blair's successor after his resignation, faced similar difficulties as Hague in playing the populist card, as he was (perceived as) a politician who cared more about policy than image. Nevertheless, when he experienced serious image damage, he was forced to use marketing strategies (e.g. references to his private life) as well, with regard to a necessary image boost, but that yielded limited success.

However, when considering the marketing strategies of both Labour and Conservative party, we have witnessed a remarkable similarity. Both parties sought a kind of modernization in policy and ideology and became similar in their efforts to demonstrate that their leaders remain unaffected by their positions of influence and power. The fact is that, during the Blair regency and legacy, the Conservatives – in their turn – changed their strategy rather impressive as well. With the appearance of a young David Cameron the focus on personification made its entry, which gave the voter an additional meaning to party identification, as an extra tool to differentiate between both parties. Cameron's strategy focuses on leader presentation, as a social person and a family man (good father, beloved husband). Further attention goes to his regular lifestyle, mundane habits and popular hobbies. With a new and modern party image, he is appealing to the young and sophisticated voter. Cameron, although with a wealthy and high educated background, carefully avoids every discussion about wealth and elitism and he refers to his background (past) only if it is to his own benefit (and otherwise ignores it, as with his drug-taking accusations).

Robert Busby presents with *Marketing the Populist Politician* a very interesting work. The individual in-depth case studies of political leaders are comprehensive and – although well-known cases – provide new insights. Especially worth mentioning, with last year's elections in mind, is the case of present British politics. The conclusions about David Cameron and Gordon Brown are, retrospectively, particularly applicable and show the importance of political marketing and its focus on ordinariness in today's politics. At the same time, this case marks the questionability of (the power of) populism as a political strategy. Populism is a holistic concept, and this applies for popular politics as well: in every different definition lies a particular understanding. The demand for ordinariness is just one facet of the interpretation of the concept. For example, one cannot say that (only) ordinariness wins elections or that limited wealth will bring a candidate electoral success (quite the contrary). These assumptions are not proven causalities. Although the author regularly notices the unstable nature of populism and the – sometimes meaningless – search to ordinariness by politicians, it seems that the author focuses excessively on this part of political marketing as a predictive entity in elections.

The question remains whether ordinariness is a successful characteristic only in retrospective and therefore is made more important than it is in reality. When looking back at a campaign, the candidate who won almost automatically seems to be in touch with the people the most. Moreover, other (at least equally) important character traits (e.g. the importance of experience) as well as policy issues are slightly being downplayed or even ignored in

Busby's study. As a consequence, the author repeats himself to some extent, precisely because each case in which marketing ordinariness succeeded tells more or less the same story afterwards. It is rather unclear to what extend voters seek for this ordinariness as the whole political package, whenever detail and the genuine complexity of policy issues get less attention. There are many examples (some of which are mentioned in Busby's book) which show that being ordinary does not have the belonged effect, or even a counterproductive effect. The William Hague campaign showed that voters do not buy insincere ordinary images. The case of Sarah Palin suggests that many voters seek a balance between folksy presentation and an understanding of the detail and substance of policy.

An often heard saying is that voters seek for a candidate just like them, only better than their contesters (rather paradoxically). This shows the contradictory and almost impossible requirements for a political leader in democratic elections. The result of this marketing 'evolution' in politics is in a way rather negative in my opinion as I stated before, but also according to the author. He concludes: 'It allows voters to make associations on grounds that require little in the way of political knowledge, and to base evaluations on attributes to which they can relate.' Voting is merely a matter of self-identification, a question of which candidates resembles the voter most, 'while it makes for little sophistication in the realm of serious politics, it allows a level of political involvement and appreciation that lends itself to political marketing' (p. 206). The more a candidate creates the impression of being in touch with the electorate, the more likely it is that he/she appeals to the section of the electorate which is far away from political detail and its content. This superficial celebrity contest has nevertheless become mainstream political strategy. Moreover, as every candidate is being portrayed as ordinary and authentic, it becomes hard to differentiate those who are derived from genuinely ordinary backgrounds and those who are strategically presented as being ordinary. That makes politics and political leaders in specific altogether incredible. Robert Busby gives with *Marketing the Populist Politician* a comprehensive and clear view on people's perceptions of political leaders and the importance and consequences of political marketing in order to win elections in modern democratic campaigns. Busby's work contains enough unexpected information on well-known cases, is very well written and pleasant to read, definitely recommended for interested people who are not familiar with political marketing.

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BOOK REVIEW 2

Title: *Intimate Enemies. Demonizing the Bolshevik Opposition, 1918-1928*. By Igal Halfin (2007). University of Pittsburgh Press., Pittsburgh, p. 416. ISBN 10-0-8229-4329-8.

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In his book "Intimate Enemies. Demonizing the Bolshevik Opposition, 1918-1928" Igal Halfin focuses upon an intriguing period in Russian history, which is the decade following the Russian revolution, in which occurred a severe transformation of the Bolshevik ideology.

In setting out his these, that rhetoric played a major role in the transformation, Halfin took enough space for drawing the context and the spirit of the Russian events. Political rhetoric, indeed, is inextricably linked to cultural and institutional frames. It is a merit of the book that Halfin, in the midst of these frames (which are nevertheless interesting), shows the discipline to stick to his subject of the Bolshevik ideology and, specifically, to the discourse of the opposition.

