

Not Your Usual Pundit: How Philosophy Flounders in the Face of Populism

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Introduction

“The most difficult subjects can be explained to the most slow-witted man if he has not formed any idea of them already; but the simplest thing cannot be made clear to the most intelligent man if he is firmly persuaded that he knows already, without a shadow of a doubt, what is laid before him.”

Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (1894)

For once, fickle weather and the upcoming football season were not the main objects of speculation among Britons in the early days of summer, as the future of the United Kingdom in the European Union lay in the hands of voters heading to the polls on a breezy Thursday morning. After a monthlong campaign, which saw British composure put to the test by a constant stream of scathing attacks from both sides, the real surprise resided not in the outcome of the vote, but, rather, in the reactions that followed it. Some foreign leaders and newspapers, pundits and intellectuals lamented a “sad day” for the UK (former Labour MP David Milliband), a “disaster for British business” (*Financial Times*), and even voiced fears of a “populist insurgency” (Nomura analysts). Referendum winners celebrated their victory, but their cheers were almost drowned out by elements of the mainstream media, or by an outcry from well beyond Her Majesty’s territory. Regardless of one’s opinion on the issue at stake, this turn of event is somewhat bothersome: indeed, if a referendum consists in asking citizens to choose between two options, how to explain the support for Remain among many opinion leaders? Either both options submitted to the voters are equally acceptable, and any consensus in the mainstream media undermines the referendum process, or one option is intrinsically more desirable, and there is no need for a vote at all.

There is arguably some merit in the Brexit narrative: the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) has long blamed Britain’s economic and social problems on EU policy decisions emanating from Brussels, and it has also highlighted the fears that migrants from Syria and elsewhere could overflow into the country. As a result, one may rightfully speculate that households still reeling from the 2008 financial crisis might be receptive to such arguments. Yet, there is a world of difference between suggesting that some voters may have failed to grasp the issues at stake in the referendum and interpreting the result as a victory of ignorance over knowledge, or bigotry over tolerance. If populism arises when resentment, rather

than logic, drives political decisions, where is the logic in the vilification of Brexit voters by otherwise respected intellectuals? Surely Bernard-Henri Levy thought of his column in *Le Monde* as a stroke of sagacity, but the individuals he called “rioters and idiotic leftists, fascists and drunken hooligans, illiterate rebels and neo-nationalists” may be less receptive to his brilliance (“Strange Defeat in London”, *Le Monde*, 25 June, 2016). If Brexit represents a victory for populism, the following outburst of elitist reactions exacted an even greater toll on democracy.

Such seems to be the problem with populism: although it is widely perceived as a threat to democracy, finger-pointing “democrats” often resort to the same tactics as those they so gleefully indict. Worse, by obsessing over their populist nemesis, they fail to address critical questions: what is populism? What does it stand for? If it threatens democracy, why does it claim to fix it? The populist “challenge” is not so much political as it is philosophical: to understand how populism came into its role of democracy’s bogeyman, one must understand how its premise ties into the very foundations of democracy. Reason, truth and the general will are Enlightenment values that populism is accused of infringing upon, yet claims to take inspiration from. Does it mean that democrats and populists make different interpretations of these concepts? Or, on the contrary, that they attach more value to some than others? If political philosophy fails to draw a line between what is democratic and what is not, perhaps it is both the problem and the solution to

Photo: Pool/Reuters



Supporters of the “Stronger In” campaign react as results of the EU referendum are announced.

the populist conundrum. Indeed, the very existence of populism calls into question the theoretical framework underpinning democracy. Yet, philosophy also makes it possible to disentangle the ties between democracy and populism.

