

Populism and the People

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They do not all look the same. But group them together and they clearly form a political family: Orbán, Erdoğan, Kaczyński, Trump, Modi, perhaps Netanyahu, Bolsonaro for sure. It would be a mistake to homogenise what are, after all, fundamentally different national trajectories: the causes of the rise of right-wing populism are not identical in every case. But there is a trend which it is important to understand: right-wing populists have developed a common strategy and what might even be called a shared authoritarian-populist art of governance – it's this that produces the family resemblance. The populist art of governance is based on nationalism (often with racist overtones), on hijacking the state for the ends of partisan loyalists and, less obviously, on weaponising the economy to secure political power: a combination of culture war, patronage and mass clientelism. The specificity of these characteristics tends to be missed by those who equate contemporary right-wing populism with fascism, or see populism as a new ideology, or assume that 'ordinary people' brought all this on themselves with their craving for authoritarianism. The spread of the populist technique of governance also puts paid to the post-Cold War illusion that only democracies can learn from their own mistakes and from one another's experiences. Authoritarians, it used to be said, couldn't innovate or adapt to changing environments; they were fated to end as the Soviet Union did. The new Populist International – whose members borrow, try out and refine techniques of populist rule – should disturb that complacent liberal-democratic notion. Historians have looked for precedents for what we are currently witnessing, often with a view to drawing 'lessons from the past'. There are numerous problems with this, not all of them specific to our age. As the historian and Liberal politician James Bryce put it in 1920, 'the chief practical use of history is to deliver us from plausible historical analogies.' What is specific to our age, as Tony Judt once observed, is that we have become extremely skilful at teaching the lessons of history, but quite bad at teaching actual history. The truth is that today's threats to democracy don't parallel 20th-century experiences. Fascism – as distinct from authoritarianism or racism – is not being revived: the mass mobilisation and militarisation of entire societies is not taking place; and while the hatred of vulnerable minorities is being fanned, a systemic cult of violence

which glorifies mortal combat as the apotheosis of human existence is not being instituted. Nor are states being thoroughly remade on the basis of racism – which is not to deny that racial (and religious) animus, in Hungary, Brazil and the US, gets its legitimacy from the very top.

One of the reasons we are not witnessing the second coming of a particular anti-democratic past is simply that today's anti-democrats have learned from history too. They know full well that they cannot be seen to be carrying out mass human rights violations: that would be too uncomfortable a reminder of 20th-century dictatorships. Large-scale repression, as perpetrated by Erdoğan since 2015, is understood as a sign of weakness, not strength. Precisely because we might recognise it as having a historical precedent, by and large it isn't happening.

It's true that authoritarian-populist regimes constantly seek to divide their societies, in particular by holding up ideals of the 'real Turk', the 'real Hungarian', 'the real Indian', and also the 'real American'. But these attempts at securing cultural hegemony go hand in hand with something much more mundane: a tendency among their leaders to seek self-enrichment. Authoritarianism goes hand in hand with kleptocracy (a term coined by the Polish-British sociologist Stanislaw Andreski in the late 1960s). The straightforward explanation is that the absence of legal and political constraints makes self-dealing much easier, which in turn reinforces the leaders' need to keep a tight grip on the judiciary and the political system in order to avoid punishment when their power ebbs. But there is also a political logic: involving others in criminality binds them to the regime, compelling loyalty; mass clientelism – rewarding supporters with patronage – tends towards mass allegiance. And threatening those who may not support populist rule with losing jobs or benefits solves the problem of how to exert control over a society without too much direct repression.

Such dynamics are what the sociologist Bálint Magyar has in mind when he refers to the rise of a 'mafia state' in Hungary. He isn't talking about envelopes full of cash changing hands under the table, but the use of state structures and legal means for corrupt ends. A remarkable number of government contracts, for example, are awarded to an uncontested bidder. Mafia states are controlled by what Magyar calls 'political families'. (These usually include rulers' actual families, as with Trump, Orbán, Bolsonaro and Erdoğan; especially nefarious roles are reserved for sons-in-law.) Absolute loyalty is given in exchange for material rewards in the present and, equally important, protection in the future. 'The main benefit of controlling a modern bureaucratic state,' a Hungarian observer has noted, 'is not the power to persecute the innocent. It is the power to protect

the guilty.’ Going along with the leader’s provocations and outrageous norm-breaking is proof of acquiescence among those who might otherwise be suspected of having retained a belief in proper democratic standards. What’s more, since violating norms compromises members of the political family, they have to stick together for mutual protection, which helps establish reliability and trust – a defining feature of the original form of the mafia.

