

Populism and Democracy

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Despite superficial successes, it is hard to see the results of the recent European election as a triumph for this family. Depressingly low participation in the election combined with dramatic growth on the part of the extreme right and even on the extreme left are both indicators that the European project has by no means legitimized itself in the eyes of increasing numbers of European citizens.

The real danger that populism presents is that politics become self destructive. That danger can be latent as is the case with the “old populism” in a place officially outside Europe, but, nevertheless, crucial to Europe’s future, Switzerland, with its chauvinistic navel-gazing referendum. Or it can be patently self-destructive as is the case with the Five Star Movement, a politics which rejects politics and threatens to make government impossible. There is also a third less- obviously self-destructive Populism of the Middle, which seeks to obtain or maintain control of power by appeasing voters’ whims rather than constructively and critically shaping policy to fit the demands of critical situations. All of them are disastrous for public life because they detach policy-making from the substance of problems to be resolved and replace it with what is perceived as pleasing the public. All real values are sold out for opportunistic reasons. Thus old-populist Swiss voters, predominantly rural and little affected by immigration, imposed their will upon business community city dwellers dependent upon the European Union (Switzerland does more business with a single German state, Baden-Württemberg, than it does with China!. Moreover, 97% of what Switzerland produces is made outside of the country). Such considerations not only underscore the self-destructive element in populist politics they also bring the conflict between populist politics and a globalized economy clearly into focus. Replacing politics with moralism is in the end no less self-destructive of democratic values.

The successes of the extreme right in the recent European election provoke reflection upon the political principles that distinguish populism from democracy and therefore on fundamental the ideas and values of Christian Democratic politics. Such reflection implies thinking seriously about the fundamental values and commitments characteristic of *democratic political practice*, i.e. what Walter Lippmann termed many several decades ago “The Public Philosophy.” Populism is certainly the counterfeit of genuine democracy. Pierre Rosanvallon has rightly emphasized the question of the relationship of populism to real democracy is not merely historical and matter of fact but intrinsic to democracy itself. At a certain point there is indeed a transition from quantity to quality as we have recently seen in France. What has previously been considered protest has swelled to the point of transforming the political landscape in that country and threatens to do so elsewhere.

If democracy is government by the people, then large-scale popular discontent of the sort that is growing in Europe cannot simply be brushed aside as an aberration. Resentment with bureaucratic and financial elites with their technocratic answers to human problems is part of the problem. For example, not all European citizens are prepared to accept the President of the European Council’s recent remark in an interview on Euronews that, since we have managed to cope with the financial crises in Ireland, Portugal and Greece: despite election results in places like France, the UK and Denmark, the EU fulfills its task excellently. Thus Europeans have nothing to fear from populist critique of European “elitism.” This view seems to fly in the face of political reality. However transparent the handling of the various crises of the last five years has been to insiders, it has remained annoyingly intransparent to huge numbers of European voters and increasingly so. President van Rompuy seems to have lost sight of the truth in the old adage that “all politics are local”. The President’s attitudes does not neutralize populism but actually fuels its fires. The real danger today is complacency when internal reform ought to be the order of the day in the EU. In our Christian Democratic tradition reform begins with

reflection upon basic principles which vivify centrist politics; for that is clearly where the current challenge lies.

The first and most important point to be made is that, however important electoral victories are, democracy is not just about numbers. Its defining characteristic is qualitative and not quantitative: commitment to the rule of law. Guaranteeing minority rights and orderly transfer of power, the striving after civic peace, are of the essence of any centrist project. That is what determines that all forms of chauvinism are anti-democratic regardless of the size of the majorities that chauvinists may command. Thus it is intellectual competition in the public arena, that is to say transparent efforts to forge sustainable policy in the face of social conflict that legitimates democracy. It is certainly *not* the case that popular majorities legitimate anybody's politics – *including ours*. We only have to cast a glance at the third world to see that majorities have nothing to do with democracy as the West (for all its faults) has come to understanding it over the last 2,500 years. The striving after civic peace has been the fountainhead of centrist political values for 2,500 years. *All* other political values flow from it – and those moral and personal values that do contradict the striving to create a sustainable center have no place in the Christian Democratic program *whatsoever*.

Where are the major fallacies in populist politics rooted? To begin with populist of all colors are fundamentally confused about answer to the question: who are The People after all? Much of politics on both sides of the Atlantic has been based upon the erroneous idea that The People are merely the voters. However, to make that assumption is to overlook the idea that The People in the tradition of Christian Democracy, reaching from Aristotle and Cicero to the American Founding Fathers and Robert Schuman are the *historical community* that perdures over time with a past and a future and forms the genuine source of political legitimacy and democratic values. On this view, the enemies of democracy are populism but also political technocracy of the sort that the current President of the Council endorses. If populism

reduces The People to the voters, technocracy in politics reduces politics to policy-making. Both really make fun of The Public – and people know it.

