

THE PENDULUM SWINGS

or

Recurring Motives in Populist Rhetoric

by Martin Iliev

I, Martin Iliev, hereby give my consent to the publication of this essay in the event that it is chosen by the University Council.

The phrase “the rise of populism” should inherently elicit a sense of déjà vu, in both those that evoke it, as well as the intended recipient at which this phrase is aimed. Populism is not something new, it has been a part of our political experience ever since we departed from unilateral rule. It is not an ongoing process, deterministically progressing as time elapses, it is more akin to a pendulum forever swinging in one direction or another in accordance with the times, and most of all, dictated by peoples desires and political grievances. It appears however that today, the pendulum has swung in favor of populism, from Mexico’s Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador to Italy’s Five Star movement and Poland’s Law and Justice coalition, governments across the world are being formed by such political entities and figures.

The term has its root from the Latin word *populus* – or people, and so populist parties and politicians are such that voice prevailing opinions amongst the population, mostly such that are the source of anger or disappointment and a feeling of marginalization and exclusion. This is not a bad thing in itself, after all electing people who share one’s concerns and act on the political issues important to us is one of the core pillars of representative democracy. And yet the word populism has a negative connotation attached to it.

In today’s political environment many have tried to establish close links between populism and far right ideologies like fascism, but this is no more than wishful thinking, designed to demonize those of the populist agenda, in a bid to diminish their appeal in the eyes of the crowd. At its core populism is not inherently left or right, but instead is a tool with which candidates across the spectrum have tapped into popular discontent, galvanizing political momentum. When one thinks of American populism today, it’s not unusual for the image of Donald Trump to quickly manifest in one’s mind. But it is important to notice that he wasn’t the only one employing populist rhetoric during the 2016 election campaign. Bernie Sanders, capitalized on

the anger and resentment of many Americans, after the 2008 crisis and the ensuing recession. Hillary Clinton actively sought to take advantage of the growing call for the expansion of women's rights, herself being the first woman to run for the highest office of the land. Even Barack Obama campaigned targeting the issue of rising healthcare cost within the US, and the marginalization of those on the bottom of the income distribution.

The big problem with populist politics is not that they inevitably lead to tyranny or propagate the establishment of dictatorships, but rather that they provide simple solutions to complex issues, as well as often misrepresent the true causes of those issues, mainly due to their overarching intricacy. A poignant example of this is Trump's crusade against jobs leaving America. The migration of workplaces overseas is not something that happens in a vacuum, but instead is contingent on the complex economic relationships and interdependencies underpinning the global economy. Despite all this, as we have seen the populist approach is blatantly simple – bully companies to keep jobs inside the US as well as impose tariffs and sanctions.

Brexit is another good example of populist rhetoric at work. A considerable portion of the UK's population is concerned over the fact that the country is losing its edge on the global stage, with the vertex of decision making now residing with the EU, instead of the British national government. Or that labor force mobility within the EU is infringing on the job prospects of Britons. Again, this is an astoundingly intricate issue, which according to populists has a simple solution – leave the EU. And just like that populists reduce the convoluted reality of our world to bite sized chunks, which they could feed to their constituents, and ultimately gain their support.

The most dangerous aspect of populism by far is the inter group conflict it creates, as well as needs for its success. In order for their message to be able to deliver its intended punch, populists strive to create an “enemy at the gates” dynamic, channeling the pent-up frustration of the

masses at a social group they perceive as responsible for the current state of affairs. Be it immigrants, elites, racial or religious minorities, such groups are instrumental in creating the sense of danger and crisis on which populism thrives. As Cas Mudde put it, populism is: “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’”. This frighteningly effective tool plays two very important roles in propelling the populist agenda forward. Since the complexity of the issues with which populists try to grapple, do not usually permit the establishment of a single cause or culprit, these political figures love to play into the old adage that “big problems often have simple solutions”. Thus, this approach first and foremost, provides a face and a name at which responsibility could be directed. It also creates the aforementioned sense of urgency, the feeling of a looming threat creeping just out of sight, ready to strike at any moment. This type of emotion acts as a powerful catalyst for galvanizing the masses, urging them to spring into action, by tapping into our most primal evolutionary instincts of self-preservation. This gimmick wouldn’t work of course if we weren’t ready and willing to succumb to such ways of thinking, and yet neuroscientists claim that this divisive mentality is quite natural to us as human beings: “Considerable evidence suggests that dividing the world into Us and Them is deeply hard-wired in our brains, with an ancient evolutionary legacy.”, as suggested by Robert Sapolsky’s research. Populists thus exploit the fundamental weakness of our political order, and consequently our psyche. Because ultimate power lies with the people, the only possible way to seize it, is for the people themselves to give it to someone, who appeals to the largest possible fraction. And there is no better way to appeal to the masses than to create a crisis, propagated by a group of “evil doers”, that only you can stop.