Not only are the new authoritarian-populist states not fascist in the familiar historical sense; in one important aspect, they turn the pattern of Nazi rule upside down. As the political scientist Ernst Fraenkel demonstrated, the Nazi polity was not characterised by total lawlessness and chaos, as traditional accounts of tyranny or of totalitarianism tend to suggest. There were plenty of areas of life that proceeded in fairly normal, predictable ways: marriages were contracted, business contracts written and enforced. Alongside these areas of relative legal normality, however, there was always the threat of what Fraenkel called the ‘prerogative state’, which could act in completely unpredictable and unaccountable ways. He used the term ‘dual state’ to describe the coexistence of predictable normality and unpredictable repression.

What if today we are once more faced with dual states, with the difference that the split is between a realm of politics which in many respects remains relatively normal, and an economic realm where one is subject to the arbitrary exercise of power? Or perhaps not so arbitrary, since if it is the case that loyalty to the political family is crucial for economic success, punishments are in fact foreseeable. Instead of sending muscle to collect the cash, the government simply alerts the tax authorities – and they will always find something. As a consequence, powerful businesspeople not obviously loyal to the regime are made offers to sell their holdings which they cannot refuse – in Hungary this has regularly happened to oligarchs thought to be aligned with the socialist party. As the sociologist Kim Lane Scheppele has pointed out, these patterns are not always easily discernible to outsiders, since actions that are essentially political can always be represented as dictated by economic necessity.

Not all right-wing populist governments operate fully-fledged mafia states. In some cases the countervailing forces to a complete politicisation of state and economy are too strong. That includes the US, for now. Trump and his family are obviously trying to use his office for personal benefit, and the president admonishes US corporations openly on Twitter. But although patrimony is pervasive in the White House, Trump’s political family hasn’t extended very far: we have not seen the emergence of Trumpist oligarchs. What we do see are Trumpist enablers, the Paul Ryans and Mitch McConnells who have

been happy to push through deregulation measures and massive tax cuts for the upper echelons. These enablers have set about realising Steve Bannon's goal of 'deconstructing the administrative state', in effect dismantling bodies such as the Environmental Protection Agency.

Mafia rule is harder to establish in the internationally exposed parts of the economy. It is received wisdom that right-wing populists are enemies of neoliberalism, but Orbán, for example, has made his peace with international investors. He offers the German car industry what one Hungarian observer has called 'Chinese conditions' in the middle of Europe: mostly pliant unions, where there are unions at all, and swift clampdowns on anything that looks like environmental protest, for instance against the major Audi factory in Győr (as one critic joked, the system is as much an 'Audi-cracy' as an autocracy). 'We are pragmatic,' says Mateusz Morawiecki, the leader of Poland's right-wing populist government. 'We have a problem with a part of the European political elite and with journalists, but not with the normal people. For example, 97 per cent of all foreign investors would come to us again.'

Right-wing populists claim that they, and only they, represent what they tend to call 'the real people', or the 'silent majority'. Rival contenders for power are dismissed as irredeemably corrupt: 'Crooked Hillary'. Those among the people who do not fall in with the populists are said never to have truly belonged to the people in the first place – witness Trump's condemnation of his critics as 'un-American', Kaczyński railing against Poles with treason in their genes, or BJP politicians' insistence that 'division ... is just in the mind of certain politicians, but, as a society, India is one and India is harmonious.' Populists talk incessantly about unifying the people, but their political strategy involves dividing societies and waging culture wars: whoever doesn't want to be unified on their terms is cast out. As Trump put it in a campaign speech in May 2016, 'the only important thing is the unification of the people, because the other people don't mean anything.'

