

1. Populism discourse and “trouble in democracy”: a critical approach

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INTRODUCTION

The year 2018 marked the bicentenary of the birth of Karl Marx and the 170th anniversary of the publication of the *Communist Manifesto*. Swapping *Communism* with *Populism* in the *Manifesto*'s most memorable phrase (“A specter is haunting Europe, the specter of Communism”) provides a take on the new specter troubling the world in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Contrary to Marxism, however, which relied on a theoretical framework that was avant-garde at the time, the staying power of populism is doubtful. Current usage of the term requires passing over incongruities, such as the lumping together of disparate phenomena in the political poison cabinet. Thus, the most widely used conceptualization of populism, the ideational approach, is quite capable of accommodating politicians and movements whose democratic instincts we have no or little reason to doubt—and others whose politics are more extreme. This associative feature makes no distinction for ulterior motives; it functions as a “sticky bomb” that can be wielded against anyone challenging mainstream thinking with an anti-elite or anti-establishment positioning. Relying on Hannah Arendt's distinction between a “Worldly” and a “World-less People,” we demonstrate that this is not in the best interest of democracy.

The contribution then argues that the categorical usefulness attributed to populism is overstated, as the term detracts from the core of the issue: “trouble in democracy” (Berman, 2016). It also provides a diversion from hidden agenda, such as the influence-peddling going on in the shadows of the Trump presidency or Brexit. We therefore characterize populism as a discourse (“populism discourse,” as opposed to “populist discourse”) that is connected to a Foucauldian truth regime (Lorenzini, 2015). The memes underpinning populism discourse include the alleged novelty of populism, as well as the idea that populism operates from the margins of liberal democracy (rather than the

core). While mainstream politicians slip in and out of populist roles, media, society, and academia are often in denial about this.

Another meme is to present populism as the one negative *alter ego* of the liberal order that matters most. Among the stratagems deployed, we find an ahistorical narrative that obscures the role of liberalism in the twentieth-century cataclysm (Arendt, 1968). The “Project Fear” scenario of populism discourse insinuates that we have a binary choice between staying on the straight and narrow (i.e., neo-liberal) path, on the one hand, and opening the door to anarchy, extremism, and chaos, on the other. It is to this false dilemma that we are asked to sacrifice our aspirations for radical economic, social, and political change.

1. THE IDEATIONAL APPROACH

The conceptualization of populism that is most common today is the so-called ideational approach, the most comprehensive summation of which is provided by Mudde (2017). Mudde’s framework builds on long-standing discursive poles that attach to the phenomenology of populism—the presence of charismatic leaders, mass movements, and anti-establishment political organizations, and a specific worldview and political style that often have affinities with conspiracy theory (Kazin, 1995, p. 1; Mair, 2002; Woods, 2014; Foot, 2016). It presupposes that populism is about ideas; in particular, ideas relating to the people, the elite, and general will (*volonté générale*). In the words of Deiwiks (2009), there are “at least two characteristics that are central to populism: a strong focus by populist leaders on the ‘people’, and an implicit or explicit reference to an ‘anti-group’, often the political elite, against which the ‘people’ is positioned.”

Contrary to the division of people and elite operated by other -isms (such as nationalism or Marxism), the essence of populism is grounded in morality (rather than class or nation). The ideational approach includes a variety of features that allow for the identification of populism, such as discourse or language, rhetoric, argument, appeal, mode of identification, political frame, or political and communication style. It argues that protagonists’ self-proclaimed populism is not systematically due to purely rational or strategic choice, and that this can be established empirically (Mudde, 2017, pp. 29–31). The ideational approach makes a claim at conceptual clarity by arguing its own ability to set clear boundaries (distinguishability): it is able to determine “non-populism,” that is, elitism and pluralism rather than democracy (which it argues is not the “correct mirror” for populism); and it is able to measure the extent of populism, all by working with a “more–less” dimension. It also answers the demand for categorizability by making provisions for different manifestations of populism in conjunction with collectivist ideologies or with

individualist ideologies such as neoliberalism (“neopopulism”) (Mudde, 2017, pp. 35–9).