Questions addressed by Halfin include the following. How did the Bolshevik define their own ideology after the Russian revolution? In which way discussion and struggles between opinions were dealt with? Who had the power to decide upon "true" and "false"? In order to clarify these issues, Halfin relies upon the so-called "Party Discussions", which consisted of the materials stemming from the official period of deliberation preceding the large party conferences. Halfin considers these discussions as institutional rituals, in which conclusions of the deliberations and, equally, the results of the conferences themselves are determined by rhetorical tricks and by power positions.

Most interesting are the evolutions to be noticed throughout a series of party conferences, being the central authority and main constructs of the Bolshevik "public sphere. Much can be learnt from the changes in the organization of the conferences, in which a constant tension can be observed between "the ingrained equality in the brotherhood of the elect and the rank imposed by function and Party seniority" (p. 34). At the beginning, unanimity was almost forbidden and representatives chosen by their people were free to decide upon what seemed the best for the future of the Revolution. They were only "obligated to explain later on to their home organizations what arguments convinced them to vote as they did" (p. 35). The Party's Central Committee's authority was often challenged and far from absolute. A first turning point, however, occurred already in 1918-1919 as the Democratic Centralists at the end of the Civil War could empower the Central Committee. Nevertheless, this accomplishment by the Democratic Centralists at the Eighth Party Congress could hardly be repeated by the Workers Opposition at the Ninth Confer-

ence. Transition being announced already by the change in terminology of the groups names, this period right after the Civil War is still, though, labeled as the "Heyday of workers' democracy" (p. 38). Divergences in opinions were still accepted and democratically decided. During the early Twenties the Party landscape consisted of four groups, including the Trotsky group, the Lenin group, the Zinoviev group, and the "Workers' Opposition Group. The study of the campaign for the Tenth Congress made – at the same time – clear that the last group represented the "opposition", while it was also seen as an asset for the revolution. This conference, as a consequence, illustrated the importance within the Bolshevik public sphere of discourse, rhetoric and a variety of currents.

This Tenth Congress, nevertheless, marked an attitude shift toward the "opposition" concept. Now that the Bolshevik won the Civil War, the enemy had to be sought within the own ranks. The term "opposition", from now on, stands for "danger", "conflict" and "traitor". It is the different social-economic context, with riots and strikes, that creates this new 'word meaning'. The "liberal" measures that, as a consequence, were taken and the strengthened power of the Party leadership over the base, resulted in a protest movement. Meanwhile, the Tenth Congress had accepted the much contested resolution "On Party Unity", that defended the existence of different platforms and currents. Terms as "unity", "expression" and "vanguard" were put forward at the cost of discussion, "Currents" became "Factions" and "disagreement" turned into "deviation", while "opposition" became some kind of "disease" that made a "cure" or even a "punishment" necessary. According to Lenin, "Quarantine" was the ultimate remedy against this "Party infection", while "the vaccination would address breakdowns stemming not from anyone's 'evil will' but from 'grave malady' ". It was at the event of a large Party Screening of 1924 that Opposition would be established as a Character Trait. The "Control Commission" used autobiographies to perform its screening task after which a hearing took place and a diagnosis was formulated in which social origin seemed a crucial factor.

Even a step further had been taken at the Thirteenth Party Congress after a heavy debate on the right of ideological freedom. The 1924 Control process seemed no longer in accordance with Bolshevik ideals. "Each side accused the other of retreating from a purely proletarian line and slipping towards the petite bourgeoisie" (p. 167). In the years 1924-1925 "oppositionism" was no longer seen as a sign of being immature or ill. Since Trotsky's publication "Lessons of October", opposition was related to counterrevolution. The power vacuum that was created by the death of Lenin was filled with the struggle between Trotsky on the one hand and the triumvirate of Kamenev, Zinoviev and Stalin on the other hand which said to represent Leninism. Hard repression prevented a real counterrevolution, in fact part of which was located in Leningrad. Trotskyism and also Zinovievism later on were demonized by Stalin and replaced oppositionism. In less than two years support of Trotsky had evolved from an acceptable opinion to a dangerous distortion from the discipline, with connotations of betrayal and conspiracy. It would take until after the Discussion with the United Opposition in 1926 and 1927 before the opposition would in fact be labeled as those who aimed at the end of Bolshevism.

In a third crucial time period, Stalin called the "United Opposition" – which wanted to form an independent party – an "evil force" at the Fifteenth Party Conference. By lack of support for this new movement, Stalin was at the winning hand again. Halfin sees the inquisition, which followed the period of disagreement, as the end of a severe transforma-

tion. At the Seventh Party Congress, discussion obligatorily started with disagreement, but now unanimity was the order.

Halfin summarizes the main thesis of the book as follows: "Stalin's consolidation of power coincided and broadly depended on the essentialization of the opposition and its transformation into a personality trait" (p. 331). Halfin's book gives us a very interesting view upon the internal kitchen of the communist party during a very turbulent period. It certainly certifies the power of language and rhetoric and its influence upon political events.