If they have sufficient power, populists try to colonise the state itself. One of the first changes Orbán and his party, Fidesz, sought after coming to power in 2010 was to redraft civil service law to enable them to place loyalists in what were supposed to be non-partisan bureaucratic positions. The justification they gave was that the liberal left controlled the state and had to be purged; in line with their conception of themselves as the only true representatives of the people, populists could also claim that since the state was there for the people, if they took possession of the administration, it was simply a case of the people themselves appropriating what was rightfully theirs.

Both Fidesz and the Law and Justice party (PiS) in Poland moved smartly to take control of the courts and exert power over the media. It was made clear that journalists should not report in ways that violated the interests of the nation, equated with the interests of the ruling party. Like Napoleon III, they would typically counter any criticism from jurists or journalists by asking: ‘Who elected you?’ India’s finance minister has declared that ‘democracy can’t be the tyranny of the unelected’; the Polish justice minister, engaged in relentless attacks on the independent judiciary, felt it necessary to explain that Poland was a democracy and not a ‘courtocracy’.

Trump is not the only leader given to declaring the independent media ‘enemies of the people’. The capture of the media by authoritarian populists does not have to be complete; again, too obvious a *Gleichschaltung* would remind both citizens and outsiders of 20th-century dictatorships. In Hungary, for instance, independent websites and a major German-owned commercial TV station continue to operate, but virtually all the country’s regional newspapers have passed into the hands of government-friendly oligarchs. Many of them were kind enough at the end of last year to ‘donate’ their holdings to a new foundation tasked with ‘promoting activities that serve value creation and strengthen Hungarian national identity in the print, radio, television and online media platforms that make up Hungarian mass communication’. According to the social scientist Gábor Polyák, the foundation – which comprises around five hundred media outlets and is registered at the holiday home of a major Orbán ally – controls about 16 per cent of the total revenue from the country’s media market. Invoking a special clause in competition law, the government declared the merger of ‘strategic national importance’, pre-empting any action by the body charged with preventing concentrations of media power.

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Opposition from within civil society presents a difficulty for populists: it potentially undermines their claim to be the sole representatives of the people. Their method of dealing with this problem is to follow a playbook perfected by Vladimir Putin (in many ways a role model for today’s right-wing populists): set out to ‘prove’ that civil society isn’t civil society at all, and that what appears to be popular opposition on the streets has nothing to do with the real people. Thus right-wing populist regimes have gone out of their way to discredit NGOs, representing them as the tools of external powers, and even (in Russia) insisting they declare themselves as ‘foreign agents’. Trump described as ‘paid-up activists’ the millions who came out against his proposed Muslim travel ban, and used the term again about critics of Brett Kavanaugh (for good measure, he also

declared them to be ‘evil’). Governments will trot out the usual suspects – the CIA is behind it all, or Soros – but for the truly creative conspiracy theorist there are no limits: the Gezi Park protests of 2013, an Erdoğan adviser eventually revealed, were the doing of Lufthansa, which allegedly feared increased competition from Turkish Airlines after the opening of Istanbul’s new airport. At the same time, populists may come to relish protest: it puts fuel on the fire of the culture wars on which they thrive. This was the reason, in the first year of the Trump administration, that Steve Bannon described the ‘resistance’ as ‘our friend’. The lesson here is not, of course, that citizens shouldn’t take to the streets to protest, only that they ought to be aware of how swift and sophisticated populists can be in turning dissent to their own advantage, to justify what always ends up as a form of exclusionary identity politics.

Identity politics of this kind isn’t really about beliefs; it is about proving you belong to the real people. One under-remarked legacy of the Cold War is the assumption that the terms of political conflict must be traceable to the ideas of important thinkers. Want to understand Putin? The intellectual power behind the throne is the ‘Eurasianist’ philosopher Alexander Dugin, talked up by Western pundits as ‘the most dangerous philosopher in the world’. Bolsonaro? Study Olavo de Carvalho, self-taught Brazilian philosopher, former astrologer and chain-smoking conspiracy theorist. Even now, we are told that the man to watch if you want to make sense of Trumpism is Bannon, whose secret reading list is said to include Julius Evola, a major inspiration for the European New Right. (Bannon now claims to be working with Orbán – the ‘most significant guy on the scene right now’, according to Bannon – and recently dined with Bolsonaro and Carvalho at the Brazilian embassy in Washington.) Instant intellectual history of this sort takes it for granted that we are dealing with political actors inspired by comprehensive worldviews; it also assumes without much evidence that far-right parties succeed because voters find their philosophies attractive. In reality, leaders don’t want to be constrained by intellectuals who might criticise them for failing to implement their ideas properly; and most citizens have no clue about the esoteric musings of the alleged powers behind the throne.