The approach has the merit of making some useful distinctions—one of these being that populism’s “elective affinity with charismatic leadership and weak formal organization” (Mudde, 2017, p. 44) should not be mistaken for its defining features. It also offers a good way around the criticism that populism as a notion is “vague” (Mazower, 2018) or that its use owes more to intuition than to genuinely objective standards (Deiwiks, 2009).

This does not mean, however, that there are no problems. For one thing, the approach relies on paying credence to what populists say about themselves (discourse). Secondly, it can be misused for lumping together critics of the mainstream consensus with the more dangerous politics of autocrats, pseudo-democrats, ultranationalists, and crypto-fascists. It suffers from a lack of sharpness and a problem of extension (breadth). When the journalist Lionel Shriver (2017) argued that it was “dishonest” to file Bernie Sanders or Jeremy Corbyn in the same populism box as Hugo Chavez and Vladimir Putin, she, no doubt, had the ideational approach in mind. It is this ultimate mushiness and elasticity that provide for the ability to suggest a kinship between Occupy, the Italian *Cinque Stelle*, or the French Yellow Vests, and other groups prone to political violence, and for populism to develop its own hyper-reality. Certain topoi thereby become “off-limits”: critical approaches to open borders, the problematization of multiculturalism and integration, or simply patriotism, can be filed as populism—and so can the actions of anyone who attempts to start an *Islamdebatte*. Concern over the possible undermining of Western secularism can be sidelined. Only novelists such as Michel Houellebecq (*Submission*, 2015) are allowed to tread this ground—and only in the name of artistic license.

The “lumping together” of elements that are ontologically alien is not the worst feature of ideational populism discourse. Even worse is that it allows almost any dissident position departing from a point-of-view of class dynamics or power monopolies to be branded “populist.” It does not seem to matter that this goes against a long-standing political science debate on the corrupting effect of power and the need for checks and balances. Potentially, populism discourse can minimize the sclerosis of established parties of the democratic Left, Center, or Right. It is unpalatable to suggest that powerful individuals often treat these parties as their fiefs; that most conservative parties are neo-liberal in all but name; or that social democracy has abandoned the laboring class in favor of corporate special interest lobbying. Other blind spots could be “state capture” or “legislatures for hire” (Shaxson, 2011); austerity politics that make the poor pay for the mistakes of the rich and powerful; or the creeping social killer of income disparities.

2. HANNAH ARENDT’S WORLDLY PEOPLE—THE COLLATERAL DAMAGE OF “POPULISM”

Although her biographer Margaret Canovan (2002, p. 403) reminds us that Hannah Arendt was something of a populist herself (in terms of considering “the People” as an honorific title), the German-American political theorist and thinker does not seem to have bothered with the term *populism* in her writing. Arendt’s view was that direct action by the People could sometimes lead to positive outcomes. However, her general attitude to grassroots mobilization was negative (Canovan, 2002, p. 403), influenced in no small measure by her own personal experience of the 1930s.

To salvage at least some pieces from the wreckage, she helped herself with a stratagem, arguing “that most eruptions from the grassroots [were] not the work of the People at all, but of some other collectivity, such as the mob or the masses” (Canovan, 2002, p. 403–404). The resentment of a narrow racist or imperialist orientation, and not the sharing of an external objective world, is what separates the “World-less People” of the tribe, mob, or masses from her ideal of a “Worldly People” who are driven by “true representation” (Canovan, 2002, p. 405–408).

Arendt clarified these concepts in *On Revolution* (1963), where she contrasted the successful institution building that emerged from the American Revolution with the descent into mob rule and dictatorship of its French counterpart. The difference she perceived is that the Founding Fathers’ “shared world” was characterized by an absence of ideological blinders and a presence of open, pluralist debate, political realism, and concern with public interest (Canovan, 2002, p. 419). They also prevented the revolution from being hijacked by unrealizable, utopian goals, such as the eradication of poverty.

