

Book Review | Other People's Politics: Populism to Corbynism by J.A. Smith

In Other People's Politics: Populism to Corbynism, J.A. Smith seeks to critically analyse and historicise our contemporary political moment, tracing the conditions that made movements like Corbynism possible, while also diagnosing their shortcomings and mapping out potential strategies for a new Left Populism. This is a welcome critical intervention into debates on populism and should be read by scholars across the social sciences and humanities, recommends Paul Ewart.



Jeremy Corbyn rallying in Glasgow, December 2019 Picture: [Jeremy Corbyn/CC BY 2.0](#) licence

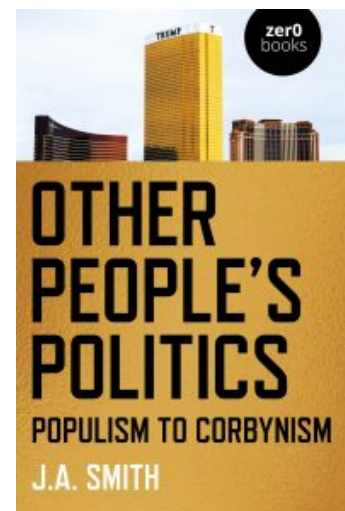
Other People's Politics: Populism to Corbynism. J.A. Smith. Zer0 Books. 2019.

Following the 2019 general election, it is tempting to read [Other People's Politics](#) as a book that could only have been written in the heady days of peak Corbynism. This would be a mistake, and would do the author a great disservice: in tracing the conditions which made Corbynism possible, J.A. Smith also diagnoses its shortcomings and maps out potential strategies for a new Left Populism.

Other People's Politics is a complex, critical work that seeks to analyse and historicise the 'new populism' that builds on, and is in conversation with, a now substantial body of New Left thinking and criticism that emerged in the early to mid-2000s, first through theory (in the absence of politics), and later through blogs and books related to the publishers Verso, Zer0 and Repeater.

Other People's Politics is divided in two parts, the first analytical, the second more polemical. In Chapters One to Three, Smith traces the history of populism and its current, slippery, pejorative and politicised usage. Beginning with [a 2016 speech by Tony Blair](#) following the EU referendum, Smith shows how a term that had all but disappeared from the political lexicon [was weaponised in defence of the status quo](#) against insurgent movements of the Right and Left from 2016.

Smith, following [Mark Fisher](#), argues that the collapse of centrism was a direct result of its own failings: it was unable to withstand the crisis of 2008 because it had *never* been popular on its own terms. Populism, described thus, is merely other people's politics, and other people's politics are invariably worse than Blair's.



Having situated the conditions that inform the current, critically lax usage of the term, Smith then sets out to explain how these 'other people's politics' have come to dominate politically since 2016 by focusing on austerity economics, populism and digital capitalism, before taking a look at 'the new culture wars centrism' of Stephen Pinker and Jordan Peterson, the alt right and the 'new socialism, spearheaded [...] by Corbyn's re-modelled Labour Party in the UK' (4).

Such a structure may appear haphazard at first (how do Petersen and Pinker fit into this story?), and Chapters One and Two cover familiar ground, albeit with [added Lacan](#), but Smith's critical, synthetic intervention begins to come together with his analysis of the 'digital libidinal economy', 'solutionism' and expertise from Chapter Three onwards.

If populism is understood as [a rejection of elites](#), what were the conditions that led to such a rejection, and how were these ideas circulated and popularised? Smith argues that Blair, Barack Obama et al were their own gravediggers, that the long emphasis in the 1990s on technocratic expertise and digital 'solutionism' produced an alienated, 'asphyxiated' political culture, unable to withstand the shock of the financial crisis of 2008:

The professional, "qualified" kind of politicians were mortified to be replaced by populists who denounced experts and claimed to act at one with the popular will. But the case can be made that Trump and the Brexiteers did little more than take the logic of digital capitalism at its word, applying to the explicitly political arena rules and assumptions that had already been accepted in any number of cultural, social, economic, and even military ones. Indeed, with the explicit encouragement of centrist parties. In this way, populism, as well as being a particularly contingent political style, actually runs far deeper in the logic of our culture in our present digital capitalism, and all of us who use digital media have some complicity with it.

Smith's analysis thus outlines the material conditions that enabled the rise of populism and historicises the processes that constitute its current form. In doing so, he adds some welcome depth to analyses of the current populism (what were 1945 and 1979 if not populist moments?) and extends and expands arguments made by Fisher and [Will Davies](#).

How are we to understand Chapter Five's diversion into the world of Peterson and Pinker in this light? If we are to understand neoliberalism in epistemological terms, and as a colonising force, [as per Davies](#), as an attempt to 'anchor modernity in the market [...] to make economics the main measure of progress and reason', then Pinker's role as a champion of enlightenment values, and thus technocratic expertise, makes a great deal of sense. History is progress plus rational expertise strictly bounded by the limits of the possible, and the limits of the Real, are, of course, policed by disinterested experts, [hence the language of post-politics, post-history and post-ideology that defined the long 1990s](#). If populism is other people's politics, then Peterson and Pinker would appear to be railing against other people's histories.

In teasing out Pinker and Peterson's inconsistencies, Smith begins the necessary genealogical work required to fully comprehend the disparate and dissonant group of cultural and political actors that coalesced to forge and embed the common sense of the long 1990s. This argument goes some way to explaining elite reactions to the rise of a new politics traced by Smith, a form of centrist narcissism unable to adapt to new conditions, characterised at both a cultural and political level by a hectoring demand for the return to business as usual and governance by 'rational' experts versus 'irrational' populists. History, understood as the movement of people, did not end in 1989, after all.

Which brings us to the present, and Smith's final chapter, an analysis of the current conjuncture and how the Left might mimic the strategies of the Populist Right. Here Smith extends his Lacanian analysis to [the field of Left Populism](#). In this chapter, Smith argues that the Left, like the Right, has learned how to weaponise the libidinal potential of digital media by creating memes that people *want* to share. This networked, bottom-up strategy fitted well with Corbyn's semi-Left-Populist approach in 2017 but proved unsustainable as Facebook changed its algorithm (power, after all, is power), and the Right adapted its own digital media strategy.

Nonetheless, if read in conjunction with [James Meadway](#) and [James Butler's recent post-election analyses](#), Smith's argument is deepened. It is in the failure to fully embrace, articulate or understand voters' desires in the present, not in 2017, that Corbynism came unstuck. By apparently siding with 'the elites' (parliament) against 'the people' in 2019, Labour broke the discursive chain established between 2015 and 2017, allowing Boris Johnson to position himself as the voice of the people against a Left movement representing the status quo. Moreover, Smith's Lacanian analysis of Johnson's appeal to the id holds true as [Butler](#) notes:

Despite abundant evidence from around the world, many people still find it hard to accept that flagrant lying is no longer a disqualification in public life, and that it might in fact be an attraction.

Smith's *Other People's Politics* is a welcome critical intervention into debates on populism, which interrogates, situates and historicises its usage and should be read by scholars in the humanities and social sciences alike.

This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of Democratic Audit. It was first published on the [LSE Review of Books blog](#).

About the author

Paul Ewart is a tutor and researcher on the history and memory of the long 1970s in the present, at the University of Sussex.

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