

BOOK REVIEWS

Jonathan Hopkin, *Anti-System Politics. The Crisis of Market Liberalism in Rich Democracies*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, ISBN 9780190699765, 331 pages

Review by Cristina MATIUTA

The rise of political parties that challenges the established political order in the advanced western democracies is widely debated in the literature of the last decades. The book signaled here- *Anti-System Politics. The Crisis of Market Liberalism in Rich Democracies*-, written by Jonathan Hopkin, Professor of Comparative Politics at the London School of Economics, adds value to this debate, explaining why anti-system parties from both the left and the right prosper in different countries and among different types of voters. As the author states from the beginning, the basic premise of the book is that the political and economic system failed to provide solutions and to protect citizens from the brutal effects of the economic crisis and the anti-system movements are a predictable response to this failure: “What the anti-system Left and Right have in common is their shared rejection of the political and economic order governing the rich democracies at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This rejection is most powerful in the democracies where inequality is highest, and where the social and economic effects of the Global Financial Crisis have been most severe” (p. 3).

Coined by political scientist Giovanni Sartori in the 1960s to describe political parties opposing to the liberal democratic political order in Western democracies, the term “anti-system” often overlapped in the public debate with that of populism. Even if the anti-system parties studied in this book adopt, to a greater or a lesser extent, a populist view of democracy, the author generally avoids the concept of populism which has acquired a significant pejorative connotation, undermining

serious and systematic analysis. Rather than dismissing anti-system politics as populism, driven by racial hatred, foreign conspiracies, irrational belief in fake news etc., we need to understand what has gone wrong in the rich democracies to alienate so many citizens from those who govern them and why the democratic political institutions failed to represent popular demands. To answer these questions, the author argues that the anti-system politics is rooted in structural changes in the economy and it is the long-term result of abandoning the post-war model of egalitarian capitalism in the 1970s.

The book is divided into three parts with a total of seven chapters. Part one, including the first two chapters places the anti-system politics in the long-term perspective of the conflictual relationship between capitalism and democracy over the past century. Thus, using a comparative approach and various political and economic indicators available for several decades (party & union membership; income shares, deficits & distribution in democracies etc.), the first chapter shows how democracy collided with the market economy throughout the twentieth century, generating economic and political instability of the early twenty-first century: “...the market liberal orthodoxy of the late twentieth century placed Western publics under a level of stress not seen since the 1930s. They had been subjected first to increasing inequality and insecurity, as labor market protections and welfare provisions were rolled back, while wealthy elites took most of the gains from the economic growth. Then the market volatility generated by a separate plank of the neoliberal reform agenda provoked a global crisis, which costs millions of citizens their jobs and wrecked the household balance sheets of many more” (p. 48). The second chapter presents the rise of anti-system parties and explains how exposure to inequality and financial insecurity predicts anti-system politics better than cultural factors. It shows that anti-system politics is stronger in countries with high trade deficits, weak welfare protections and closed electoral systems that limit the range of political options voters can choose from. Instead, in countries where economic and social institutions protect the population from economic risks and provide a more equal distribution of economic benefits, the success of anti-system politics is rather limited.

The second and third parts of the book apply the theory to several countries, illustrating how different kinds of anti-system political movements can win support in different social, economic and political contexts. Thus, Part Two analyzes the success of anti-system politics in the English-speaking world, namely the United

States (chapter 3) and the United Kingdom (chapter 4). The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States in 2016 brought anti-system politics to the heart of the world's most powerful democracy. "Trump's rise is deeply intertwined with the financial crisis and with the longer term political shifts resulting from the market liberal turn of the 1980s"- says the author (p. 87), which made US voters much more vulnerable and exposed to the fluctuations of the market system than in other advanced economies. His rise illustrates the failure of political establishment to protect the living standards of the majority. Similarly, the British voters' response to inequality and market liberalization took the form of the "Brexit" vote, in fact an anti-system vote of rejecting the political establishment and the economic policies it had implemented since 1980s: "Brexit is the consequence not of Britain's participation in an unpopular European project, but of the political choices made by British governments in recent decades, and the inability of the governing elites to respond to the consequences of these choices. Like the United States, the United Kingdom adopted a markedly neoliberal economic strategy after 1970s, and again like in the United States, this led to rapid increases in inequality, economic insecurity, and severe industrial decline in many regions. As a pioneer in the liberalization of financial markets, Britain found itself at the epicenter of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008" (p. 118). Therefore, the Leave vote was firstly a protest vote, not against the unbearable pressure from immigration, but against the economic and demographic decline.

The third part of the book (chapters 5 to 7) turns to the crisis of Eurozone and the success of anti-system parties in several European countries. The author distinguishes between two different patterns of anti-system politics in the Eurozone countries: more left-wing in debtor countries, demanding greater burden-sharing at a European level and a strengthening of social protection at home and more right-wing in creditor countries. The cases of southern European countries demonstrate how the financial crisis turned into a debt crisis not well managed by the national governments and that led to a powerful anti-system response directed against the institutions imposing austerity measures. The final chapter argues that the current wave of support for the anti-system political movements reflects the failure of the neoliberal economic model and the inability of the market liberalism project to deliver prosperity and security. It underlines that the only way for mainstream democratic parties to survive is to assume a more activist role in protecting societies from economic turbulences: "The idea that markets can resolve most social

problems, and that governments should simply provide the basic institutions to allow this to happen, has run out of political capital. Whatever new paradigm emerges must facilitate meaningful mass participation in political decision-making over whatever society thinks are important. In other words, what most people understand by the word *democracy*" (p. 257).