



## Expert Comment

Santiago Abascal, leader of the right-wing populist Vox party, stands as the national anthem plays in Cáceres, Extremadura. (Credit: Esteban Martinena/Bigstockphoto.com)

# Populism in epochal change: Superstructure and underlying causes

Jürgen R. Grote (2019)

# Populism in epochal change: Superstructure and underlying causes

Jürgen R. Grote<sup>1</sup>

The success of populist parties is at last undeniable since the latest European Parliament elections. Equally undeniable is the slow erosion of traditional political parties, and the interlinked fragmentation of party politics in many EU member states. Both can simultaneously be seen as expressions, and causes, of the current populist success. This has been debated extensively in the media, however mostly when exploring the question of whether this is just a temporary phenomenon, or indeed an irreversible development encompassing an increasing number of countries.

One fundamental shortcoming of many debates is, that few contributions assume a clear separation between the sensitivities of those who are ready/willing to vote for the corresponding parties, and the political actors who, aware of these sensitivities, guide them in a direction far-removed from the original underlying issues. Populist rhetoric is one thing – the factors underlying their success are something completely different.

This is the problem with the current media-political discourse: the discussion of bizarre political agendas and outlandish leading figures usually only scratches the surface of an issue that has much deeper roots. When voters and supporters are presumed to accept the totality of the political agenda, it becomes easy to ascribe idiocy, lack of education, or authoritarian characteristics to them. These rather superficial explanations regard the success of populist rhetoric as a stubborn reflex to Merkel's decision in 2015 to open the

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borders to refugees, and find it in alleged personality flaws and collective traumas, or perhaps in unfortunate social circumstances. In this case, perhaps populism doesn't have any specific content, and can be described as a form of identity politics. Populist parties and their followers then, would be equally possessed with pathologies that, as a crude effect of cultural estrangement and as a general defence mechanism against the challenges of today, are simply unacceptable.

Such surface explanations are astounding, since there meanwhile exists a wealth of scientific analyses that are attempting to get to the bottom of the underlying structural causes of the phenomenon.

### **Epochal change**

Practically all serious scientific explanations declare a type of epochal landmark, which manifested already at the end of the last century as a result of the processes of globalisation and commodification, and is currently reaching its zenith. In the context of this landmark moment, western societies are witnessing a re-ordering of a nationally-based industrial modernity, to a new constellation, which can be described as global modernity. Contributing to this is a form of neoliberalism which subjects large social and political sectors to economic imperatives. Forms of capitalist domination have become ubiquitous – a fact that has left obvious traces in the deep structures of our political and societal systems.

### **The crisis of good governance**

The relevant literature talks of a process of parallel change in practically all societal sectors. This change is made obvious by falling back on the essential societal ordering principles of state, market and society. In contrast to conventional views, according to which societies are functionally split into different dimensions in which each develop their own logics of action and exist relatively independent of one another, new conceptions assume the

existence of partial overlaps. These overlaps dictate which of the three dimensions, or rather which actors from these dimensions dominate and prescribe the rules in any specific situation. Where state, market, and society are more or less balanced, they are ascribed the quality of good governance arrangements. The underlying logics of the different dimensions support one another, and contribute to the stabilization of their own structures and rules, as well as to that of the overarching system.

As (economically) productive, (politically) democratic and (socially) accessible these arrangements may be, the unilateral intervention into, or usurpation of, the matters of one or more 'partner' by another is hugely negative and destabilising. The present debate about populism essentially assumes that there has been such a usurpation in the last few decades, primarily perpetrated by the market and the underlying neoliberal mantras, and the purveyors of said mantras, i.e., big multinational corporations and banks.

The resulting effects on politics and civil society, can be roughly characterised as follows. In part as a result of the imposition of 'New Public Management' techniques, in politics we are witnessing the de-regulation and de-institutionalisation of all those institutions having previously assumed market-constraining functions. The increasingly inclusive practices of elite recruitment (Hartmann, 2018) as well as the shrinkage of traditional parties and the implosion of the political centre have contributed to a comprehensive change of political mentality.