The “Cinderella Complex”: Chasing the Little Populist Slipper

Populism, unlike most ideologies, is not easily defined. The concept is in fact so confusing that it has become a staple of political science literature to deplore the absence of an overarching framework to study political movements falling into this category. There are variations of liberalism or socialism, but none differs much from the original. Populism, on the other hand, would be better characterized as a conceptual mayhem. Some describe it as an ideology, others as a discursive style, and others still as a form of political participation. In its most minimal conception, populism is a “thin-centered ideology”, as political scientist Cas Mudde writes, that is, a Manichean worldview opposing a “pure people” to “corrupt elites”. Although theoretically sound, this definition does not explain why populism applies to turn-of-the-century Russian farmers, charismatic Latin American leaders and right-wing European parties alike. How to explain such ambiguity? Populism derives its meaning from a concept that is itself ambiguous: Ernesto Laclau argues, in *On Populist Reason* (2005), that the “people” in “populism” is an “empty signifier”, that is, an interpretation of what binds people together. Donald Trump’s “people” are American citizens who want to “take their country back”, while Bernie Sanders’ “people” are the “99%” who want to “make the 1% pay”. These two representations may overlap, but the groups they are purportedly opposed to have nothing in common: immigrants, in one case, and Wall Street in the other.

Merely observing such ambiguity, however, does not explain why scholars keep arguing over what populism means. If the concept of “people” is indeed an empty signifier, why not acknowledge that populism is nothing more than a discursive style, that is, a symbolic construction aiming to mobilize “the people” against a common enemy? Doing so is unsavory, because it means giving up on understanding what causes populism to arise: if populism is only a discursive style, what distinguishes it from any political speech? Making sense of “the people” is about identity, not populism: Brexit may have won because some kind of “nostalgia for the British Empire” inspired anti-EU sentiment, but the opposite of “inward-looking” identity is not the absence of identity. Even a “positive” identity such as the one promoted by Remain supporters — progressive and tolerant — feeds from political opposition. Being welcoming towards immigrants does not mean shying away from antagonism, as reactions to Brexit illustrated. In a recent article, Marian L. Tupy, editor of *humanprogress.org*, condemned the response of the “progressive commentariat” to the referendum outcome as “shocking”, saying that “the votes of some 17.5 million

people were roundly dismissed as those of nationalists, xenophobes and even racists.” She cited a Lord Ashcroft survey showing that 49% of people who voted to leave the EU did so on the principle of national sovereignty, because they believed “that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK”, and that only 33% of Brexit supporters were most concerned with control over Britain’s borders.” (<http://capx.co/the-fallout-from-brexit/>).

But then, if populism is no different from mainstream politics, why does it ebb and flow? Why is it stronger now in Europe than 10 years ago, while the opposite is true in Latin America? The intuition that populism deserves a category of its own explains why there is no agreement on its definition. Political philosopher Isaiah Berlin introduced the concept of the “Cinderella complex” in a conference in 1967 at the London School of Economics: one day, he explained, scholars encountered a “populist shoe” (the word itself), and started believing that there was, somewhere in the world, a “populist foot” (the essence of the word). Whenever a politician is given the label “populist”, it is because he or she reminds scholars of the shoe whose owner they so desperately seek, although it never quite fits. In other words, populism is frustrating not because it is an ambiguous word, but because the very existence of the word does not seem to allow for ambiguity.

Existential, Not Economic Insecurity: Debunking the Myth of the Globalization Loser

Unable to find the foot’s owner, scholars did not abdicate but, rather, made it up. To explain the rise of populism in the United States and Europe, multiple theories compete: some see populist voters as “globalization losers”, calling for stronger state protection, others portray them as scolders of post-materialistic values. Predictably, none of these theories are quite satisfactory. The most widespread one, the “economic insecurity” thesis, suggests that years of low growth and high unemployment led to the rise of nativist, anti-immigration parties. Workers whose jobs were outsourced blame governments for allowing unfair competition, and demand to shut off foreign labor and capital. Although at odds with Republican values, Trump’s plans to build a wall at the Mexican border and renegotiate trade agreements strongly appeal to such voters. This theory is convenient, as it allows mainstream parties to deflect blame on macroeconomic factors, but it is at best incomplete and at worst disingenuous. If populism comes with economic insecurity, why is Trump massively rejected by minorities, who are relatively worse-off than whites?

The “cultural backlash” theory addresses this contradiction by pointing to the decline of economic issues as markers of ideological divide. Populism, Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris argue, is better explained as a “reaction to progressive cultural change”: it does not reflect economic but existential insecurity (“Trump, Brexit and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash”, a paper for the roundtable on *Rage against the Machine: Populist*



Photo: Lane Hickenbottom/Reuters

Trump supporters have the reputation of being as loud, bombastic and controversial as their candidate, but in some corners of the public sphere they feel they must keep their stances quiet.

