

A. JAMES McADAMS

Populism, Democracy, and the Role of the Catholic University

Nearly a decade ago, I travelled to Rome with a pressing question on my mind. How was it possible that the Italian people would choose a bombastic, narcissistic, and untruth-telling media giant, Silvio Berlusconi, to become their longest-serving prime minister? Given that no other country in Europe, let alone the United States, was governed by such a person, I speculated that the explanation must somehow lie with a peculiarly Italian, or southern European, love for charismatic personalities – witness Benito Mussolini. Little did I know that within a half-decade, leaders like Berlusconi would enjoy widespread support and in some cases in East-central and Northern Europe, such as Hungary, Poland, England, Austria, France, and Holland seriously contend for election to high office. Indeed, never in my craziest dreams could I imagine that an equally bombastic, narcissistic, and untruth-telling media giant would become President of the United States.

These developments reflect the powerful wave of populist passion that has challenged conventional democratic politics over the last half

decade. Populism, as I understand it, is denoted by the desire to find simple solutions to complex problems. To this end, such movements embrace the idea that self-described straight-speaking, anti-establishment, and “swamp-draining” men of the people can provide the answers they need.¹ To understand the meaning and significance of this populist surge fully, I suggest that we pose three questions: 1) What do we mean by populism? 2) Where did the current wave of populist sentiment in the West come from? And, 3) What contribution can Catholic universities make to overcome it?

First, what is populism? Many political scientists consider populism to be an alternative form type of democratic politics. I disagree. I believe we can only capture the essence of today’s populist movements if we conceive of them as *anti*-politics. The practice of liberal democratic politics, as it has been observed in the West over the past two centuries and welcomed after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in the 1990s, is positive action. Specifically, it is based upon three assumptions about active citizenship: a) the natural curiosity that leads humans to pursue truth; b) an “ethic of responsibility” (Max Weber’s idea that we should be responsible for the consequences of our decisions); and c) personal integrity, that is, the sincere desire to address the problems that beset humanity. In contrast, populism is a negative phenomenon, a rhetorical style and an emotion. In this form, it embodies the spirit of the post-truth age. It is: a) a-factual; b) absolutist (what Weber called “an ethic of absolute ends”); and c) politically opportunistic and *un*-responsible.

Second, where did the contemporary populist wave come from? Typically, populism is depicted as coming from without. In this

¹ For recent books on populism, see Cas Mudde and Cristobal Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

understanding of the term, populism is defined by the intrusion into the political sphere of outsiders, people who claim to have no association with status quo. In their public declarations, populist leaders base their appeals on the longing for simple solutions to complex problems and the hope for emotional security that associated with “post-truth”. These individuals claim that they have been chosen to serve a higher purpose, what they call “the voice of the people”, and that they alone can “drain the swamp” because they have not been sullied by its corruption.

This self-portrayal is ironic. Like most populists reaching back to the 19th century, such as the Russian *narodniki* of the 1870s and 1880s, contemporary populists are invariably members of the establishment, people with the time, experience, and resources to attack long-standing political institutions and social norms of acceptable behaviour. Consider the biography of Viktor Orbán, Hungary’s current Prime Minister. Orbán was a true outsider when he courageously used Imre Nagy’s reburial in spring 1989 to challenge the legitimacy of his country’s communist regime. Yet, after entering the National Assembly in 1990, Orbán has been anything but an outsider. He has skilfully used his experience with Hungarian electoral politics to turn his once liberally-minded party, Fidesz, into a nearly unchallengeable representative of nationalist intolerance and chauvinism. In explicitly declaring the “end of the liberal democratic era”, he has also weakened the greatest achievement of the overthrow of communism, the Hungarian constitution. Similarly, France’s Marine Le Pen is no political novice. Raised in the atmosphere of political competition at a young age in her father’s National Front party, she has been active in electoral politics for over two decades. Drawing upon a compendium of false promises and claims to moderation, a moderate extremism, she came close to becoming France’s President in the elections of 2017.

Of course, there is also the billionaire Donald Trump. For his entire career, Trump has been the consummate insider. He used his wealth and connections to lobby the American government for special deals and exemptions. He actively courted politicians of both political parties, including his current nemeses Bill and Hillary Clinton. Yet, the closest he came to “the American people” was when he invited them to be on his TV show, “The Apprentice”. There, he excelled in firing them!

Nonetheless, it is a serious mistake to construe what we currently see in America and in Europe as only a matter of clever demagogues who know how to manipulate popular sentiment. If that were the case, one could simply remove these figures and democratic life would return to good health; in fact, many of Trump’s opponents would like to fire him! However, contemporary populism is not only about what comes from without. All too often, the cause of the contemporary populist wave is not “them”, the purported outsiders. Rather, it is “us”.

Particularly in the United States populist leaders on both the Right and the Left have taken advantage of the fertile soil produced by self-satisfied elites who have lost their sense for what it means to nurture a democratic political order. This departure has been reflected in a casual nonchalance about the plight of ordinary citizens, especially those who have experienced a continual deterioration in their quality of life as a result of the loss of decent jobs, affordable housing, and educational opportunities for their children. In the view of many of these Trump supporters, mainstream politicians sit on privileged perches and use words like “deplorable” (Hillary Clinton’s dismissive term at multiple fund-raising events) when less well-off citizens express their dissatisfaction with the status quo. Indeed, many see their suspicions confirmed when the establishment news media continue to depict them

as backward, extremist, and racist.² This unreflective condescension reinforces the appeal of populist politicians who are free to take advantage of their anger. Yet to a greater extent than in Europe, these Americans are especially vulnerable to the consequences of these politicians' simplistic economic recipes, such as those created by irrational trade tariffs. They have little in the way of safety nets to prevent them from falling further.

