

## Retoryka zdrowia i choroby Rhetoric of health and illness

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### RECENZJA/REVIEW

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## **Recenzja/Review: Christian Kock, Lisa Villadsen (eds) *Populist Rhetorics Case Studies and a Minimalist Definition*, Palgrave Macmillan 2022.**

The book *Populist Rhetorics Case Studies and a Minimalist Definition* is the next volume in the *Rhetoric, Politics and Society* series published by Palgrave Macmillan, whose editors are Alan Finlayson, James Martin and Kendall R. Phillips. Two researchers associated with the University of Copenhagen prepared the book: Christian Kock and Lisa Villadsen. The volume consists of two chapters – an introduction and a conclusion – by the editors and seven case studies from different countries: USA, Italy, UK, Germany, Greece, Hungary and Venezuela. The authors are experienced researchers who deal with populism in various conditions and have articles and books on the phenomenon to their credit. They have studied specific cases and have also undertaken broader theoretical reflections.

Populism has become a key concept in describing the language of politics in recent years, but it is also emerging as an explanation for certain phenomena in media communication or political participation. Populism is studied as an ideological stance, a political strategy or a socio-cultural phenomenon. The topic in recent years seems inexhaustible both when it comes to the multitude of examples from the practice of political life and the interest of researchers manifested in conferences, special issues of journals or monographs.

Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo and Pierre Ostiguy, editors of the *Oxford Handbook of Populism*, published in 2017, pointed to the fragmented nature of the literature on populism, and the difficulty of conducting international or interregional comparisons. In addition, the history of populism is rich and complex, going far beyond the most common negative understanding of the phenomenon today.

In the Introduction of the book, Christian Kock and Lisa Villadsen rightly note that populism has become one of the crucial terms used today to describe the activities of right and left-wing politicians, journalists and publicists in many countries. Debates on whether populism should be considered in ideological terms

and associated with the right and/or the left continue unabated. A strongly drawn division between the people and the elites seems to be common, and the figure of a leader who speaks for the people also seems essential. Another debatable issue is whether populism is always and everywhere associated with a weakening of democracy or whether it can be treated as a value-neutral category or even an expression of 'real' democracy – since it embodies the voice of the people.

From the point of view of rhetorical scholars, the fundamental question is whether populism exists on its own, as a set of ideas, or is it inextricably linked to a particular type, a mode of communication – the eponymous rhetoric of populism? As the editors explain, the book aims to bring together the work of scholars who share a rhetorical approach to populism. “This approach implies a concern with understanding situated discourse in its particularity and involves an interest in how the discourse and its specific traits and qualities build a relation with its intended auditors, and how that relation may be characterised.” (p. 3). The analyses presented in the volume were primarily to show “the relevance and usefulness of close rhetorical readings of populist discourse” (p. 3). The editors note that many scholars working on populism in political science or philosophy do not use the term populist rhetoric, although it describes their focus.

It is also worth clarifying how the editors define rhetoric, because rhetoric often appears as an obvious and unambiguously negative term in debates about populism. In the book, rhetoric is “a *politically unmarked* term used to describe public discourse in the political realm”, “an academic tradition with roots in the ancient world and alive in many university settings to this day”, and finally, “*everything* a rhetor does communicatively with the aim of securing others’ adherence to a position”.

Rhetoric on this view is thus not a matter of stylistics, nor a presentational technique, but a comprehensive approach to communication that begins with the adaptation of a message (understood in its totality of ideas, appeals, and form) to a particular audience in order to influence their understanding, views, feelings and actions about the matter in question. (p. 6)

This framing of rhetoric certainly provides a holistic view of populism as a communication phenomenon.

In the volume, the channel (medium) is also strongly emphasized as one of the factors allowing the spread of populism. Does the popularity of Twitter help spread populist messages? Or maybe the very conditions of communication created by this platform encourage users to choose such forms of expression that drift in the direction of populism?

“Populist rhetorical melancholy” is a term that Paul Elliott Johnson (*Populist Melancholy*) uses to describe the Republican Party's approach to new challenges

in political life. Populism, in this view, becomes a rhetorical form and a political logic that shows that 'the people' are permanently harmed in some way.

The superiority of rhetorical construction over facts is also shown in Pamela Pietrucci's study (*Voltagabbana Rhetorics: Turncoating as a Populist Strategy in Pandemic Times*) on “voltagabbana rhetorics”, i.e. the tendency, characteristic of populist politicians (Metteo Salvini is an example in this case), to change the issues raised in the debate, to alter their position and meaning constantly. Pietrucci calls this “turncoating” and argues that seemingly incomprehensible changes are a response to what social media analysis shows. So, a politician's statements are being adapted primarily to the algorithms. Hence the name already appears in the literature: “algorithmic populism” (Maly 2018).

Moreover, such action is possible due to the popularity in the public debate of strategies that serve to win support by disavowing the opponent. The current effectiveness and prevalence of these strategies (always present in political life, after all, as Mirosław Karwat [2006a, 2006b] among others wrote about) is linked to the decline in trust, the lack of authorities recognised by all sides in a political dispute and the lack of respect for the authority of the law. (Jennifer Mercieca [2020] and Joshua Gunn [2020] mentioned by Pietrucci wrote about this).