It has been suggested that a correlation exists between irresponsible voting behavior and citizens’ ignorance of political and economic facts, and that direct democracy has the potential to lead to the “dictatorship of the majority.” Brennan (2016) thought that this militated in favor of an epistocracy (“democracy of the experts”)—a two- or three-class franchise system where only “smart citizens” would be allowed to vote. A first problem with this lies in the fact that large numbers of the electorate can hardly be expected to stand around and do nothing should their voting rights be withdrawn or limited. This only compounds the problem of democratic legitimacy and works into the hands of the populists (a similar argument applies to those who advocate a second referendum vote in the United Kingdom, and who do not factor in the hostility that will arise should the result of the first referendum be overturned) (Becker, 2018). Notwithstanding Arendt’s arguments on the alienation of individuals in mass society—which could be interpreted as tallying with Brennan’s

argument that “dumb people” should not be allowed to determine the fate of nations—Arendt would probably have argued that irresponsible voting behavior does not necessarily stem from a disposition of disengagement. It can also be interpreted as a knee-jerk reaction to the erosion of distributed power and democratic accountability that is a core problem of representative democracy. For Arendt, the latter’s principal flaw was that it “outsourced” politics to a class of professional politicians and bureaucrats. This leads to the concentration of too much power in too few hands and to the disempowerment of the people who give expression to their political alienation by supporting new grassroots organizations (not all of which pursue realistic or commendable goals) (Berkowitz, 2016).

If we follow Arendt, then the correct pathway is to alter the course of elitist and paternalist politics and return experiences of power to the people. This aligns with Arendt’s classical republican leanings and her clear preference for forms of participatory or council democracy (Lederman, 2016; Muldoon, 2016).

Arendt also concedes that there are two types of popular mobilization: the less benign forms adopted by the bigots and rabble-rousers and the much rarer one of the Worldly People. What populism does is to collapse both in one single category. By “throwing out the baby with the bathwater,” populism creates an unresolvable paradox. Disposing of the Worldly People as collateral damage of the fight against populism conflicts with the fact that politics, like economics, needs entrepreneurs to drive forward innovation. If they are filed in the populist poison cabinet then, instead of updating the system, these entrepreneurs may simply go astray. This mirrors Schumpeter’s views on the end of capitalism (Schumpeter, 1942). Schumpeter did not believe that capitalism would be swept away by a proletarian revolution. He argued that once the entrepreneurial spirit had been undermined by big business and bureaucratic sclerosis, the crisis would be brought to a head by the agitation of disaffected intellectuals.

An echo of this can be found in the discourse of a new breed of British Tories who were featured in a *Financial Times* article in December 2017. One of these Young Turks, who appear to be ready to make a historical break from their party’s free market fundamentalism, is Nick Boles:

His somewhat surprising lodestar is former American President Teddy Roosevelt. “Roosevelt’s key insight was that capitalism in the 1890s in the US was becoming its own worst enemy,” he says. “It had been captured by robber barons and monopolistic groups. It was destroying the interests of the small businessman, the small farmer and the consumer. He worked out that if those who believed in capitalism didn’t reform it, then the populists would sweep it away.” (Payne, 2017)

One does not have to adhere to the "sweeping away" argument; as Niall Ferguson (2016) says, there is no evidence that populism wants to go beyond altering some precepts of globalization, such as free trade and free movement. Notwithstanding this reservation, what Boles is saying could very easily be labeled populist under the current definition.

3. THE STRATEGIC AND CULTURAL APPROACH

If ideational populism does not deliver the goods, are there other approaches to populism that do a better job? The most serious contender is populism as an organizational strategy and particular personalistic leadership style "based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support" (Weyland, 2017, pp. 50–51). According to Weyland (2017, p. 52), the essence of populism lies in the fact that "populist movements are notorious for not espousing a clear, systematic, and comprehensive worldview; they avoid embracing a specific, well-defined ideology." He criticizes, in particular, techniques of holistic grading used in the ideational approach, a methodology whereby populist discourse is scored on a numerical scale. This is based on protagonists' own self-proclamations, when, in order to understand populism, we should be looking at their actions (Weyland, 2017, p. 53). Thus, the ideational approach delivers "false positives"; it lumps together populism with totalitarianism or other "hard-core, dogmatic variants," when, essentially, it belongs in the "hybrid zone between democracy and 'competitive' authoritarianism" (Weyland, 2017, p. 54). The ideational approach also pays no particular attention to some key features of populist practice: the slow erosion of democratic institutions once they gain power; the ideological fuzziness, which is neither right nor left (or can be both); the pragmatic opportunism (rather than ideological fervor) that is characteristic for leaders like Donald Trump; or the asymmetry between "grand proclamations" and "meager realizations" (Weyland, 2017, pp. 50–51, 63). By eliminating the "false positives" of the ideational approach, Weyland allows for a more accurate measurement of populism (Weyland, 2017, pp. 50–51). One of the interesting things he does, for example, is to make a distinction between Jean-Marie Le Pen, whom he does not consider a populist because of his ideological position, and his daughter Marine, whom Weyland does consider a populist because of her primacy of raising the appeal of the party founded by her father (Weyland, 2017, p. 64). On the other hand, where the ideational approach is too broad a brush, the strategic approach, with its basic underlying assumption that populist leaders are opportunistic and flexible rational choice agents who don't really believe in what they are saying, must strike one as narrow.

