EDA SANT’S POLITICAL EDUCATION IN TIMES OF POPULISM (2021) offers a refreshing read. There has been considerable moral panic about the rise in populism, evidenced by both popular and scholarly publications (e.g., Drache & Froese, 2022; Galston, 2018), including a special issue of the Canadian journal Academic Matters (2017) dedicated to “the populist challenge for universities.” In this context, Sant’s take on populism is level-headed: “Rather than examining populism as a disease that needs curing, this book uses populism as a diagnostic tool to comprehend our reality and how we are reacting and could react to it” (p. xv). Sant takes a salutary, minimalist view of populism, seeing it as “a thin term referring to political practices that polarize society into two distinct groups, the elite and the people, where the people underpin the ultimate source of the general will” (pp. 47, 52). In other words, populism refers to an attempt to construct a “we, the people” who oppose themselves to a dominant regime, but the substance of this “people” and the nature of their disagreement with the dominant regime varies considerably. Understood in this minimalist way, there is no need for moral panic about populism itself, as it is a common part of the dynamic cycle of democracies. We should reserve our moral panic for the racist, sexist, and sometimes downright anti-democratic and fascist substance of particular populist movements.

Sant’s (2021) book has an ambitious scope. In addition to the helpful conception of populism, it offers an analysis of different kinds of democracy, a view of the cyclical democratic process, and a diagnosis of the current democratic state of affairs:

We are living in turbulent times where existing institutions appear to be in decline. . . . And in these tumultuous times we have seen the rise and fall of populist leaders and movements. Populists are more a symptom that accompanies these changes, not a trigger. (p. 76)

The book opens with background on democratic political education. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 present the central theoretical framing of the book. This framing includes the view, based on the work of Ernesto Laclau, that populist uprising is a natural part of the democratic cycle. It further includes a conception of political subjectivity as open, relational, and affective, and a psychoanalytic perspective on both aspirational democracy and populism as “fantasmatic.” Sant (2021) then provides a critique of the emancipatory goals in aspirational forms of democratic political education, arguing that the economic, epistemic, and political aspects of the “emancipatory project” are bound to fail. The final three chapters translate the argument for

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open democracy into practical approaches for classroom teaching, down to the level of specific exercises and discussion topics. While there is more to say about whether it is helpful to distinguish the proposed "pedagogy of differences," "pedagogy of articulation," and "pedagogy of equivalence" as such, my review focuses on the theoretical analysis and argument and not the pedagogical suggestions in these chapters.

One of the challenges for a wide-ranging theoretical analysis and argument is how it can be framed in such a way as to resonate in different social, cultural, and political contexts. In the main UK and Spanish examples Sant (2021) elaborates, she is clear about the specificity of the contexts. However, she also makes reference to other contexts—including Trump and Sanders in the US, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Orbán in Hungary, and Morales in Bolivia—and so the analysis and argument is made in terms that appear to claim general relevance. As Knight Abowitz and Sellers (2022) comment in a previous review of the book, the overarching analytic frames of the book, including the distinction between aspirational, pragmatic, and open democracy, and the psychoanalytic conception of fantasies, are thought-provoking. At the same time, universalist explanatory frames can also become constraining and lose sensitivity to the specificity of local contexts and how these are shaped by their historical conditions.

For example, understanding exactly what populist fantasies collide with what other fantasies of the dominant social order would require a deep analysis of the particular context and cannot always be captured neatly in the schematic clash Sant (2021) sketches. For Sant, a fantasy or "fantasmatic narrative" is a view of the good life that is "consistently experienced as something 'to come', or to recover, rather than a situated experience in the present or a celebration of the past" (p. 87). In addition to being an unattainable "object of desire," fantasies are complete, perfect pictures: "There is a feeling that what will come will make us feel entirely complete in such a way that we will experience the ultimate status of inner and social harmony" (p. 88). Sant presents both aspirational democracy and populism as fantasies. In the case of the former, her conception of modern, liberal forms of democracy that rely on individual rights and rational deliberation as "aspirational" has already framed it as fantasmatic. However, I am puzzled by Sant's claim that "populism is a modern fantasy of democracy" (p. 88). Certainly, populist movements are informed and motivated by particular fantasies, ranging from a white supremacist society to an egalitarian one, and these are fantasies perceived to be at odds with the one that shapes dominant institutions at the time. A group's desire to form a "we, the people" arises from the perception that the dominant social order is a barrier to the realization of that group's idea of the good life. However, it is not populism itself that is the fantasy; populism is merely a means to an end, a way for people to organize themselves into a movement that makes political demands.

