

Crucified on a Cross of Gold:

The Rise of Populism

Populism is a movement within a democracy and refers to a sense that an elite of some kind has stolen democracy from some wider grouping within society, usually called the 'people'.

By Michael Prior

The political structures of both Europe and North America are in a state of turmoil, owing to what is usually referred to in the press as an upsurge of populism. This turmoil has been a recurring theme in past issues of *The Thinker* and was recently explored last year by Anver Saloojee (2008). It is often characterised by the rise of new political parties and previously unknown leaders.

Political shifts are occurring in many parts of the world. Trump and Macron – non-politicians – have

become presidents of two of the world's largest economies. The populist Five Star Movement, which was fronted by comedian Beppe Grillo until it came to power, is in government in Italy. Andrej Babiš, a businessman and entrepreneur, became Prime Minister of the Czech Republic only three years after entering politics. Syriza is in government in Greece. The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and the Greens now take a significant share of the vote in Germany. Hungary and Poland are

ruled by populist and illiberal parties. The new Ukrainian President is Volodymyr Zelensky, whose previous political experience consisted of playing a Presidential candidate in a television sit-com. Among the emerging markets, Brazil has recently installed a far-right President, Jair Bolsonaro, and Mexico, a far-left President, Andres Lopez Obrador. Pakistan is now ruled by former cricket captain Imran Khan.

These new parties combine policies that traditional parties would not, they are organised differently to traditional parties, and they are led by people who would not be in charge of traditional parties and who say things that traditional politicians would not. They pride themselves on being outsiders, setting themselves apart from incumbent elites. The parties portray themselves as democracies opposed to corporatism and the vested interests that have captured government and the old, incumbent parties. Indeed, even the names of the new parties indicate their purpose. In Germany, the extremist AfD translates as Alternative for Germany, President Macron's party, En Marche! (the exclamation mark is apparently required) simply means Forward, whilst Imran Khan's Tehreek-e-Insaf means Movement for Justice.

In South Africa, the rise and fall of ex-President Zuma can be seen to exhibit both the strengths and the weaknesses of populist movements, in that Zuma rose to power on the back of populist demands such as free university education and his attacks on an elite within the ANC - and fell because of his notorious corruption. The rise of Julius Malema and his Economic Freedom Fighters may be seen as current evidence of populism in South African politics. In his election campaign, Malema made a point of attacking 'racist white farmers, corrupt politicians, the rich and the powerful' (quoted in Conway-Smith, 2019), which reflects usual populist rhetoric about the capture of democracy by an elite group.

Although this political turmoil is world-wide, it is important to distinguish populism from popular uprisings such as the Arab Spring or recent events in Sudan. Populism is a movement within a democracy and refers to a sense that an elite of some kind has stolen democracy from some wider grouping within society, usually called the 'people'. The sense of the term originated at the end of the

“These new parties combine policies that traditional parties would not, they are organised differently to traditional parties, and they are led by people who would not be in charge of traditional parties and who say things that traditional politicians would not. They pride themselves on being outsiders, setting themselves apart from incumbent elites.”

nineteenth century in the USA by the Peoples' or Populist Party, a largely agrarian movement led by William Jennings Bryan who, in a famous flight of rhetoric concerning the rather technical demand for currency bimetallism, attacked the financial and political elite, who in turn wanted to maintain a currency backed by gold. Bryan declared that,

Having behind us the producing masses of this nation and the world, supported by the commercial interests, the laboring interests, and the toilers everywhere, we will answer their demand for a gold standard by saying to them: You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns; you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.

One problem in characterising these new political formations is that they do not fall neatly into the left/right axis that is broadly used to define European political parties based upon their economic policies. Marianne Le Pen's Fronte National party (renamed National Rally) is usually described as 'far-right', even though many of its economic policies would conventionally be seen as further left of the neo-liberal market policies of President Macron's En Marche! party. Although their policies seem to be confused and sometimes internally contradictory, they usually involve budgetary expansion and tax-cuts and are hostile towards the globalisation of economic policies. Indeed, hostility to global financial interests is a common feature, even if attacks on bankers in general are often combined with racist attacks on 'Jew bankers'.

The apparent concern of new populist parties lies with the financial plight of the 'common man', which has led to the collapse of the traditional social-democratic left in many European countries rather than the populist 'right' making similar inroads in the conservative right-wing groups. In an ominous historical parallel, it needs to be

“ In an ominous historical parallel, it needs to be remembered that Hitler named his party National Socialist and that Mussolini was originally a leading member of the Italian Socialist Party, whilst Oswald Mosley, the British Fascist leader, was elected as a Labour member of Parliament. ”

remembered that Hitler named his party National Socialist and that Mussolini was originally a leading member of the Italian Socialist Party, whilst Oswald Mosley, the British Fascist leader, was elected as a Labour member of Parliament.

It is also true that some of the new parties, such as the Five Star Movement in Italy, Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, are sometimes called left-populist because they largely, though not entirely, eschew the anti-immigrant racism that characterises the ‘right’ populist parties.

