


THIS IS YOUR
COUNTRY DONT
LET THE BIG
MEN TAKE IT
AWAY
FROM YOU

How dangerous is populism for democracy?

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In the 1920s José Ortega y Gasset, an educated and conservative Spanish thinker, observed with increasing concern that liberal regimes, in spite of the fact that they extended suffrage and increased political and social rights, were losing control over their political systems and that the masses were inclined to support extremist political forces.[1] The populist upsurge we have witnessed in the last years could be the symptom, to use Ortega's term, of a new revolt of the masses. The rebellion is directed not so much towards the very essence of the democratic form of government, but rather towards those elites that have failed to share advantages with the people.

A new revolt of the masses

Some of the attitudes criticized by Ortega y Gasset for his mass man could be easily transposed to the current situation. Among them are:

- the belief that the art of government does not require any particular capability and therefore that every person, independent of specific knowledge, could be able to govern a country;

- the refusal of the scientific method, leading to the spread of fake news and antiscientific theories;

- the tendency to oversimplify complex problems and the consequent search for simple solutions, even if they are unlikely to succeed.

Indeed, in the actual present context, all these attitudes and beliefs have fuelled the electoral success of populist groups in many countries.

Ortega y Gasset's analysis was certainly insightful, but his response was disconcerting. He was annoyed by the fact that the "uneducated" claimed some of the privileges of the elites. He was displeased that theaters and cafés started to be populated by the masses. In the shadows, he seemed worried that the multitude wanted to have the material privileges that were for so long reserved to the upper class. He blamed the crowds for no longer trusting the elites, rather than criticizing the elites for failing to assert their leadership. Some of the contemporary comments on the populist upsurge seem to be written by a reincarnated Ortega,[2] as if the multitude is wrong in claiming some of the benefits enjoyed by elites. We do not have to repeat Ortega's mistake: even if the populist response is wrong, we need to listen and respond to their claims.

A call for understanding a new phenomenon

Populism is not yet properly understood and definitions of it are still highly controversial, especially since it is a label that is applied to a wide range of political movements that have very little in common. It is also highly controversial whether populism should be classified as an ideology, a political style, or a socio-political mentality.[3] It is a complex and variegated galaxy, better identifiable for the problems it mentions than for the solutions it proposes. We will need to distinguish between various forms based on their left/right/anti-systemic ideologies, their effects on consolidated democracies/young democracies/countries in the transition to democracy, and their national characteristics, especially the Europe/United States divide.

In spite of analytical differences, populism originates from the general discomfort with the inability of liberal democracies to fulfill their promises. It is paradigmatic, in fact, that the recent wave of populist electoral success can be traced back to 2007/2008, years in which a major economic crisis violently rocked the Western economies. When income stops growing and even starts to decline, when unemployment, especially among the youth, increases, and when poverty expands while at the same time income inequalities enlarge, it is not surprising that losers will search for somebody else to represent their interests. It happened in the 1930s. It is happening again. Moreover, dominant political parties have so far been unable to listen and act, and the link between rulers and ruled is broken. This inevitably attracts new entrants.

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Still, until now, within Western Europe, democratic institutions have proven robust enough to prevent populist attitudes from growing into authoritarian regimes. And it seems that citizens do not really wish to change constitutional rules. The populist vote could also be interpreted as a sort of “menace card” that citizens insert into the ballot box to achieve better responsiveness from incumbent political parties. However, even if the recourse to populist parties is instrumental and carried out within the boundaries of democratic rules, their existence is already hurting the quality of democracy. Many populist political programs, in fact, are soaked with nationalistic and xenophobic rhetoric that so far has eroded but not destroyed democratic institutions. Right-wing populism is often associated with rallies and political provocations against migrants, minorities, gypsies, or LGBTQ citizens; this decreases civil liberties and security, and therefore corrodes political life.