However, it is equally important to recognize that support for populism, as it is expressed in the person of Donald Trump, is also about "us" in a different way. Trump's electoral base is by no means restricted to the working class. In fact, public opinion surveys suggest that two thirds of Trump voters in the 2016 election came from the upper half of the U.S. household income bracket. To be sure, economic status was not the only issue in the election. One of the deciding factors in voter decisions was level of education. Fifty-two percent of those who voted for Trump did not have college degrees. Nevertheless, it is equally significant that 44 percent did have college degrees.³ In these respects, continued support for the American President is an elite phenomenon. One can debate whether it is indicative of a genuine enthusiasm for populist politics among the middle and upper classes or merely a reflection of exasperation at Washington politics-as-normal. Still, it is telling that a substantial segment of these voters have continued to support the President, even when his populist strategies exploit extremist and anti-democratic sentiments. In this way, although Trump may exacerbate the populist mood in the U.S., he is

² Sarah Smarsh, "Liberal blind spots are hiding the truth about 'Trump Country'", *New York Times*, July 20, 2018.

³ See Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu, "It's time to bust the myth: Most Trump voters were not working class", *Washington Post*, June 5, 2017; and Alec Dyson and Shiva Maniam, "Behind Trump's victory: Divisions by race, gender, education", Pew Research Center, November 9, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/behind-trumps-victory-divisions-by-race-gender-education/>

also a manifestation of a new and different normal that may extend well after his time in office expires.

Third, and finally, how should we respond to this populist wave? I believe that we can bring our democratic culture back to good health by going beyond the criticism of populist personalities to scrutinize our own attitudes and expectations.

This means, first of all, that we demand that our representatives speak the truth. We should refuse to be swayed by the easy simplicity of political sloganeering, pandering, and accusations of "fake news". In the strange world in which we currently live, especially in the United States, those people who actually pursue the truth—whether it be empirical (in terms of the scientific method) or absolute (in terms of religious faith) – have suddenly become countercultural. In America, one particularly indefensible position is held by politicians and lobbyists who deny the science of global climate change and the direct role that human beings play, to quote Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si*, in turning the earth into an "immense pile of filth". In Francis's view, history will judge those, and we should too, who refuse to recognize our contribution to this degradation of human and natural life.⁴

Additionally, we must accept our responsibility for each other. One of the greatest offenses of populist movements is that they attract their followers by encouraging the exclusion and demonization of "the other". No human community can survive on this basis. Rather, to cite Pope Francis again, "We must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, that being good and decent are worth it". "We have had enough", he adds, "of immorality and the mockery of ethics, goodness, faith, and

⁴ Pope Francis, "Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si*", http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

honesty. It is time to acknowledge that light-hearted superficiality has done us no good”.⁵ Indeed, populism is guilty of an even greater offense: it is grounded in a *cold-hearted* superficiality.

We must also be open and honest about our limitations. The populist leader promises what amounts to a heaven on earth, just like many communists did in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe throughout much of the twentieth century. In the U.S., this approach has meant assuring followers that they can simultaneously enjoy full employment, a low cost-of-living, economic self-sufficiency, unrestrained growth in every industry, putatively wholesome values, and a uniform American identity. But this is manipulation, not politics. Life in a democracy means accepting that not every wish can be fulfilled. Only on the basis of extended conversation and compromise – a “strong and slow boring of hard boards”, as Max Weber called it⁶ – can one realistically hope to meet the needs and wants of the greatest number of people of all social strata.

To this end, by virtue of their two-fold identity, the Catholic university has a unique role to play in restoring faith in liberal democratic institutions. Like its secular counterparts, it must demonstrate excellence in all of the disciplines that are relevant to combating populist extremism – climate science, economics, political theory, public policy, global affairs. To do anything else would be a great disservice to its supporters. In particular, the Catholic university does not help its students if it encourages them to live cloistered lives. Rather, it should prepare them to become responsible leaders *in* society.

⁵ Pope Francis, “Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si*”, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

⁶ “Politics as a Vocation”, in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* H. H Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 128.

At first glance, one might think that the Catholic universities in the U.S. and Western Europe are best equipped to be the institutions where, to paraphrase the University of Notre Dame’s long-time president, Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, “the Church can do this kind of thinking”. After all, they have the financial resources, large faculties, and elite students to compete against the best secular universities in the world. However, appearances are deceiving. Despite their wealth and international standing, these institutions’ desire to acquire the prestige of their competitors means that they can ever so gradually lose sight of their religious identities.

By contrast, it is conceivable that the Catholic universities of Eastern Europe have an “epistemological advantage” in fulfilling this function.⁷ For their faculty and students, the memory of persecution, of political prisons and of secretly celebrating Mass behind closed doors, is still alive. So, too, are the hang-over effects still alive from a half century of communist and Soviet domination; political and economic corruption, authoritarian temptations, and a lack of interpersonal trust. They know what it is like to live in an atmosphere suffused with false promises and anti-political practices of self-interested rulers. This means that they have the benefit of knowing how to exercise responsible roles in society. In the words of the mission statement of the Ukrainian Catholic University, they are built to serve “the glory of God, the common good, and the dignity of the human person”. For this reason, they are well positioned to provide a message that is conducive to the restoration of hope in the promise of liberal democracy.

⁷ I am borrowing this term from the concept of the “epistemological advantage of the poor” in liberation theology. See *Hope and Solidarity: Jon Sobrino’s Challenge to Christian Theology*, Stephen J. Pope, ed., (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008), part IV.