The recent elections to the European Parliament illustrate the extent to which the new populist parties have grown and how the traditional centre-left and centre-right have been eroded. In these elections, the Social Democrat bloc lost 46 of their seats, reduced to 145, whilst the European People’s bloc, the home of the German Christian Democrats, lost 41 seats, down to 180. The Conservative and Reformers bloc containing the British Conservatives lost 11 seats, reducing them to 59. This latter result was largely down to the obliteration of the Conservatives, who lost 16 of their 20 seats. The principal winners in the election were not, however, the far-right nationalists, but rather the Green parties, which gained a total of 19 seats from a base of 50, and a mélange of centrist liberal parties, including the ALDE bloc, which gained 109 seats, a rise of 42. Of course, the two main centre-right and centre-left blocs remain the largest groups, but they no longer have any majority in the Parliament and will have to seek various kinds of alliance when it comes to the crucial elections of various officials within the European Commission.

A closer look at particular countries does, however, confirm the collapse of traditional parties, particularly on the left. For instance, in Germany, the once dominant Social Democrats (SDP) were reduced to third place, losing 11 seats and almost being overtaken by the neo-fascist AfD, which won 11 seats compared to the SPD’s 16. In France

and Greece, the traditional left has effectively disappeared. In Italy, the Social Democrats were comfortably beaten into second place by the Liga, once a regional party, and were almost overtaken by the Five Star Movement. It was not all bad news for the traditional left; in the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and Portugal, these parties held on to a dominant position but, overall, it was a bad night for them.

Perhaps the strangest result of all was in the United Kingdom, where, enmeshed as the country is in a protracted withdrawal from the EU, a party formed barely four months before and led by Nigel Farage, a man who is widely characterised as a cartoon buffoon, swept the board taking 29 of its 73 seats. The Labour Party limped in at third place, behind the centrist Liberal Democrats, whilst the ruling Conservatives crashed to fifth behind the Green Party.

It remains very unclear as to just where the disintegration of the traditional left/right political structure in Europe will lead. The same concerns apply to the USA, in the binary pairing of Republican, broadly conservative, and Democrat,



Leader of the Brexit Party Nigel Farage addresses a large crowd on Parliament Square, Westminster, London on 29 March 2019.

© incmonocle / Shutterstock.com

broadly progressive. The huge proliferation of potential Democratic contenders for the next Presidential elections suggests a major fracturing of usual alliances.

This collapse of political structures is not a recent phenomenon but has instead been gaining momentum for some time. In 2007, Peter Mair (2013), a British political scientist, wrote about the wider context of political parties:

A tendency to dissipation and fragmentation also marks the broader organizational environment within which the classic mass parties used to nest. As workers' parties, or as religious parties, the mass organizations in Europe rarely stood on their own, but constituted just the core element within a wider and more complex organizational network of trade unions, churches and so on. Beyond the socialist and religious parties, additional networks of farming groups, business associations and even social clubs combined with political organizations to create a generalized pattern of social and political segmentation that helped to root the parties in the society and to stabilize and distinguish their electorates. Over at least the past thirty years, however, these broader networks have been breaking up. In part, this is because of a weakening of the sister organizations themselves, with churches, trade unions and other traditional forms of association losing both members and strength of engagement. With the increasingly individualization of society, traditional collective identities and organizational affiliations count for less, including those that once formed part of party-centred networks.

He concluded that:

Voters in contemporary Europe may still

“It remains very unclear as to just where the disintegration of the traditional left/right political structure in Europe will lead. The same concerns apply to the USA, in the binary pairing of Republican, broadly conservative, and Democrat, broadly progressive. The huge proliferation of potential Democratic contenders for the next Presidential elections suggests a major fracturing of usual alliances.”

be willing to locate themselves in left-right terms, and may even be willing to locate the parties in the same dimension, but the meanings associated with these distinctions are becoming increasingly diverse and confused. In part, this is due to the policy convergence between parties; in part also, to the often contradictory signals emerging from post-communist Europe, whereby the traditional left position is often seen as the most conservative. In another respect, it has to do with the new challenge of liberalism, and the increasingly heterogeneous coalition that has begun to define leftness in anti-imperial or anti-American terms, bringing together former communists, religious fundamentalists and critical social movements within what may appear to be a unified ideological camp. In this context, meanings are no longer shared and the implications of political stances on the left or on the right become almost unreadable.

Yet the question remains: What does the future hold? The only possible answer is no-one knows. Perhaps the unexpected upsurge in Green votes suggests that the people of Europe recognise that the biggest problem they face is that of climate change and of coping with the surge in displaced peoples, many of whom will see Europe as a place of refuge. As the countries of Europe have been, historically, a major contributor towards climate change, it has to bear its share of responsibility for the outcome. Perhaps.

As long-suffering readers of *The Thinker* will know, the writer has the habit of placing his hopes and fears into the songs his choir is singing. This month we are still singing Hamish Henderson's wonderful anthem of hope, *Freedom Come All Ye*. His words are the best conclusion:

So come a ye at hame wi' Freedom,
Never heed whit the hoodies croak for doom.
In your hoose a' the bairns o' Adam
Can find breid, barley-bree and painted room.

Reference list

- Conway-Smith, E. (2019). How Far Can Populism Go in South Africa? *Foreign Affairs*, 7 May.
- Henderson, H. (1960). *Freedom Come All Ye*.
- Mair, P. (2013). *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*. London: Verso.
- Saloojee, A. (2008). Using Gramsci and Laclau to Understand Contemporary Populism. *The Thinker*, 78: 8-11.