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Populism and the Rhetoric of “Bread and Freedom”

The impact of the pandemic on the future of populism is hard to predict. First, in any discussion of populism we should specify whether we are referring to populism in government or as an opposition movement. Second, we should remember that although populists in power do share some tendencies (strengthening the power of the leader and the executive, and humiliating oppositions and minorities), populism also mirrors the political culture of the country in which it emerges. Thus any analysis needs to be attentive to the context. We should also avoid identifying populist democracy with authoritarian regimes. Although some leaders who start as populist not only change the existing constitution of the country to favor their own party but also weaken the democratic power of the suffrage, when they cross this line and embrace authoritarianism, they are no longer populists. A dictator is not a populist. A populist disfigurement of democracy is still a democratic practice.

Hungary is important in this regard. The pandemic provided a pretext for Victor Orbán to jump fully outside of the democratic constitution and the rule of law. As we know from history, the most difficult task of a democratic constitution is to ensure that legality is not gained at the expense of democratic legitimacy, or security at the expense of liberty. As le Marquis de Condorcet put it, “*Sur la nécessité, l’excuse des tyrants.*” After several debacles, written constitutions proved capable of both anticipating and regulating change and institutional innovation while neutralizing executive attempts to exert arbitrary and exceptional power in the face of exceptional events. Condorcet’s anxiety has proved prescient once again, as some populist leaders have used the pandemic to install a regime that humiliates the most democratic organ of the state, the parliament. Hungary is an extreme case of populism that has devolved into dictatorship, and that can hardly be generalized.

However, the pandemic has also induced some changes in democratic governments that will likely impact the stability of democracy, and thus also populism. The necessity of centralized healthcare measures has come in tandem with two phenomena: a draconian limitation of the right to free movement and freedom of association for all citizens, and the extraordinary authority given to biomedical sciences and statistics. The pandemic has potentially undermined the primacy of politics, which is the pivotal trait of democratic societies, and elevated scientific experts in its place. According to some commentators, the leading role of science is bad news for populists, who are notoriously distressed by experts and ready to embrace fake news and conspiratorial rumors. I have some reservations about relying on “science” to save us against populism.

In recent years, some political theorists have suggested that to debilitate populism, it would be good to devalue politics in its more characteristic aspects, namely partisanship, party animosity, and electoral campaign propaganda, and to expand the domain of non-political actors, spaces, and authorities (rational deliberation by juries, mini-publics, and monitory authorities and institutions). According to this strategy, less conflictual and partisan politics would deprive populism of oxygen. Thus, the expansion of the role of expertise would be a silver lining of the Covid-19 tragedy.

But the price of debilitating populism in this way would be a debilitated democracy.

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to criticize this anti-political/unpolitical argument, and the accompanying belief that *episteme* would save democracy from itself. Moreover, I don't think it would even deflate populism; on the contrary, the hyper-scientism of the Coronavirus crisis and the simultaneous evacuation of democracy only feeds populist grievances.

So far, the pandemic has highlighted the uncertain knowledge of science rather than its salvific power: the crisis has shown that the theories and results of the biomedical sciences are provisional and far from indisputable. Covid-19 is a new virus and our knowledge of it proceeds by trial and error. Scientists are in the process of learning like

the rest of us, although they are using labs and experimental devices, and learning at the level of molecules. Moreover, the uncertainty of their pronouncements exposes them to contestation by politicians, and in particular, populist politicians. This is the point I would like to stress about whether the pandemic will debilitate populism.

I'm skeptical precisely because the biomedical sciences themselves have been trapped in the spiral of populist polemics. In Italy, Matteo Salvini (the leader of the League) mobilized his thousands of followers in order to cast doubts on the validity of (at time tentative) opinions of biologists and medical doctors in order to reclaim the primacy of politics and freedom of movement against an "authoritarian government" (!). He attacked the center-left government's lockdown both at the beginning of the pandemic (late February) and at the end of the lockdown phase, when the debate on reopening started.

Populism in the opposition profited from the messy and evolving scientific recommendations and predictions. It showed its opportunistic nature, as a movement ready to embrace the topics and rhetoric that suit the moment. This brings me to the more specific reason I think populism's future is rosier than one might think (and hope).

Except for the authoritarian Orbán, populists worldwide have shown a preference for neoliberal answers to the pandemic, not only in those countries, like Italy, in which they are in the opposition, but also in countries in which they rule, like Great Britain (before the virus hit the Prime Minister), the USA, and Brazil. In the latter two countries, the demagogic fight against the opposition merged with the fight in favor of "freedom" against "statism" or "authoritarianism." Thus Trump and the Republican governors adopted mild or no restrictions on freedom of movement and assembly, while orchestrating demonstrations against "fake scientists," Anthony Fauci, and the Democratic governors in charge of the hardest hit metropolitan areas. Similarly, in Brazil, Bolsonaro toyed with freedom, as did Salvini in Italy.

Presenting themselves as politicians who defended freedom against "authoritarian" overreach may take on a sinister meaning once societies reopen and face the problem of

huge numbers of new poor people that the lockdown created. Populist opposition to lockdown (in almost all countries) will become a badge of honor and a cudgel with which to beat those governments and majorities that defended the lockdown in the name of health and solidarity. In other words, the massive unemployment and economic distress in the months to come can fuel populism, which is ready to mobilize the “forgotten many” against an establishment, which, as Salvini thundered, deprived them of their freedom and livelihoods at the same time.

Toeing a fine line, Salvini has expressed admiration for Orban’s decision to close the parliament in Hungary, while he has played the liberal and neoliberal card in his own country, accusing the center-left government of authoritarianism and of destroying economic wellbeing. In defending liberty against lockdown, Salvini put himself at the head of the motley coalition that is already asking for “bread and freedom,” from industrialists to impoverished laborers and the middle classes. Thus, unless center-left parties shake out of it and start mobilizing their citizens around social justice, populism has a bright future.