

GUIDO BARBI

Christopher J. Bickerton, Carlo Invernizzi Accetti,  
*Technopopulism. The New Logic of Democratic Politics*, Oxford,  
Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 256.

*Technopopulism* has the ambitious goal of extrapolating and conceptualizing the contemporary “logic” of democratic politics. More precisely, a “political logic” is taken to be the “contextually and historically specific set of incentives and constraints, which affects the way in which rival contenders for public office compete with one another in the electoral sphere, independently of their substantive policy goals” (p. 21). Christopher Bickerton’s and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti’s main claim is that despite the frequent opposition of technocracy and populism in public and academic discourse, current democratic politics is best described as dominated by a technopopulist logic, which requires political actors to make use of both populist *and* technocratic tools to claim to be legitimately representing the people as a whole. The authors make their point by successfully interweaving an insightful conceptual framework with an informed historical narrative. Despite the diverse topics broached by the book, it maintains clarity and organic unity throughout, which give substance to the book’s ambitious claims. The work is structured roughly in three thematic blocks dedicated to the conceptualization (Ch. 1-2), contextualization (Ch. 3-4), and evaluation (Ch. 5) of the technopopulist political logic.

In the first two chapters, the authors establish the concept of technopopulism. According to the authors, this new political logic results from and further consolidates the progressive shift of democratic competition from a horizontal to a vertical axis. If before political positions could be categorized along an ideological left-right distinction based on competing social interests, the new vertical axis conceptually distinguishes between a (legitimate) interest of the whole from the (illegitimate) interest of its parts. The key feature of this shift, however, is that it is a formal one – one concerning the “political logic”. Therefore, it “cannot be understood in terms of the emergence of a new political ‘cleavage’ because it

stems in large part from a process of separation – or disconnect – between social conflicts and divisions, on one hand, and partisan political rivalries, on the other”. (p. 36) Precisely because the shift is not substantive but formal, technocracy and populism are complementary, rather than opposite to each other. They are both conducive to capturing the voter’s favor by claiming knowledge and ability to realize the general will of the people. Accordingly, different “mixes” of technopopulism are possible, especially considering that the technopopulist logic has not completely replaced the ideological logic but is still partly superimposed onto it. After establishing the concept, Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti delve into categorizing two types of technopopulist actors: pure and hybrid. For “pure” technopopulist actors, the remnant of the ideological logic is spurious at best. Rather, they deploy technopopulist discourse in defining their political identity (usually embodied by a charismatic leader). The authors exemplarily discuss UK’s New Labour, Italy’s 5-Star-Movement, and France’s Macronism. Additionally, the authors discuss left- and right-wing hybrid cases of technopopulist actors that deploy similar appeals in electoral strategy but remain attached to ideological party identities.

The book’s second part (Ch. 3-4) analyzes technopopulism’s causal origins and main consequences. The historical narrative the authors span is detailed and cannot be discussed step-by-step. However, their main claim is that technopopulism enters the scene with the increasing decline of organized interests – itself caused by several factors, such as the increasing fluidity of society’s class structure, or the end of the cold war. Moreover, the severance between organized interests and political organization is understood as being further strengthened by the effects of technopopulism itself. The new political logic is not only rooted in, but rather also strengthens “[t]he presumption that there exists a procedure-independent criterion of political truth [implying] that politicians are not to be evaluated on the basis of their particular policy goals (which are assumed to be consensual), but precisely on the basis of their capacity to deliver on these presumptively consensual policy ends”. (p. 153) This leads to an increasing personalization and desubstantiation of politics, “making the process and the means – rather than the ends – the substance of political debate”. (p. 158) This further exacerbates distrust in democratic procedures and authoritarian tendencies in decision-making processes.

This assessment leads to the final chapter of the book, which attempts to give a provisional normative evaluation of the technopopulist phenomenon. The main *malaise* the authors identify in technopopulism is precisely how it hinders the political mediation of competing social interests – be it institutionally or discursively. Solutions apt at counteracting it should not be sought in institutional correctives to public discourse (already dominated by a technopopulist political logic), nor in the balance between technocratic and populist elements (which are seen as false opposites). Rather, political mediation should be reactivated through a democratization of party organizations. According to Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, ideally, this could lead to reconfiguring political competition along renewed ideological lines mediating competing interests present in society.

*Technopopulism* is a highly insightful contribution to the study of one of the urgent topics of our time: the deep-seated crisis of liberal democracy. The narrative spun by Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti is compelling throughout. The only *desideratum* the reader might be left with is for more attention to the specific qualities of populism and technocracy, which are often overshadowed by attention to their common traits (especially in the book's latter half). More attention to their specificity would have helped clarify the authors' evaluative claim about the desubstantialization of technopopulist politics. While their reading of technopopulism as the consequence of the breakdown of ideological political mediation is clear and convincing, it is not as clear why technopopulism should equate to the complete negation of political mediation as such. Political appeals to the people (as opposed to only interest groups therein) don't seem restricted to the technopopulist era, nor do all technopopulist topics seem devoid of political substance. Moreover, the very procedural element of politics itself – held to be the main “substance” of the desubstantiated political debate – could be understood to reflect different interests in society, especially in the context of the complex sovereignty status of EU member states. For instance, by many accounts, the Brexit referendum could be read along these lines, pitting ‘technocrats’ against ‘populists’ in deciding the institutional (but hardly unsubstantial) question of UK's membership in the EU. In this sense, the reader might be left wondering if technopopulism couldn't be read as a necessary transitory phase between one kind of political mediation and another. Yet, such interpretative uncertainties

are – at least in part – the side-effect of the ideal-typical approach characterizing the book. As such, they simply constitute the necessary price for an approach that certainly paid its dividends. For, it is precisely the successful combination of conceptual and historical methodology, that makes *Technopopulism's* main claim compelling and certain to influence the reader's view on the state of contemporary democracy.