

Populism: Problems and Challenges

Comments upon the EIN Seminar on Populism, Brussels 12 May 2015

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The steady growth of populism both on the extreme left as well as the extreme right presents a serious challenge to the European center. The fact is that the European center is not holding but eroding just about everywhere with the Nordic countries as perhaps the most dramatic examples. In one way or another most of the serious political problems facing Europe are involved in the growth of populism. The inability of the center right and the center left to solve big problems that have been with us for a very decades has contributed to making populist “quick fix” solutions to largely intractable problems increasingly attractive to the electorate. Increasingly the European center right and left is being perceived as a class of elitist mandarins who have lost touch with the concerns of ordinary people. On the left (but not exclusively there) the failure of the center to alleviate mass unemployment or to regulate financial markets has produced the Five Star Movement in Italy and Podemos in Spain (the latter admirably elucidated by M. Alvarez Tarido). On the right (again, not exclusively) the inability of centrist governments to regulate immigration and to develop policies and procedures for dealing with asylum seekers quickly and smoothly has greatly contributed to the appeal of Pegida in Germany, the FPÖ in Austria and their counterparts in the Scandinavian countries. The fact is that the increasing appeal of extremist parties is a very real reflection of voter impatience with the inability of centrist parties to cope with their most worrisome concerns: financial security and collective identity. Voters want to change the political agenda and feel that the only way to do so it to endorse anti-Establishment parties (F. Hartleb). In the most dramatic cases political alienation from the center has led to the very hatred of conventional politics (Hartleb, Chrysosgelos). The excellent presentations at the seminar reflected the complexity of everything surrounding populism.

Peter Ucen's enlightening account of the meanings of populism in the popular press underlines boldly the difficulty of making a hard and fast distinction between populist measures and genuinely democratic policies that are "of the people, by the people and for the people." He rightly emphasizes that in popular discussion "populist" is far more a term of abuse, a political swear-word that is employed to disqualify the views of the person or persons in question as morally unacceptable, economically irrational or politically simple-minded than it is a useful political category. The charge of populism is a sign of elitist dismissal of the "merely" popular and as such an expression of sentiments that are at their core anti-democratic. Peter Ucen's remarks form a sobering reminder that usage is of the utmost importance for understanding the complexities of politics in our world and especially of the language of politics (and I would add, paying respects to Alasdair MacIntyre, of ethics: appeals to moral values in politics frequently have a similar decidedly political meaning, which should remind us that politics and ethics are closely bound together and not opposites, as they are frequently portrayed in anti-Establishment politics, and as such never neutral). Our political language is chuck-full of innocent-looking words that mask a multitude of phenomena as well as moral judgments that stack the deck for or against specific views. In short, it is virtually impossible to attain anything like scientific objectivity in politics precisely because our very descriptions of policies and situations are politically loaded. Briefly, we neglect political rhetoric is a lot more than "mere rhetoric." Some obvious examples are "fairness" and "responsibility" but even the word "economy" can be misleading in today's political discourse: does it refer to the finance economy or the real economy. We can't be sure at a glance. Such example can easily be multiplied.

The presentations of Elodie Novinski and Angelos Chrysosgelos taken together also form an important reminder of the crucial role that the *imagination* plays in political thinking. Ms. Novinski presented a dramatic picture of populist movements as a form of counterculture with a decidedly formed marketing style designed to

create a social network that protects the People from the Mandarins. Attaching yourself to a populist movement is a way of being “cool.” As such those movements require charismatic leaders and continual hype to thrive. Although she did not employ the example the transformation that rock music created in western culture from its modest beginnings in the 1950 is a powerful example from the history of pop culture showing us how a sub-culture can absorb the broader culture in which it is embedded. There is evidence that just such a transformation is underway in Europe as the developments especially in the Scandinavian countries indicate. Moreover, a front page editorial in newspaper with impeccable liberal conservative credentials like the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* at the end of 2014 insisted that what is dismissed as populist extremism by, say, Pegida is in fact a realignment of the center right (Eric Gujer, “Das Nutzen der Wutbürger,” NZZ, 20 December 2014) Doubtless, the same could be said of, say, Podemos on the left. Populism needs powerful media support to succeed and that is relatively easy to mobilize in our world. However, if the imagination is a key to success for the anti-Establishment extremism, it is also a key to coping with it. Angelos Chryssogelos has rightly pointed out that populist successes are principally in electoral politics. Once in power they are considerably less successful at forming the constructive reforms that are expected of them as the scandals around the system that Jörg Haider put into place in the state of Carinthia in western Austria clearly indicate. So the challenge to center-right politicians is to invite their electorate to participate in “what-would.-happen-if” political thought experiments that would bring out the vacuousness and superficiality that would be involved in consistently implementing populist policies. The power of imagination and the symbolic dimension of politics can in no case be underestimated in their capacity for good and evil. It has to be a priority of responsible political leadership to develop policies to encourage the development of responsible journalism and responsible media.

Although there was ample discussion of parties, movements, leadership and strategies connected with all aspects of populism in the course of the seminar, one main facet of the rise of populism went unmentioned: the crisis of representation. Long before anti-Establishment parties in Europe began to make headlines with their smashing electoral performances, even before the crises that have plagued us in recent years, there was intense discussion of the so-called “democracy deficit” in the EU. The Union’s leadership was roundly criticized already twenty years ago for lack of transparency in its functioning and the lack of accountability on the part of its decision makers. In the minds of the broad masses of European voters nothing has changed in that respect. The parliament was criticized years ago for doing everything except what it is there to do, i.e., *to represent citizens*, not factions. Ordinary Europeans have little or no chance to participate in Europe. Little wonder that they are grasping at straws extended to them by politicians who claim to offer them the voice they need and seek. The matrix in which the bacillus of populism has been cultivated is the crisis of representation in European politics. Only when it is met head-on will there be real possibilities for neutralizing anti-Establishment sentiments.

On final thought is yet more sobering: there is also a 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. This form of populism exists within our family. I can offer an example from my country, Austria – the small world in which the big one rehearses as Friedrich Hebbel put it; a proving ground for world destruction in the words of Karl Kraus. In a televised discussion earlier this year a highly respected Austrian jurist objected to plans for large-scale administrative reforms go deal with Austrian debt proposed by the ÖVP on the grounds that it was obvious to him that such reforms would never be permitted by the all-powerful provincial governors that majority of whom were themselves ÖVP. In effect, he was calling a spade a spade and accusing the ÖVP of

populism in its crassest form: promises that a-priori cannot be held. There is plenty of food for thought there.