Politics in the U.S., Europe and Latin America on Sept. 2, 2016, at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia). It is not driven by the poor, but by people who do not identify with post-materialistic values such as multiculturalism or LGBT rights. Trump supporters may care less about losing their job than hearing people speak Spanish on television: how they perceive their environment matters more than their actual situation. Although there is evidence to support this theory, it is not without contradictions: if “populist support is greatest among (...) the religious” (Norris and Inglehart), for instance, why are Catholics who frequently attend Mass less likely to support the Front National in France than those who don’t? Most importantly, if populism existed long before post-materialistic values appeared, what was driving it until the 1970s?

Populists at the Gates: Lurking Threat or King’s Fool?

What is compelling in those theories is not what they identify as the root causes of populism, but what they omit to investigate: the assumption that populism unfolds outside democracy. Stricken with the “Cinderella complex”, political scientists keep treating populism as a shoe they found, and seek to reunite it with its owner. Doing so, they fail to realize that, unlike the charming prince, they never actually saw Cinderella: perhaps, then, the shoe says more about the person who found it, than the one it belongs to. “Classical” political science literature, however, does address the relationship between populism and democracy. Indeed, it describes populism as a “political pathology”, inherent to democracy. From this perspective, pioneered by Peter Wiles in 1967, populism is not an outsider but a feature of the system: it represents the “underside” of the democratic ideal, built on openness and reason, yet unable to tame primal, self-preservation instincts.

This approach, however, is also unsatisfactory. Aside from failing

to provide actionable solutions other than resigning to populism, it does nothing to address the contradiction previously identified. If populism truly arises when citizens are willing to trade democracy for stronger governments, why would populism claim to fix democracy? Could it be that populism seeks not to annihilate democracy, but to strengthen it? Considering, for instance, the influence of wealthy donors and lobbies in the US, some of Trump’s accusations about the “rigged system” are not all that unfounded. Populism, Benjamin Arditi argues, is comparable to a drunken guest at a dinner party: unbound by decorum, he may use frowned-upon language, but also broach consequential subjects that sober guests dare not discuss publicly. But does their discomfort stem from their tablemate’s foul mouth or from being confronted with awkward truths? If Hillary Clinton is not as vocal as Trump in denouncing the influence of lobbies, is it because those comments rarely come without insults or because condoning them might upset her own contributors? This endearing analogy illustrates the intricate nature of populism, which is not so much an assailant, lurking outside the walls of the democratic citadel, as a court jester, who alone can mock and shed light on a king’s contradictions. It does not seek to overthrow democracy, but to expose its flaws so as to stir up frustration. As Francisco Panizza writes in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (2005), populism is “neither the highest form of democracy, nor its enemy. It is, rather, a mirror in which democracy may contemplate itself, warts and all, in a discovery of itself and what it lacks.”

Undemocratic Liberalism Versus Democratic Illiberalism

Introspection, however, is no easy task: most kings would rather have their fools whipped than their God-given authority questioned by a commoner. Populism is a philosophical challenge because it elicits self-criticism. Democrats, like kings, are reluctant to look into the mirror precisely because of the imperfections it might reveal. We fail to understand populism because of the misguided assumption that political philosophy provides a blueprint for “perfect” democracy. Liberal democracies, however, tend to forget that there is more than one way to articulate values such as the general will and the separation of powers. They do not correspond to a “perfect” form of democracy, but to one that relies on a balance between two obligations: popular sovereignty (democracy) and the right to equal protection (liberalism). Citizens do elect their representatives, but the judicial power enforces the law, even against the general will. It is this very balance that populism calls into question. By railing against the growing influence of special interests in politics, while promising extreme measures against illegal immigrants, Trump seeks to realign democracy, away from equal rights and towards popular sovereignty. “Mainstream parties” tilt the balance on the other side, by placing emphasis on equal rights, at the expense of popular sovereignty. Although Clinton is right to chastise Trump’s comments on women

and minorities, calling his supporters a “basket of deplorables” is bothersome because it feeds into the idea that some people should not be allowed to vote.

