

Imprints of the Populist Time

Book Discussion (Online), 19 March 2023, on Zoom

Moderator: Samir Kumar Das, *University of Calcutta* & CRG

Discussants: Ranabir Samaddar, CRG

Sandro Mezzadra, *University of Bologna*

Samita Sen, *University of Cambridge* & CRG

The discussion began with an introduction to the book given by the moderator, pointing out three sub-themes: a) the historicity of the people, b) breaking the distinction between 'politics' and 'political', and c) populism as an anathema to economic rationality - three departures important for understanding society.

Ranabir Samaddar began the discussion with the idea of preparing the book. The idea came as a response to the Left Politics in India as well as in the global scenario. He said that the book which is the second one of his writings on populist politics, was a response to his colleagues who told his book "Passive Revolution in West Bengal 1977-2011" (2013) is 'under-theorised'. According to Samaddar, 'populism' defines ensemble of popular political practices which could not be theorised all the time. Therefore, the book is a mix of theoretical exercises and experiential understandings. According to his definition, populism is an idea where the idea of a group of individuals transformed into a population who thought that they are not only the denizens of democracy but also contributors to that exercise. Secondly, as per Samaddar's definition, populism could not be judged only through the representative mechanism or organised movements (Trade Union Movements, etc.), because the character of these activities is not historically similar all the time. He said that, the current idea on populism could not define the process to organise labour in the nineteenth century or the uprising of the subalterns in the seventeenth century. Therefore, it was difficult for him to draw a line between the popular and the populist through any particular formulae. Thirdly, referring to Michael Foucault's "The Punitive Society" (1973), Samaddar argued the necessity to study the changes in the character of people/citizens with the transformation of the society. He said that the changes in the history of the politics of the people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries should be noticed through the lenses of Foucault and Marx's idea on society, class and class struggle and through economic understanding. Referring to the current movement on securing pensions in France, Samaddar said that the reason behind securing pension as a popular movement could not be possible without the success of the yellow vest movement (by French workers and the middle class) in 2018. Both the movements, though separate in their characteristics, supported each other in the second decade of the twenty-first century. These two incidents, according to Samaddar defined the changes in the characteristics of populism. He thus concluded by saying that the idea of populism should be seen through multiple lenses with contextual references, not as a single definition.

Samita Sen began the discussion with the complicated framework of the book. She said that Samaddar's approach towards populism pointed out both historical as well as theoretical complexities. Although Ranabir Samaddar tried to define populism with a particular historical context, he also brought an analysis of contemporary global politics with a historical understanding of populism. There were many spatial and territorial layers in that book which made the argument more interesting. Secondly, Samaddar took an empirical stand to study the relationship between populism and representation by studying elections (both General and Assembly Elections) of 2014, 2016, 2019 and 2021 which according to Samita Sen, showed the relationship between populism and representation. Thirdly, Samaddar showed the relationship between migration and citizenship which turned to a crucial factor in contemporary politics both in India and in all over the world. Fourthly, Samaddar theorised the idea of "Biopolitics from Below" through the relationship between the pandemic and politics with the body of the poor migrant labourers. She also pointed out that the gender question played an important role in the preparation of the base of the book. Samaddar, focused on the charismatic presence of two women leaders, Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal and J. Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu. Samita Sen focussed on politics since the decade of 1980 where the presence of populism was prominent.

