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How To Think About Populism

June 20, 2017 | Volume 10 | Issue 41
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A report in the *Financial Times* on President Trump's inaugural compared it to President Obama's first inaugural and declared: "Obama radiated hope. Trump channeled rage."[1] This is factually correct. But if so, the fact needs diagnosis. Why hope in 2013 and rage only four years later? An obvious answer is because the hope was not fulfilled and so roughly half the electorate refused to believe that Obama's anointed successor in the Democratic party—nor even the orthodox core of the

Republican party—would fulfill it either. Brexit seems to be channeling the same rage against Britain's political establishment. But the political establishment is not a self-standing class. Even a glance at the lineup of support for the Remain vote and for Clinton (both in the primaries against Sanders and in the presidential elections) shows the extent to which what underlies this political class is a parade of corporate and banking elites, ranging from the IMF, Wall Street, OECD, and Soros, to the Governor of the Bank of England.

That leads into the subject of how to understand the meaning of 'populism' as a term of opprobrium. The term is defined as 'ordinary people's opposition to elites'. So defined, it is too under-described to be a term of opprobrium. After all, *democracy* is intended to give ordinary people a chance to counter elites through representative politics. What populism today seems to add to democracy is that it also opposes the power of *un*elected officials with specific economic interests who dominate the formation of policies—with the general acquiescence of elected representatives.

But this still does not capture what we instinctively recoil from in populism. How can it be wrong to oppose the voluntary implicit surrender of sovereignty by elected law and policy makers to unelected wielders of elite financial interest?

Suppose, then, for a moment, that a working or workless person in Nottingham or Crete or Seville were to ponder the humane policies that some nations in Europe came to embrace since the Second World War, policies that provided safety nets (whether of health or education or housing) for people like him. He might ask: what was the site where these safety nets were administered and implemented? And he would answer: well, the site of the nation. He might scratch his head and wonder: Has there ever been a supra-national site at which welfare was ever administered? What would a mechanism that dispensed it at a supra-national level even look like?

Now, of course, such a person might go beyond these shrewd questions to associate supra-national affiliation with immigrant hordes who not only deprive him of economic opportunities, but dilute the centuries long national culture of which he is so proud. But there is no logical link between those excellent former questions and these latter trumped up anxieties. One may rightly ask the questions without having these anxieties. And so here at last we have what is the defining element of populism from which we recoil. The term stands for precisely the assumption of such

a link, a link that is uncompulsory.



So a question arises: whence the compulsion to make this *un*compulsory link? And here we must resist the temptation to blame the people themselves. The assumption they make of such a link is not due to their feebleness of mind but to a wide variety of distortions not only by the media they read and watch, but by the political class, and not just the extreme elements of that class but the political establishment. We cannot forget that the British Prime Minister's Remain campaign ratcheted up the immigration theme to prevent its being owned by his more extreme Right opposition, just as Obama in his first campaign was far worse on immigration than John McCain, again with a view to gaining ownership of a Republican platform, for electoral gains.

So the lesson is this. Even if we identify what we recoil from in populism as the uncompulsory linking of sound questions with unsound anxieties, this cannot simply be attributed to an *intrinsic incapacity* in the judgment of ordinary people, but must be attributed to the failure of public education provided by the media and the political class. One cannot believe in democracy and dismiss the electorate as vile or stupid. For the electorate is shaped by what *knowledge* it possesses.

For two millennia, philosophers have said that the central ethical question is: What

ought we to do? Or, How ought we to live? But in our own complex time, the more crucial prior question has become: What ought we to know?

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And the question of what we ought to know is a matter of public imagination and education by public institutions that have failed, whether they be the media or the universities. In a sense, these institutions always did produce and sustain the ruling class, so it is perhaps wrong to expect them to be the sites of public imagination. Where the public got educated on the fundamental issues that shape our societies have tended to be movements, from the Left labor movements of Europe and the United States (now ebbing to the point of non-existence) to the civil rights and anti-war and women's movements of some decades later. In countries of the South this learning happened in the prolonged and highly creative movements of struggle against colonial rule during which millions of people were mobilized and were educated into the possibilities of a progressive future after gaining independence. But all of these examples seem now like a distant past.

So on the question of contemporary populism, I would conclude by saying that (to put it in the most general terms) the two underlying causes of this phenomenon are 1) a chronic crisis of capitalism and 2) the failure of the Left to find an adequate response to it. It is a reaction to capitalism in its neo-liberal mode of the last few decades: its inability to create sufficient employment, its seemingly irreversible inequalities, its systematic destruction of the bargaining power of labor, its undermining of national economic sovereignties, and its making immigration—which could be a source of strength for national economies—into a deep source of anxiety and complaint among working people. The failure of the Left to mobilize an adequate response to these crisis conditions creates what we might call a "movement vacuum." Just as there can be a power vacuum, there can be a movement vacuum. And so extreme right wing nationalist movements, that is to say "populism" in the bad sense of the term, step into the vacuum. Such a vacuum may represent a failure of public imagination on the part of the Left, but to be fair, Left movements today are increasingly constrained by the turn that capitalism has taken in the last few decades.



First of all the old style movements based on trade union activism are hardly possible because ever since the dominant nature of capital itself changed from industrial capital to finance capital, trade unions in the traditional sense have only a residual agency; and, in any case, such unions as are still in place have been beaten down by neo-liberal economic policies that generate chronic unemployment and the informalization and impermanence of employment in many parts of the world, which undermines the bargaining power of unions (for the obvious reason that corporations can hire and fire as they please, knowing that there is what Marx called a ‘reserve army of the unemployed’ from which labor can be recruited if unions bargain too hard for the employed and organized workers). And even more crucially, ever since the tremendous increase in the mobility of capital after Bretton Woods, even if a working class movement throws up the possibility of progressive policies, those possibilities for the most part can’t really be implemented because of the fear of capital flight. Thus, for example, Lula, as a result of a working class movement, got elected on a very progressive platform in Brazil but was not really able to implement it for fear of capital flight. If such platforms were to be implemented and capital flight ensued (quite apart from the hardship caused by that to working people), *oppositional movements would have to be waiting at the place to which*

capital flies. And that form of international solidarity in the global labor force is not a realistic possibility. One needs more than public imagination, one would need a magic wand to forge such solidarities. The mind boggles at the idea of a serious possibility of *global* labor movements to oppose global finance capital. I myself think that that is just fantasy, a fantasy expressed by some political theorists such as Hardt and Negri with such terms as “multitude.”[2]

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What, I believe, is more plausibly within our public imagination—at least for countries of the South, where I come from, which are suffering from the oppressiveness of these neo-liberal policies in our period of financial globalization—is that they would be better off de-linking (at least partially) from the global economy and getting sovereignty over their own nations’ political economies. Such ideas need to be explored in serious detail. They may require partial South-South relinking so as to protect some of the smaller economies of the South, and they may require creating alternative credit agencies—alternative, that is, to the IMF and World Bank. These are all under-explored ideas worth considering, and it would take a great deal of public imagination on the part of the Left to do so.

Notes

[1] “President Trump’s speech puts the world on notice.” *Financial Times*, January 20,

2017. Online: https://www.ft.com/content/b5859136-df3f-11e6-86ac-f253db7791c6

[2] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*.

New York: Penguin, 2004.

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neoliberal



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