Between mainstream and populist parties, communication seems impossible, because each side is determined to uphold the “right” ideal of democracy yet fails to grasp the contingent nature of democratic governments. Mainstream parties, Cas Mudde argues, indulge in “undemocratic liberalism” by voting laws consistent with liberal values but against public opinion. For instance, Angela Merkel’s decision to welcome Syrian and Iraqi refugees was arguably a liberal, if not a noble one, but German citizens voiced their disagreement by punishing her in the following elections. To “undemocratic liberalism”, populism sends an “illiberal democratic response”, as Britons’ decision to leave the EU illustrated. Although Brexit supporters displayed “illiberal” opinions (anti-immigration, nationalism), they also signaled that democracy ultimately prevails over “special interests”. Instead of taking responsibility for their failures and acknowledging populist concerns, mainstream parties make matters worse by entering into fallacious justifications. When Merkel was excoriated for opening Germany to refugees, she was keen to remind voters that democratic values supersede a country’s self-interest. However, when she was criticized for imposing austerity measures on Eurozone countries against their will, she argued exactly the opposite.

Philosopher-Kings Have Become Populism’s Useful Idiots

Philosophy flounders in the face of populism, because it fails to equip democracy with a framework to understand populism. Despite repeated attempts to introduce some nuance in the public space, the populist conundrum is still alive and well. Worse, philosophy flounders in the face of populism because it ties democracy into its *raison d’être*: the search for truth. Whereas democrats are said to look for the truth by appealing to each other’s reason, populists supposedly persuade their supporters by appealing to emotions. Democrats would be philosopher-kings, and populists demagogues. How to explain, then, that populism precisely resonates with those who are wary of traditional media, or compelled by Trump’s “tell it like it is”? To populism, the search for truth is actually interwoven with a quest for direct democracy: just as elected politicians stand between the people and sovereignty, theory stands between the people and the truth. Populism makes a very literal interpretation of Enlightenment philosophy: the truth can only come from the people, and such truth is the general will. Marine le Pen, unsurprisingly, routinely extols “popular wisdom”, and never misses an opportunity to oppose her “common sense” to an expert’s opinion.

Populism, however, is not devoid of contradictions: since the “people” is always a symbolic construction, its “truth” can only be fictional. Yet, philosophy seems completely unable to prevent the truth from being hijacked by populism. Trump, who is assumed to

have no incentive to lie because of his financial independence, cannot be bothered by the distinction between what is true and what could be true, yet manages to convince voters that his opponents are the ones lying. Perhaps, then, it is time to put to rest the naïve belief that philosopher-kings make for good democrats: admittedly, democracy has failed to prove that it was best positioned to achieve the truth, which opened the door for populist movements to conquer that space. Since it is generally difficult to get objective facts when examining the relevance of opposing policy options, even the revelation of some factually misleading statements during the referendum did not change Britons’ mind about the outcome, as a survey conducted two months after the vote showed. The more “fact-checkers” turn up the volume, as Clinton would like them to, the less voters seem to entrust democracies with the truth.

Coincidentally, a week before the referendum, neighboring Ireland was celebrating Bloomsday, or Lá Bloom, a holiday centered on the life of James Joyce, the avant-garde poet and author of Irish literature landmark *Ulysses*. Joyce, as it turns out, greatly inspired Orwell in advocating for a breed of intellectuals that would be anathema to philosopher-kings. Indeed, upon reading *Ulysses*, he professed his conviction that intellectuals’ reasoning differs in no way from the ordinary man, and writes:

Books about ordinary people behaving in an ordinary manner are extremely rare, because they can only be written by someone who is capable of standing both inside and outside the ordinary man, as Joyce for instance stands inside and outside Bloom; but this involves admitting that you yourself are an ordinary person for nine-tenths of the time, which is exactly what no intellectual ever wants to do. (Orwell, *The Collected Essays*, Vol. 1)

Following Orwell, there may be hope for intellectuals to understand populism. However, this involves doing exactly what “no intellectual ever wants to do”: putting oneself in the position not of the “most intelligent man, persuaded that he knows already”, but in that of the “most slow-witted”. Only by doing so will intellectuals be able to extricate themselves from the burden of certainty, and start helping democracies dissipate the misunderstanding around populism. Once they leave their crown to Caesar, philosopher-kings may find being ordinary all that was needed to be a true democrat.

Note: This article is based on a presentation given at the JEF-Europe Forum in Paris in July, 2016.

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