In order to better understand the dynamics of what is actually transpiring today, it is worth exploring the origins and background of similar episodes in a historical context. The first wave of populism arose in the late 1800s. Coinciding with the end of a period of unprecedented growth for the American economy after the Civil War, marked by what is now known as the Long Depression. The stagnant economic environment, coupled with the increased level of immigration into the US, sparked a wave of discontent amongst farmers and laborer's, thus giving rise to inflammatory rhetoric largely similar to the one we witness today. Denis Kearney was an active political figure of the time with a message strikingly familiar to the one that shocked us so much, during the 2016 presidential election. Kearney took advantage of the ensuing backlash and managed to drum up support for his cause, by blaming the nation's problems on the corrupt elites of the time as well as the growing number of Chinese immigrants. He even went as far as to suggest building a wall around the port of San Francisco, to stop the tide of immigration. At the same time, another political activist of that era - Marry Ellen Lease, delivered fiery rhetoric asserting that America had become: "A government of Wall Street, by Wall Street, and for Wall Street". A statement not that far removed from our recent experience with the occupy Wall Street movement, which arose in the wake of the credit crisis.

If all of this sounds familiar, it should. Historical events like thee are not something unprecedented, they have all happened before, played out, but have been well forgotten. Populist rhetoric is thus not something novel, neither are the candidates behind it, who manifest themselves to exploit political opportunities, whenever they arise. Another wave of populism erupted in the midst of the Great Depression half a century after Kearney and Lease were all but forgotten. Latin America quickly followed suit, and Asia went through a similar experience later on in the 1990s. If one is to even look at the issues most commonly hashed up by populists, it

will become apparent that those are recurring motives as well. As Neil Ferguson suggests, increased immigration, wealth inequality and poor economic performance, coupled together with a profound lack of trust in the governing system, are the major sources of popularity on which populism has relied in the past, as well as today. And when examined closely, it is easy to see that virtually all upswings in the spread of populism have had one or a combination of several such “ingredients” at their core. Today the expression of these could be found in figures like Hungary’s Viktor Orban, who came to power on the promise to crack down on the wave of immigration sweeping through the country. Rodrigo Duterte became president of the Philippines on a platform called “Disiplina Duterte”, which outlined severe anti-drug and corruption measures. So even though the faces behind the message have changed, the issues hashed up by populists today, clearly echo those of the populists of yesteryear.

Sadly, the false novelty of this phenomenon does not in any way alleviate the darker consequences of the implementation of its ideas. Populism’s solutions to the people’s problems are inherently ineffective. And after a while the political momentum garnered by such parties and politicians, inevitably runs out. That’s not to say, that such periods of active flirtation with populist ideas, don’t have an impact on society, they most certainly do. Misrepresenting the causes of a certain political, economic or social issue, might have severe ramifications in the face of inadequate policy measures that do more harm than good. The persecution and marginalization of particular groups within society can leave lasting scars in the fabric of our community.

And alas, as with all troubling issues, it is much easier to outline presumed causes, and formulate analytical rhetoric, than to answer the simple question: what can be done about this? The pendulum of populism has swung again in the direction of popularity, and this by itself is a

complex issue, and it would be very populist of me indeed if I was to give you a simple, “full proof” actionable solution. Populism is after all a syndrome of our times. With more and more people being able to voice their ideas, wants and concerns, in an ever more heterogeneous world, defined by individuality, it is inevitable that we would see such political phenomena, and consequently people willing to capitalize on such emotions for the furtherance of their own agendas.