According to Samita Sen, the idea of populism began with politics since the time of Indira Gandhi. Indira, through her charismatic image started a new trend of populist politics which made her the one and only icon of her time. According to Samita Sen, Indira never considered women as a vote bank. The women leaders (mainly Mamata Banerjee and to some extent Jayalalitha) clearly mentioned in Samaddar's book considered women as an inevitable part of their electorate. Therefore, the women-centric populist policies through different schemes in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu became one of the key success points for both the leaders. Sen gave examples from West Bengal Government's policy level interventions to secure child rights (especially girl child rights) and prevention of child marriage. Sen also focused on the chapter on the question of civility which addressed the gender question as well as securing the right to subaltern intervention. She referred the subsection of the book where Samaddar explained the exchange of words between well-known Bengali poet and litterateur Sankha Ghosh and the then President of the Birbhum District Trinamool Congress (the ruling party led by Mamata Banerjee) Anubrata Mandal ("The Commissar and the Poet", p. 95 of the book) to understand the power dimension in the society under a populist government. According to Sen, Ranabir Samaddar framed his argument through the lexicon of resistance on one side and the lexicon of state on the other. While the lexicon of resistance covered four themes (multitude, class, people and population), the lexicon of the state covered three major aspects (rights, protection and welfare). The relationship between the lexicons were important to understand the current debates on citizenship which became an important issue after the partition. The debate (through CAA-NRC) enhanced the possibility of statelessness for a larger section of people. Ranabir Samaddar successfully pointed out the details about the politics to resistance against the new debate on citizenship - populist policies played a successful role there.

Sandro Mezzadra began with a quote from Samaddar's book, "left-wing populist upsurge today is all about the class question of our time." According to Mezzadra the book is searching for a new class politics that is capable of new democratic and socialist transformations. The book along with Samaddar's "Passive Revolution in West Bengal (2013)" shows the transformation in the materiality of politics in West Bengal which led to a specific kind of class politics emerging into populism. The book provides one of the most important debates on populism. Mezzadra pointed out the chapter where Ranabir Samaddar gave importance to populist economy and popular literature to define populism. "Populist Economy" as Samaddar explained "the economics grounded with the idea of protection, as well as the idea of economic justice." Referring to Partha Chatterjee's book "I Am the People (2020)," Mezzadra said that Partha Chatterjee opposed the extension of state power upon its citizens which he called as an "integral state system." He also argued that the post-colonial states began their journey with an entirely new set of techniques to reach the governance system towards the margins. He said that by doing that the state ensured the conditions to legitimate the dominance of capital. Samaddar argued that the welfare schemes of the state also ensured dominance. Mezzadra said that Samaddar's arguments are not only applicable to West Bengal but also to the worldwide understanding of populism. Samaddar in his book refused to accept "populism" as an ideology. According to him, populism was an ensemble of economic and political practices which according to Mezzadra was the most important intervention. Samaddar showed how to differentiate both the practices. He analysed differences between left and right-wing populism through these practices. Samaddar addressed both ideas and tried to prove that populism, whether right or left had a material background against which class and class struggle played a crucial role. Mezzadra told his experience of living under a right-wing coalition government in Italy, where the far rights play a prominent role. He experienced a different kind of populism with a mixture of racism and hatred, especially towards migrants, and therefore, he believed that the distinction between right and left populism could not be ruled out. But there is a common link between both populisms. Both of them (at least in Europe and the US) are afraid of migrants. Whether the right-wing populists were in favour of pure race and ethnicity and therefore believed that the migrants may create socio-economic crisis, the left populists thought that the migrants along with several other groups (like minorities, women etc.) betrayed the formation working-class and class struggles. Mezzadra pointed out the incapability of the current left politics, at least in Europe, to understand the new class dimensions. Mezzadra differed with Samaddar's opinion on the current populist movement in France and said that the yellow vest movement was a "class movement." It has a decade-long history of social mobilisation and class struggle. According to Mezzadra the Black Vest began in November 2018 to legitimise migrant workers, and played crucial role behind the Yellow Vest movement; economics also played a crucial role in it. Therefore, to conclude

his argument, Mezzadra said that class had multifarious differences in the current time. It is necessary to study the economics of populism or populist policies as Samaddar did in his book to understand the dynamics of class composition.

There were several questions on the changing character of populism in current times. The speakers reflected that the local references may lead to a global idea of populism. The examples from Tamil Nadu, Assam and other states were given by Samaddar as references of multidimensional populism with gender playing an important part. The idea of modern-day citizenship was also rooted in the migrant question. Ideas of parliament, democracy and citizenship also emerged as undeniable units of discussion during the session.

The full discussion is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MC0fSDfeqpw&t=119s>