A similar observation must pertain to Ostiguy's (2017) cultural or performative approach. Here the focus rests on how political actors relate to people.

Using a high–low axis comprising two sub-dimensions—the socio-cultural (manners, demeanors, ways of speaking and dressing, vocabulary, tastes) and the political-cultural (forms of leadership and decision making)—populism is defined as low on both: populists behave in a popular manner and emphasize strong personalistic leadership. Seizing populism probably requires a mixed methodology that takes in all three approaches.

4. THE TROUBLE WITH POPULISM: TROUBLE IN DEMOCRACY

Although the parsimony of the latter two is to be preferred to the breadth of the ideational approach, the Achilles heel of populism focus lies in its inclination to treat populism as an independent variable (and agent of change). However, the idea that populism could be the uninvited “party crasher” troubling the otherwise calm waters of the current order is unconvincing. It leads us back to the realization that empirical phenomena count for little if they are not contextualized within an appropriate frame of reference. In the light of Arendt’s diagnosis of the flaws in representative democracy—and the consequent need for council democracy—the labeling of phenomena studied under the lens of populism constitutes an exercise that fails to mark the correct emphasis. Why expend lavish efforts on something called populism, when the thing to emphasize is the functioning of representative democracy?

By treating context as a “given” requiring no further elaboration, populism reveals its Fukuyaman pedigree. This does not question the framing of market and liberal democracy as natural complements or of neoliberalism as the only alternative in terms of *projet de société*. It also abstracts from all evidence suggesting that populism could be a cyclical and ephemeral phenomenon and lets populism take the intellectual high ground. Populism noise crowds out other frameworks for rationalizing the worrisome aspects of current global reality, such as the rise of illiberal democracy (Zakaria, 2003) or the idea of a “democracy recession” (Diamond, 2008; Thumfart, 2017; critically, Merkel, 2010; Levitsky and Way, 2015). Adding disinformation to this mix, we arrive at a situation where the West starts doubting itself—exactly what the Putins, Orbans, or Erdogans of this world want it to do.

In reality, populism is not the gravedigger of democracy, but rather the latter’s handyman:

[P]opulism . . . is a symptom of democracy in trouble; fascism and other revolutionary movements are the consequence of democracy in crisis. But if governments do not do more to address the many social and economic problems the United States and Europe currently face, if mainstream politicians and parties don’t do a better job reaching out to all citizens, and if conservatives continue to fan fear and turn a blind

eye to extremism, then the West could quickly find itself moving from the former to the latter. (Berman, 2016)

The “trouble in democracy” (or “state of democracy”) lens advocated by Berman and other authors (Mazower, 2018; Thumfart, 2017) can be combined with a critical position on the economic crisis and the internal contradictions of the capitalist system (Ranger, 2016). To those who would label such talk “populist,” one might respond that an economic system that sometimes functions like an organized racket must invariably induce alienation (Neumann, 1954) and that there is much reason to remain vigilant where it comes to our elites. Pretending that nothing is wrong and returning to “business as usual” is irresponsible, as it abandons the ground to the bigots who had rather rely on scapegoating and conspiracy theory.