I agree with Sant (2021) that the focus on knowledge and the epistemic battle against supposed "post-truths" and "alternative facts," which she attributes to the aspirational perspective on democracy, is not going to achieve the end of combating the forms of populism perceived to be problematic: "Education is expected to . . . emancipate us from irrationality. The assumption is that, if people gain the right form of knowledge, they will not support populist alternatives" (p. 113). Instead, as Sant argues, we have to understand the profoundly affective desires and attachments that drive populist movements in their particular contexts.

In Chapter 3, Sant (2021) discusses various phenomena that have all been proposed as contributing forces to the rise of populism: changes in communication and, especially, a greater reliance on social media; educational failure; and globalization. While it is uncontroversial to argue that none of these phenomena is, by itself, a sufficient explanation, and that their relative influence depends on the particularity of the context and the populist response, I was surprised at Sant's quick dismissal of one of the partial explanations of populism: that it is a reaction to feeling left behind by social changes. Sant discusses this explanation only in the form of feeling left behind by globalization and acknowledges that, while this may be a phenomenon that explains some forms of populism in some contexts, "this theory is not helpful in understanding all instances of populist activity" (p. 55). Moreover, argues Sant, some of the people involved in populist movements can be shown to have benefited from globalization: The typical "Trump voter," for instance, "benefits from low-cost products produced elsewhere and from his status as white male in a globalised world where patriarchal and racism are often institutionalized" (p. 56). Sant here seems to abandon her own affective lens. What matters for the case of Trump voters (and, as we will see, certain Brexit supporters) is not whether they are, objectively speaking, worse off as a result of certain social and economic changes and whether they would, objectively speaking, be better off if their populist candidate of choice were elected. Rather, what matters is whether these voters feel that social and economic changes have left them worse off and whether they feel that their candidate of choice offers new hope.

This picture emerges clearly from Arlie Russell Hochschild’s (2016) in-depth sociological analysis of the appeal of the Tea Party movement in Louisiana, in the years leading up to Trump's election in 2016. Hochschild uses not the concept of the fantasy but rather that of the "deep story" as an explanatory frame:

**A deep story is a feels-as-if story—it's the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols. It removes judgment. It removes fact. It tells us how things feel. Such a story permits those on both sides of the political spectrum to stand back and explore the subjective prism through which the party on the other side sees the world. And I don't believe we understand anyone's politics, right or left, without it. For we all have a deep story. (p. 135)**

The deep story is not just a fantasy of the good life toward which people strive but which must, according to the psychoanalytic perspective, remain perpetually out of reach; it is also a powerfully explanatory story of how the current state of affairs came about and how those who tell the story are positioned in it. In the case of the Tea Party movement, Hochschild (2016) explains that its supporters do not feel like the losers of globalization, specifically, but like the losers of progress, more generally. The feeling is that the new social arrangement of "progress" has betrayed them by letting many others cut in line, so to speak, while
the Tea Party supporters were waiting patiently for their turn at the American dream:

> As strangers in their own land, [Tea Party supporters] wanted their homeland back, and the pledges of the Tea Party offered them that. It offered them financial freedom from taxes, and emotional freedom from the strictures of liberal philosophy and its rules of feeling. Liberals were asking them to feel compassion for the downtrodden in the back of the line, the “slaves” of society. They didn’t want to; they felt downtrodden themselves and wanted only to look “up” to the elite. (p. 219)

Different from Sant’s (2021) description of the fantasy, Tea Party supporters’ view of the good life was very much anchored in the past. They were well aware that this past was not perfect, but it gave them a sense of honor (in hard work and sacrifice), a sense of community and local agency, and a sense of pride. Tea Party supporters in the American South felt ridiculed—once again—by Northerners who saw them as backward, poor, and “moronic” (Ehrenreich, 2015, as cited in Hochschild, 2016, p. 144). There are striking connections between this deep story and the one recounted by Sant (2021) among the Brexit supporters: “We are a nation of strong hardworking and proud people. Do not call us morons or idiots. As a person who has nearly hit rock bottom but pulled myself up again I’m prepared to do it again for a better society” (emphasis added, p. 82).

Education, broadly conceived, involves an understanding of one’s present conditions as well as the long reach of history. In many countries, both settler societies and European societies of former colonizers, this involves the long reach of colonialism and how it continues to shape the reality of democracy and the affective attachments to views of the good life. Sant’s (2021) book is a timely and engaging work that includes both theoretical analysis and detailed examples of particular and recent populist movements, such as Brexit in 2016 and the Chilean protests and demands for constitutional change in 2019. It gives educators new and provocative points of departure for discussing present conditions and the long reach of history in their particular context, including how and why political movements have arisen and developed as they have. In doing so, it makes an original and substantive contribution to rethinking how “political education [can] provide an appropriate response to our current climate” (p. 122).

References