Alan Finlayson (*Brexit, YouTube and the Populist Rhetorical Ethos*) argues that the new genres operating in online communication create new rhetorical situations in which the appeal to ethos becomes crucial. It is the character of the sender that determines how his or her message is received. In this view, populism can be understood as a style of presenting specific content, for example, as in the case discussed by Finlayson, the juxtaposition of the people against 'others' in a convention of good and evil. This way of representing reality is recognisable in populist rhetoric regardless of the country in which they operate.

Multimodal communication in new media provides new opportunities for leaders who would not otherwise gain support; their message focuses on convincing the audience that the politician is part of the people, part of an oppressed community. The mechanisms of identification, and the implied intimacy experienced by social media users (including YouTube), are crucial. The efficient use of the specificity of online parasocial relations and skilful use of technical possibilities (e.g. algorithms, audience engagement) makes it possible for populists to build their ethos as both an expert and 'one of us'. It is in the specificity of the creation of the ethos that Finlayson sees some features typical to the rhetoric of populism.

The importance of online communication for the rise of populism is also addressed by Olaf Kramer, Anne Ulrich and Dietmar Till, describing a German example (*Populism and the Rise of the AfD in Germany*). They analyse the case of the Alternative für Deutschland movement, showing the intertwining of media

logic, persuasive forms of expression and ideology. The authors identify the key perspectives for populist rhetoric as people-centred, anti-elitism, and exclusion of others.

This distinction between 'us' and 'them' in moral terms is repeated in different countries, and therefore, as the editors of the volume note, it is also a recurring theme in several chapters. It is also present in the study on Greece (*The Rhetorical Strategy of Moralisation: A Lesson from Greece*). Sophia Hatzisavvidou argues that populism needs to be analysed in a broader context that also considers the effects of populism. The author believes that it offers citizens the opportunity to identify with each other but at the same time, creates impassable moral dividing lines. We may belong to one group, but this means that everyone outside this group is different; their difference has a negative dimension, and overcoming divisions becomes impossible.

The dividing line drawn by populists is based, on the one hand, on an appeal to common sense, but the evaluation criteria stemming from this are rhetorically constructed. In this way, what is labelled as self-evident can, for example, be a story about the moral superiority of a certain group or grow out of a sense of disappointment and injustice.

Such clear divisions between 'good' and 'bad' help to create simple but compelling stories. Moreover, it is precisely the ability to narrate that turns out to be one of the key competences of populist leaders, as the chapters on Viktor Orbán (Miklós Sükösd, *Victorious Victimization: Orbán the Orator-Deep Securitization and State Populism in Hungary's Propaganda State*) and Hugo Chávez (Pierre Ostiguy, *The Voice and Message of Hugo Chávez: A Rhetorical Analysis*) demonstrate.

The analysis of the recurring rhetorical patterns in Orbán's speeches, both in terms of invective and elocution, shows that his growing popularity was to some extent linked to implementing a populist rhetorical strategy. This strategy was based on two thematic pillars: instilling fear and creating enemies (external, such as the EU, Soros or migrants) and internal (the opposition). In this context, Orbán's proposed solutions appeared as a way of ensuring security. The analysis of Hugo Chavez's ethos, on the other hand, showed that despite the universality of certain populist patterns, the effectiveness of a particular leader depends hugely on the cultural embeddedness of the communication style and the patterns invoked.

To conclude, the editors are once again confronted with the challenge of defining populism. In many regions of the world, the rise of populist parties and politicians has led to an equally dynamic increase in researchers' interest in this phenomenon. Thus, on the one hand, the volume is intended to bring rhetoric closer to scholars of populism, and, on the other hand, to bring populism closer to scholars of rhetoric. However, the editors point out that populism is not a topic

that is commonly explored in rhetorical research, despite the fact that research on concepts closely linked to it, such as demagoguery, fake news, or political resentment, has been developed.

Have these tasks been accomplished? Indeed, the studies collected in the volume have demonstrated the value of rhetorical analysis in the study of the rhetoric of populist leaders. Highlighting the relevance of the rhetorical dimension of populism is valuable and constitutes the most significant value of this monograph.

Regarding the achievement of the second objective, the answer is not entirely affirmative. Although rhetorical researchers have obtained some intriguing case studies, the editors' minimalist definition of populism yields obvious conclusions: effective communication can lead to electoral success and a skilled speaker can increase their popularity among the public. However, we are not left with a resolution (perhaps impossible) as to what populist rhetoric is – does it manifest itself in the choice of *topoi* or arguments, or rather in the popularity of specific rhetorical figures or perhaps in a particular style of *actio*? How can we analyze it? While the volume does not explicitly state that it serves as a methodological tool, the introduction does propose the concept of “rhetorical close reading.” Therefore, it might have been valuable for readers who come from non-rhetorical backgrounds to familiarize themselves with this term in order to understand that the book addresses rhetoric.

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