5. POPULISM AND THE LIBERAL TRUTH REGIME

Neoliberalism’s ability to produce a sense-making narrative has taken a serious battering since the eruption of the worst financial and economic crisis in living memory in 2007–2008. The golden cows of deregulation, privatization, lean government, self-regulating markets, and even spreads of free trade have made way for government bailouts, austerity politics, and now also protectionism and trade wars. Standard vocabularies have been enriched with terms like *working poor*, *mass pauperization* (“surplus humanity”), and *cosmopolitan elites*. End of History and, even more gallingly, End of Ideology have revealed themselves as pipedreams. The objective truth to which neoliberalism lays claim has been outed by its questionable premises.

At the same time, neoliberalism will not abandon the commanding heights of discourse without a fight. Colin Crouch (2011) referred to this survival against considerable odds as “the strange non-death of neoliberalism.” The tired economists and their dated dogmas have made a tactical retreat, but this has not provided a forum for heterodox economics. This “more of the same,” in the face of evidence of manifest failure, ties in with what Michel Foucault called a “truth regime” (Lorenzini, 2015).

The truth regime also attaches to populism. Whatever it is, it is measured against the ideal standards of liberal democracy as advocated by Fukuyama. It is being pushed by a political need for such a narrative, rather than on account of its intrinsic merit (this, coincidentally, also points to a commodification of scientific discourse that is trying to be useful within the marketplace of ideas).

Populism (as part of the truth regime) is characterized by a number of memes. The first of these is its assumed novelty or unprecedentedness, an assertion that cannot withstand a historical stress test. Populism was already a well-known feature in ancient Athenian democracy, where the institution of

ostracism, created to safeguard against abuses of power, frequently became a tool of populist agitation. The permanent vigor of populism was also built into the Roman constitution through the institution of the office of the *tribunus plebis*. Manipulating the masses remained an important factor throughout the history of the Republic. During the civil war it allowed Caesar, who was technically outside constitutional legality, to prevail over Pompey. And from the late Republic onwards, anyone rich enough to curry favor with the crowd—a precondition to running for political office—could put on free games.

Modern politics would also be unthinkable without populism. Niall Ferguson (2016) argues that populist mobilization has been a staple item of American politics since the nineteenth century. A populist backlash occurs each time there is a confluence of five factors: a major financial crisis, an increase in inequality, and the emergence of demagoguery, whose targets are immigration and the perceived corrupt political elites. It is when taking into account these contextual factors that the bias induced by the media focus on Donald Trump reveals itself at its most misleading. However distasteful Trump's verbal derailings and questionable relationship to truth may be, populism is not a newcomer in American politics. And while the political scales may well have shifted, and the rhetoric and atmosphere have become more antagonistic, climate change denial, shooting sprees, targeted police violence, crooked corporates, state capture, and the opioid epidemic are not problems that originated with Trump.

Latin American and Asian politics have also produced a steady supply of populist leaders throughout the twentieth century.¹ Europe is no stranger to this game, either. While Front National, the French far-right party founded by Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1972, has always remained outside the mainstream Republican consensus, other populist leaders who started operating from the margins have fared better.² The man who let the populist genie out of the bottle in Europe was Silvio Berlusconi—a Donald Trump before the hour. Capitalizing on the cataclysmic *mani pulite* (clean hands) revelations of the early 1990s, which resulted in the collapse of the established parties and a profound reconfiguration of the Italian political landscape, Berlusconi rode into office on the wings of constitutional crisis. Becoming the midwife of today's right-wing populism, he did not shy away from shattering postwar taboos, partnering with the pariahs of Italian politics, the neo-fascists.

Another meme is that populism originates from the margins of politics. But this is disproven by the fact that elements of populism are present throughout the political mainstream. Also, populism does not require crisis to exist. Democratically elected governments have relied on the populist touch to gain or remain in power. Examples of this are the British Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher, the Christian Social Union (CSU—the party that has ruled

postwar Bavaria almost without interruption since World War II), or Tony Blair's attempts to widen the appeal of New Labour. Today, the trouble in Brexit Britain is not coming from people who muscled their way onto the political rostrum from the sidelines. The policies of the pedigree populists such as Nigel Farage have been co-opted by the Eurosceptic and Europhobe fringe of the Conservative Party. It is in the motherland of democracy that the pathways between mainstream and populist fringe can be studied at close hand.