One of the things we can do is avoid what Niall Ferguson calls “historical amnesia” – the act of disregarding the historical lessons we have learned, and letting history repeat itself. We have the power if not to stop the pendulum entirely, at least to dampen its swing. Given our “rich” historical experience with populism, and more concretely the consequences of its rise to power, we only have to look back to our not so distant past to see that this is not a productive way to deal with the problems we are currently facing. But alas we tend to suffer from what economic historians Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff refer to as “this time is different mentality”, the profound belief of both experts and laymen alike, that indeed “current situations” are undoubtedly different from what has been previously seen. And although the researchers define this phenomenon in the context of our experience with financial crises, they argue it might have applications outside the realm of economics as well.

Bobette Buster in her book *Do Story*, argues that we humans are moved by stories, and most of all compelling narratives, with which we can identify on an emotional level. And you don’t need to look far to see that populists are masters of this craft. Their very rhetoric seamlessly blends facts and fiction, delivering a masterfully crafted saga of lost glory and betrayal, impending danger and faint hope, the likes of which would make even Tolstoy green with envy. Above all populists promise a better tomorrow, an alternative to the corrupt system of the status

quo. And who is to blame the ones succumbing to this alluring message, after all don't we all want a better life for ourselves and our children? At its core populism's ultimate goal is to appeal to people's fears, anxieties, hopes, and dreams and thus gain their support for its own ends. One way to combat this, is for the opposition of populism, to muster a message of its own, to offer a narrative that gives people hope and draws them away from the populist path. One of the reasons Donald Trump's message was so well received during the 2016 election, putting aside the pent up anger concerning the issues outlined earlier, was the lack of an alternative. Hillary Clinton's candidacy was one which in itself represented the status quo, promising people more of the same.

Our most crucial mistake in the fight with populism so far, may just be our misdirected effort. Just like a 16th century doctor, we have been treating the symptoms of the ailment, but not its root causes. We have been asking the question: "What can we do to stop populists like Donald Trump?", all the while disregarding the factors underpinning his popularity, making him an attractive candidate to so many. How can we more effectively help people transition from sectors with declining employment? How can we reduce xenophobia and racism? What policy measure could be taken to combat wealth inequality? How do we restore faith and trust, in our political system and institutions? All of these are hard question, with no simple answers. But by focusing on them, instead of the political manifestation of the fact that we have been ignoring them for too long, we have a far better chance of not only effectively combating populism, but also resolving the issues that bring about its rise in the first place.

It could be argued that in the end populists are of our own making, it is we as a society, who provide them with the necessary fodder for their emergence. We create our own crises, which leaves us disadvantaged in their wake, asking ourselves how can this truly be the best of all

possible systems. It is we as well, who secretly harbor prejudicial thoughts against our neighbor of a different color, religious belief or sexual orientation, taking comfort in the assurances of someone that our thoughts are well justified. We again, are ready to accept the offer of a magic bullet, capable of solving all our problems, no matter how complex they might be. It is we, the people, who voluntarily give power to demagogues. The moment we take a stand against prejudice and violence, against anger and complacency, it is only then that we have made the first step along the road that leads away from populism.

Bibliography

Buster, Bobette. *Do Story: How to Tell Your Story so the World Listens*. Chronicle Books, 2018.

Mudde, Cas. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2004, pp. 542–563., doi:10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x.

Pfaelzer, Jean. *Driven out: The Forgotten War against Chinese Americans*. University of California Press, 2009.

Ferguson, Niall. "Populism as a Backlash against Globalization - Historical Perspectives." *CIRSD*, www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-autumn-2016--issue-no-8/populism-as-a-backlash-against-globalization.

Reinhart, Carmen M., and Kenneth S. Rogoff. *This Time Is Different: Eight Centuries of Financial Folly*. Princeton University Press, 2011.

Sapolsky, Robert. "Why Your Brain Hates Other People - Issue 49: The Absurd." *Nautilus*, 22 June 2017, nautil.us/issue/49/the-absurd/why-your-brain-hates-other-people.