Anti-immigration campaign poster, Switzerland

Emerging new political movements in Europe and elsewhere are difficult to classify and they seem to be unified only by their antagonism to traditional governments, political parties, and institutions. The comprehensive label “populism” is used more and more, but its meaning is not yet clear. In the series that we launch with this essay, we will try to identify some of the problems that the populist challenge puts on the current agenda, and we invite colleagues to discuss such questions as:

> Is there a convincing definition of populism able to classify new political players? Do we need to distinguish among right-wing, left-wing, and anti-systemic forms of populism?
>
> What is the evidence that populist forces are really threatening democracy?
>
> What are the nation-specific characteristics of populist movements?
>
> We suggest conceptualizing populism in terms of differences between “incumbents” and “new entrants” in the political arena. Is such a definition useful?
>
> To what extent is the upsurge of populist parties meant to punish the incumbent political forces or to express a genuine wish to elect the new forces into government?
>
> Are there new forms of participation that could reinforce the current democratic practice and challenge populist claims about the unfitness of liberal representative democracy?
>
> Where does the political traction for such reformist moves come from given the constellation of present anti-democratic forces and structures?
>
> If the current populism is also due to an uncontrolled economic globalization that has disadvantaged the weak, what policies should be adopted?

Besides the need to understand populism more specifically, democrats must respond to the challenges it poses. The response to populism cannot be outside of the democratic framework, but should rather fully enhance it. Radical changes

should be introduced in policy-making, changes that, so far, no government or political force has been willing to introduce. Democracy does require new entrants, and it is fine if they come to the fore not only as a leading force in established political parties but also as new political parties. The basic problem is to guarantee that political turbulence is kept within the rule of law and that it is not detrimental to civil liberties.

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We suggest considering four propositions:

1) If, on the one side, populism often expresses the popular will to entrust “strongmen” with power, which could lead to the rise of latent authoritarian temptations, on the other side it also expresses the popular will for a more participatory democracy, which current forms of representative democracy do not seem able to provide. [4] Therefore, the first proposition is to complement representative democracy with other methods of political participation. Deliberative democracy, in its various forms, seems the obvious answer to respond to the populist challenge. However, it has so far remained an academic exercise with very limited applications. It is vital that new forms of consultation with citizens are introduced and that elected officers seriously engage with them.

2) The second proposition is a radical change in the attitude of elites, especially in their capacity for delivering public policies and services. The top-down approach is dead, but the attempt to give fake responses just to please the crowds is equally useless. A genuine involvement of citizens in public policies is needed, with an effort to be more transparent about policy options. Without sincere attempts to respond to the criticisms and concerns of citizens, it is unlikely that the populist wave will ever retreat.

3) The third proposition focuses on the need to introduce serious welfare and job creation programs. These programs should have been at the very core of any democratic country and it is surprising that so little innovation has been carried out in the last forty years. In consolidated democracies, it is always argued that there is no budget to finance these programs and high public debt is often considered an

insurmountable obstacle. This logic needs to be rejected, especially when, in many countries, military expenditures are on the rise.

4) The fourth proposition concerns economic globalization, which is, more and more, a ticking bomb in our societies. Trade flows, financial flows, and foreign direct investment have grown exponentially over the last 40 years, while the development of political institutions which should govern them has been almost non-existent at the world level. Small improvements have been carried out at the regional level and in Europe in particular. But political integration, at the regional or even global level, has not successfully addressed the unbearable inequalities and uncertainties created by economic globalization. Not surprisingly, dominant groups have managed to appropriate most of the benefits, leaving nothing to marginal groups. National political institutions should therefore adopt explicit policies to redistribute these benefits but also to provide visible and legible institutional responses. Direct forms of participation in world politics should be attempted, also as a way to address the global democratic deficit.



Savo Prelic/AFP via Getty Images

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Notes

1. Ortega y Gasset, J. (1929). *The Revolt of the Masses*. New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1994.

2. Blair, T. (2017 March 3). “Against Populism, the Center Must Hold”, *The New York Times* [online]. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/03/opinion/tony-blair-against-populism-the-center-must-hold.html [Accessed 15 March 2018].

3. For a review of the state of the art on the different definitions of the populist phenomenon, see: Tarchi, M. (2016). ‘Populism: ideology, political style, mentality?’ *Politologicky Casopis*, 23(2), pp. 95-109. doi: 10.5817/PC2016-2-95. See also Urbinati, N. (2016). *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth and the People*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

4. Tarchi, M. (2004). “Il populismo e la scienza politica: come liberarsi del ‘complesso di Cenerentola’.” *Filosofia politica*, 18(3), pp. 411-432.

Tags

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