It isn’t hard to see why liberal thinkers have inadvertently been building up their opponents into philosophical giants of illiberalism: it gives them something to work with, a theoretical battle to fight. It’s also easy to see why they believe that ordinary men and women are ready to be seduced by illiberal ideologies. Suspecting that the masses are up to no good has been the default position of liberalism since the early 19th century. The democratic double disaster of Brexit and Trump gives liberals licence to revive the prejudices of 19th-century mass psychology: people are irrational, or at least

horrendously ill-informed. Or they were authoritarians all along. As Hillary Clinton recently put it in a remarkably evidence-free interview, right-wing populism meets what she calls ‘a psychological as much as political yearning to be told what to do’. In order to counter the non-democratic masses, the favoured strategy is to restrict democracy preemptively. In the US, the call is to re-empower the ‘gatekeepers’ in political parties and the media, who used to shut the likes of Trump out of the primaries; in Europe, the case for liberal technocrats like Macron is that they will save us from a dangerous populism. But have so many people really been converted to the views of the far right? Contrary to the domino theory propounded by pundits, and by the populists themselves – first Brexit, then Trump, then Le Pen etc – the fact remains that no right-wing populist has yet come to power anywhere in Western Europe or North America without the collaboration of established conservative elites. Farage did not bring Brexit about by himself; he needed Michael Gove, Boris Johnson et al to assure voters that it was a jolly good idea. Trump wasn’t elected as the leader of a spontaneous grassroots movement of – as the cliché has it – angry white working-class males; he was the candidate of the ultimate party of the establishment and needed the support of Chris Christie, Rudy Giuliani, Newt Gingrich – all of whom vouched for him. What happened on 8 November 2016 can in one sense be explained in the most banal terms. Citizens who identify with the Republican Party came out and did what voters do on election day: they cast a ballot for their party. What took place was utterly normal, except that the candidate himself wasn’t quite so normal.

Trump’s atypicality did not go unnoticed, but it was overridden by a larger concern. Some Republicans went on record saying that although they considered Trump unqualified to be president, they still voted for him. An increasing number of elections involve not the enthusiastic endorsement of a mandate, but the unwavering desire to reject someone or something else. For many on the American right, Hillary Clinton was unelectable no matter what; for many Brazilians, it was imperative to vote against Lula’s Workers’ Party. In Hungary in 2010 and Poland in 2015, neither Orbán nor Kaczyński campaigned on the promise of dismantling the rule of law. Instead, they presented their parties as part of the mainstream (in Orbán’s case, the claim was certified by Europe’s most powerful Christian Democrats, the Bavarians with their car industry). The citizens of these countries, rather than revealing a deep-seated yearning for authoritarianism, did exactly what democratic theory would prescribe in a two-party system in which one major contender has become discredited: in Hungary because of the socialists’ corruption and disastrous economic record, in Poland because Donald Tusk’s Christian Democratic Platforma had become complacent after too many years in power. Only after

their resounding victories did Orbán and Kaczyński declare that it was time to remake political institutions.

By the same token, not everything right-wing populists have done in government is a reflection of what the people wanted. Liberals should stop moaning that democracy is dying because ‘the people’ don’t care for it any more; their critics on the left have to do more than argue that democracy was never really born in the first place because our existing political institutions were shaped by racism and sexism. Not everything that populists say about elites is necessarily wrong – the talk of rigged economies resonates for a reason. But as long as liberals and the left fixate on the idea that right-wing populism has a universal cause, they will remain fixated on their opponents. There has to be more to them than being ‘anti-populist’: they have to start to figure out what they actually stand for.

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