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Class struggle à la droite

Populism is boosted by economic crises, but its roots are cultural

Populism is a method. It works by mobilizing an imaginary homogenous entity called “the people” against an equally ill-defined and generally despised “elite,” thus radically simplifying the political field. Such simplifications have served to orchestrate conflicts since the 19th century and in particular during economic and cultural crises: on the left, in terms of a class struggle against the powers that be; on the right, in terms of a confrontation with an ‘other,’ be it foreigners or minorities. Sometimes these two tendencies have gone hand in hand, for instance, when migrant workers got portrayed as wage-squeezing competitors. In fact though, a populism that purports to be about solidarity with the “common people” always promotes social *dis*unity.

As a catchphrase in political debates, populism may be useful; a productive analytical concept it is certainly not. The “people” that our modern-day nationalist populists champion are no longer just defined socio-economically (as in “the proletariat”). Rather, these populists employ ethnical constructs (e.g., “Biodutsche,” “français de souche”) which suggest a homogenous community with a shared ancestry, a long history, and a solid identity. It is to *these* “people” – not the actual pluralistic *demos* – that populists ascribe an authority that exceeds that of institutions: “The people stand above the law,” as a slogan of the Austrian “Freedom Party” goes. In this view, there is no “representation” through democratic processes; instead, “the people” form movements that back charismatic leaders and legitimize them by means of plebiscites. Right-wing movements may be diverse, but what they all have in common is a worldview that is utterly authoritarian (as well as usually patriarchal and homophobic). The own nation, ethnically defined, takes center stage – think “America first!” or “La France d’abord! – albeit aggression is (thus far) mainly being directed inward, towards supposed “enemies of the people” (as Donald Trump has designated both members of the opposition and the “mainstream media”) or towards (im)migrants who demand equal rights and equal treatment.

Populism is frequently regarded (and excused) as an expression of economic woes. However, ethno-nationalist authoritarianism is motivated less by feelings of inferiority in terms of status, income, or opportunities in life than by a harsh rejection of the Global South’s demands for participation in the wealth still generated within neocolonial structures. In Germany, such *ressentiments* were first utilized during the 1980s when the “REPublicans” pursued a strategy of “prosperity chauvinism.” With refugee movements on the rise, they recently intensified and are now increasingly expressed through violent acts. Hostility towards refugees, islamophobia, rejection of minority rights – the favorite obsessions of the right may be triggered by economic developments, but they are essentially of a cultural nature, right up to downright racism.

While the majority of supporters and voters of right-wing parties are middle-class or well-off (and male, for that matter), we also find among them low-skilled, low-income workers in precarious employments who are afraid of declining even further and categorically opposed to a global economy that is merciless but has generally been described as without alternative, not least by social democratic governments. No doubt *one* factor in the rise of the new authoritarianism is the increase in social inequality since 2008; even more important are the feelings of being marginalized on the part of those who live in deindustrialized rural areas devoid of infrastructure – “somewheres” who feel attached to their native regions and whose anger at the cosmopolitan “anywheres” (supposedly rootless) won’t be placated by welfare benefits.

Unlike during the 19th and early 20th centuries, such deprivation no longer results in leftist reactions, such as mass support of socialist reform or revolutionary movements. It is a nationalist narrative that dominates discourses nowadays, in fact largely the same one as already championed by 20th-century fascism, featuring anti-Semitic conspiracy theories (directed, for instance, against George Soros) and dystopian visions of a “great replacement” of populations (Renaud Camus).ⁱ Right-wingers are convinced that the European Union plans to systematically replace white, Christian populations with Muslims, Africans, Asians. In effect, their agenda thus boils down to ethnical cleansing.

These political strategies of the new populists are clearly inspired by Hitler’s “national socialism” – which is precisely why they downplay the importance of the Nazi terror regimeⁱⁱ and attack post-World War II commemorative culture. In the Trump-era US, extremist white-supremacist tendencies have begun to infiltrate the mainstream as well: here it is mostly Latinos and Hispanics who bear the brunt because a growing number of whites fear the loss of their – demographic, religious, cultural – hegemony. The first concrete results of these fears are Trump’s “great wall” on the Mexican border and more inhuman immigration detention practices than ever before.

With respect to economic and social policy, the Front National, the Austrian and Dutch “Freedom” Parties, and the Scandinavian far-right have traditionally favored the “neoliberal” course of shrinking the welfare state. As of late, however, European right-wing parties have increasingly focused on bestowing exclusive financial gifts on their respective ethnic in-group; the prime example is the nativist birth promotion program recently adopted in Hungary and Poland. Such policies contribute to the fading of the conflict line that once firmly separated left and right, mirroring structural contrasts between the classes and resulting in a preference for either economic liberalism or interventionist politics.

In our post-industrialist societies, tectonic shifts are currently taking place, but the gap that is newly forming is primarily a cultural one. It is the gap, already hinted at, between cosmopolitans and communitarians, who radically differ in their assessment of globalization and of transnational institutions like the EU. The old dichotomy of progressives vs. conservatives is being superseded by an antagonism between a new populist right and a new (sub)urban and environmentalist left. To put it in color terminology familiar to German and Austrian readers: red and black are being ousted by green and blue (the color of both the AfD and the FPÖ, though one feels tempted to call them brown). And it is no coincidence that most authoritarian nationalists cling to fossil industrialism, deny the reality of climate change, and delay or thwart measures for climate and species protection.

ⁱ In Germany, AfD regional leader Björn Höcke has referred to this as “Umvolkung,” a term that is reminiscent of Nazi parlance.

ⁱⁱ For example, by calling it “just a flyspeck” within Germany’s century-long glorious history, as the AfD’s Alexander Gauland did.