With regards to society, we are witnessing a partial collapse and fragmentation of not only 'communities of choice' such as trade unions, trade associations, and social movements, but also of 'communities of fate' such as families, neighbourhoods, churches and religious communities. The explosion of inequality and the erosion of social cohesion can certainly, in extreme cases, take on pathological forms of individual and collective anomie. Though to differing extents, the entire society is affected by the above-named processes, not just the voters of right-wing populist parties. However, the latter have in fact

specialised in craftily using existing discontent and insecurity with a number of issues (financial crisis, migrant crisis, institutional crisis) as grist for the mill, and thus to push for three primary goals: re-nationalisation, communitarian re-vitalisation, and re-establishment of sovereignty.

### **Political-economic explanations**

The dominant approaches in the analysis of populism conceptualise it mainly as an economic resource conflict. Within that, some authors refer to texts by Dani Rodrik (Rodrik, 2018) who, while investigating the reciprocal relationship of populism and economics, posed the question of how to explain country-specific expressions of left-wing and right-wing populism. Rodrik's theory is that left-wing populism is closely linked to the freedom of movement for capital and goods that is a hallmark of globalisation, while right-wing populism is a form of protest against the free movement of people, i.e., against migration.

The most developed of works in this line of thought is undoubtedly Philip Manow's *Politische Ökonomie des Populismus* (Manow, 2018). Without disregarding the relevance of cultural and mentality-driven factors, Manow emphasises the central importance of economic backgrounds. He thereby avoids the analytical mistake present among many authors of viewing current moods as a direct expression of global change. In his empirically broad comparative examination, Manow inserts a filtering mechanism that allows him to hold the characteristics and properties of distinct political economies responsible for different types of reactionary movements. He therein refers to the four basic freedoms of the European domestic market (free movement of goods, people, services, and capital) and their connection to the institutional disposition of labour/job markets and welfare systems. Northern Europe possesses strong and relatively inclusive welfare states. Migrants are therefore often considered as competition for limited state benefits. Self-styled 'welfare-state chauvinistic' insiders thus defend the accomplishments of social benefits which they

ultimately profit from. It is thereby right-wing populist parties that have taken it upon themselves to limit the migrant influx.

The challenge in southern Europe is the globalisation of goods rather than the free movement of people. Countries like Greece, Spain, and Italy are reliant upon domestic demand, which they have attempted to stimulate through greater state spending that is now impossible due to austerity measures. Consequently, the stronger current of left-wing populism in these areas stands for regaining control of financial and exchange rate policies, and for corresponding protectionist measures. As for the right-wing populism in the United Kingdom; the conflict does not revolve around the welfare state, but rather the job market. Here it is the job market insiders, typical losers of globalisation, protesting. Thus, Manow's work doesn't solely produce a political economy, but rather, due to its clear and strong focus on geographical factors, also a political ecology of populism.

### **Political sociology**

Political sociology has recently attempted an all-encompassing explanation, which does consider economic factors, however emphasises to a greater extent the role of cultural relationships. For Cornelia Koppetsch (Koppetsch, 2019) populism is representative of a current epochal transformation, a protest against material and immaterial losses in status, and thus a counter-revolution against processes of globalisation. Her analysis does not foreground the rise of new types of parties, rather focuses on manifestations of changes in the deep structure of societies, that fundamentally explain the existence of these parties.

A large part of her work concerns itself with the so-called *Backlash* thesis (Norris and Inglehart, 2019), according to which populism is to be understood as a reaction to now-hegemonic values, born in the context of the 'cultural revolution' of 1968. While comparing the last quarter of the past century with the last twenty years with regards to the inception of protest movements, it is argued that, for such movements to be successful, three factors

need to work together – a structural declassification of significant sections of the population; a crisis of legitimacy of the present order; and finally general crises that threaten the structure. This is the case partly for the inception of new social movements, and certainly for the slow growth of right-wing populist movements. Social and economic tendencies of insecurity spring to mind, as does the crisis of neoliberal practices and conceptions of order, and the external and internal threats of terrorist attacks, wars and mass migration.