Nobody understood the problems discussed here into politics better than F. A. von Hayek, whose economic views have made him a hero to neo-liberals. However, his brilliant defense of the free market is but a single side of a coin. We need to look at the other side in order to see what this remarkable man has to say to us today about populism. His views about politics and democracy are almost shocking.

I quote,

If, as some maintain democracy has now definitely come to mean unlimited power of the majority, we may have to invent a new word to describe a system of government in which, though there be no power higher than that of the majority, even that power would be limited by the principle that it possessed coercive power only to the extent that it was prepared to commit itself to general rules.

We forget at our peril that Prof. Hayek was a political philosopher as well as an economist. The cornerstone of his political thought is that political power does not originate in the *will* of the majority but in majority *opinion*, i.e., an enlightened public opinion emerging from vigorous, if you like, value-free, public debate of just the sort that Walter Lippmann ceaselessly advocated. Without employing the word populism he characterized it perfectly and profoundly as something that could only be rooted out if politicians *never* faced re-election – thus anticipating – and neutralizing -- Jean-Claude Juncker's famous lament that, if we do what we think is right, we won't be re-elected. Therefore Hayek advocated a – highly utopian – political system in which people would vote only once in their lives at the age of 40 to elect representatives from their cohort who would serve a 15 year term after which they would retire to become elder statesmen. It will come as surprising, if not outright shocking, that the great enemy of planning in the economy was anything but laissez-faire in his politics.

So where do we go from here? It has rightly been emphasized that restoring confidence can only take place when European politicians enter closely into dialogue with their constituencies. That means dispelling any number of myths about “Brussels” on the one hand and re-articulating our lot in a globalized world. Populists are not alone in their nostalgia for a simpler society with a fixed secure, transparent structure. Hardly anybody is immune to such thoughts in our confusing world – even if our idealized Worlds of Yesterday never really existed at all. Globalization is the main fact of life today. Either we control it (to the extent that it is possible to do so) or it controls us. In order to do so in Europe we need a single market with a single currency. That single market requires a certain regulation as even the most skeptical of us has discovered in the last six years. Such regulation, in turn, has to be developed in the framework of critical political discussion. These are the facts of life from which responsible politics has to proceed. In a sense this is the converse of the Principle of Subsidiarity: what cannot be handled at a local level must be dealt with on a wider scale. Comprehensible examples of the actual political and economic complexities that form the basis of well-being in Europe today must be carefully and powerfully presented to the public in a way that dispels fear and builds trust. The first crucial step is to talk to people clearly and comprehensibly. That all seems self-evident but it is not easy to do given the complexities of EU institutional generally and in particular the remoteness of the Parliament from its constituents. If we are to believe an insider like Luuk van Middelaar, who is virtually President van Rompuy’s secretary, the very compromises that formed its development over the last sixty years have made the EU a virtually incomprehensible organization viewed a-historically from the outside. On top of that our populist challengers are putting enormous pressure on us by crudely oversimplifying what is at stake in today’s Europe. What we need is a vast storehouse of powerful, comprehensive examples of just what Europe is and does to counter extremist *terrible simplificateurs*. Re-creating lost trust and confidence among The People is very much a matter of helping them overcoming their apathy and alienation. MEPs on the center right face the enormous

challenge of accepting a certain responsibility for the status quo and remedying it. This representative function is every bit as important as the parliamentary function they have as MEPs. However difficult it may be in the concrete to embody the voice of reason and substance in politics, the less substance that politics embody, the more self-destructive they become as the case of the Five Star Movement in Italy clearly demonstrates. There is a real danger today that voters cut off their nose to spite their face as the last EU election clearly indicates. Genuine political leadership in today's Europe is a ticklish matter of persuasion both with respect to the opposition and The Public, that must be a central concern of all members of the European Parliament.

Selected Literature

Bingham, Tom. *The Rule of Law*

Hayek, F.A von. *New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics and the History of Ideas*

Janik, Allan. *European Values* (obtainable from the author: allan.janik@uibk.ac.at)

Lippmann, Walter. *The Public Philosophy*

Rosanvillon, Pierre. "Penser le populisme," in Colliot-Thélène & Guénard (eds.). *Peuples et populisme*

Schuman, Robert. *For Europe*