In comparing the two phases, Koppetsch comes to the conclusion that there were two peak moments that were characterised by upward and downward movement, respectively. 1968 was the culmination of a societal opening, that enabled social mobility as well as social and political participation for an increasing number of people. Hierarchies were dismantled, institutions were liquidated, and values like self-determination and authenticity came through not only in high schools, but also in business and public administration. A lot of this was based on the all but utopian acceptance of a limitless malleability and planning of society. This process was reversed through a linked yet contradictory development in the direction of social closing which reached its peak in the foundation year of the AFD (2013). In sum, the two phases can be understood as the rise and fall of liberalism, in relation to both its cultural and economic implications. It is four years which appear to be particularly significant and which divide the entire phase into different sequences. The rise of the *New Social Movements* begins approximately in 1968. The primarily cultural, and subsequently economic, liberalisation that took place in 1979 (the Reagan/Thatcher phase as the starting point of market deregulation), as well as the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 marked the incremental erosion of politics attributed to a modernity anchored in the nation-state, and signalled the rise of global liberalism of Western nature. The dates 1979 (the Islamic Revolution), 1989 (the strengthening of anti-liberal system antagonisms) and 2001 (the attack on the Twin Towers) can also be said to, at least in part, symbolise the rise of right-wing populist counter-movements, which position themselves against global liberalism and

invoke the nation as a cultural community. Koppetsch gets to the heart of this, in saying: “not the release from, rather the re-involvement of the individual in traditions, not the struggle of the subject against all-determining structures, rather the reinstatement of structures, not individualisation and atomisation, rather communitarian revitalisation and stabilisation”. Thus, the whole story is about processes of opening and closing. The politically restorative phase of the economic boom in the *Trente Glorieuses*, which drove processes of collective upward social mobility was followed by a phase of further-reaching cultural opening since the end of the sixties. Both phases seem to have come to an end. Now, not everyone is on the same upward trajectory, some are heading down. This affects primarily those groups, which position themselves in the extended circle of the established middle class.

One important aspect of sociological deliberation that needs addressing in this cursory overview is indeed the analysis of the social situation of those parts of the population being particularly prone to the populist temptation. It is actually not just losers of globalisation, i.e., the underqualified, unemployed, rural, or otherwise disenfranchised, that are affected. The phenomenon of social, political, and economic precarity has objective and subjective manifestations. In the former it is effectively a case of exclusion, whereas subjectively it can certainly be interpreted differently. On the one hand, it contributes to causing huge fears of impoverishment; on the other hand, it is also seen as an opportunity. A central and continuously evolving split in the middle class is responsible for the differences in interpretation. On the one hand, we have a small elite of super-rich and a broader layer of urban, well-educated cosmopolitans, who experience resonance and acknowledgement and who feel largely at home in the world of permanent self-improvement, marked by flexibility and constant availability. On the other hand, we have a declining rural and traditional middle class, whose members are increasingly going on the defensive, and whose once-present self-assurances and control measures are being threatened. It is this section that is not only highly interested in maintaining and defending an established national

economic and welfare system, but also strives culturally for a reversal of the changes since 1968, partly brought about by social movement mobilisation.

The political narratives of the right-wing are directed at the fears and resentments corresponding to this conflict situation, which feed on both real social declassification and/or subjectively perceived threats (Nachtwey, 2018). They are attempting to activate these resentments and create a 'league of the betrayed' where slights can be transformed into collective anger at the establishment.

### **In lieu of a conclusion**

Regardless of whether one prefers economic explanations for the emergence of populist movements, or rather cultural and identity-based explanations, it is two things uniting both of them: on one side the reference to fears created by feelings of powerlessness and disenfranchisement, which unites both those threatened by downward social mobility (fears of foreign intrusion and a weak state which offers no protection from outside dangers), and the "arrived/established" (fear of a loss of democracy and reactionary restoration). This has forcefully been described by Biess (2019) in a history of cycles of fear in the Federal Republic. On the other side, reference to an immense growth in complexity, which no one seems able to withstand. Besides a massive opposition to right-wing populist rhetoric and the combating of openly racist and fascist militancy with all constitutional means available, politics should not advocate the overcoming of such fears by way of complexity-reducing answers. It should be open to admit and reflect the emergence of increasingly complex realities, and to adequately communicate them notwithstanding the increasing 'ambiguity intolerance' among large parts of the population. Every attempt to respond to complex problems with simplified answers and false clarities would ignore the intelligence of the voter and thereby bolster the ranks of the populists. A politics aiming to regain its primacy, would first of all need to prevent from any further commodification and reverse it in instances where

the process has already taken hold. It would thereby rid market actors of the spade with which they are digging their own graves. It would simultaneously encourage both 'communities of choice' and 'communities of fate', i.e., civil society, to adopt complex challenges, tolerate ambiguity, and further extend pluralist ways of life.

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