Finally, disinformation, often cited as a key factor allowing us to separate populists from non-populists, is not the preserve of the former. This was in evidence in the run-up to the Iraq War in 2002–2003, when Anglo-American mainstream leaders ventured claims about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capability that later turned out to be either profoundly mistaken or deliberately false.

Comparing populism in mainstream politics to what might be called new-style populism, we note that opposition is not principled, but a matter of degree. Mainstream politics uses populism as a tactical device within a wider political mix that retains a rational core; it is a means to an end. For the "new populist" (Canovan, 2004, p. 242), the populist agenda is an end in itself. In terms of ideal-type, this would mean that the mainstream politician only lies or deceives sometimes, but for the populist leader this is routine. In reality, however, one need only return to Hannah Arendt to realize that drawing red lines in the sand like this is virtually impossible. In her essay "Truth and Politics" (1967), she argued that both of these were "on rather bad terms with each other"—and that this relationship held regardless of political regime (Arendt, 2000, p. 545).

In later reflections on the Pentagon Papers and the invasion of political life by public relations, she argued that the image itself—namely to avoid "admitting defeat" in Vietnam—was "the only permanent goal" of the Nixon administration (Arendt, 2003, p. 263). Contrary to lying in politics, whose purpose was to hide specific secrets or which was deployed in emergencies, image making was limitless: "the seemingly harmless lying of Madison Avenue [. . .] was permitted to proliferate throughout the ranks of all governmental services" (Arendt, 2003, pp. 263–4).

We conclude that any interpretation of populism is always going to be subject to a certain degree of "eye of the beholder": one man's populist is another man's democratically elected and legitimate radical politician. Although it is sometimes suggested that populism is not to be understood as "pejorative," in reality, the term denotes an irritant or an antagonism to "how things should be." This marks a third meme, namely the alterity or otherness of populism.

The master narrative in operation since the end of the Cold War has portrayed liberalism as a rampart against all forms of bigotry and obscurantism;

and as the alter ego of despotism, political extremism, and un-freedom. Framing populism as something alien to “normality” has several powerful effects that contain the legitimacy crisis of neoliberalism. It first of all acts as a device to deflect criticism and legitimize liberal discourse. Populists make for ideal scapegoats when a return to business as usual has not materialized. As long as this danger looms, so the story goes, other things must take priority over learning the many lessons that the 2008 crisis holds. Populism gets citizens to think what got us into crisis in the first place and to reconsider whether liberal representation really is the pinnacle of democracy and to what extent neoliberalism engenders conditions that could be considered as structural or systemic violence remains outside this framing. It also remains silent on points of contact between liberals and new populists, and it downplays the connections between capitalism and extreme politics.

Populism’s defiance of reason and regression to collective irresponsibility are not aberrant departures from a liberal “normality” that never was. According to Riley (2010), the liberals were the vanguard of revolutionary parliamentarianism in many European countries throughout the nineteenth century. However, once they achieved their objectives, they were quick to strike a deal with the old regimes and monopolize political power themselves. This marginalized many constituencies at the lower end of the social spectrum, who then fell into the fascist lap. The triumphalism of the post-Cold War era fades when one considers the meek response of the liberal elites in Europe and elsewhere to the rise of fascism.

Liberals also draw flawed conclusions from the 1930s; namely, that it does not take long for the political clocks to start ticking in reverse once the economic clocks have done so. In this respect, the liberal bewilderment that democracy could indeed be going off the rails is above all the sign of a flawed disconnect of economy and society, a belief refuted at great length in Polanyi’s *Great Transformation* (1944). Rather than subscribing to the view of a natural complementarity between market and democracy, Polanyi described both as antagonistic. To realize just how fast contagion spreads from markets to the foundations of democracy one need only consider the miserable score of 2.6 percent that Hitler’s Nazi party obtained in the 1928 Reichstag elections (Kershaw, 2008, p. 234). This indicates a point in time, less than five years before the Nazi takeover, when the Weimar Republic had finally stabilized. It is indeed an interesting intellectual exercise to engage in a counterfactual that factors out the 1929 crisis and then to ask again whether such a situation would have provided sufficient conditions for the rise of the Nazi dictatorship. Could the Weimar democracy have continued indefinitely? Or were World War II and the Holocaust inevitable after all?

6. FLYING UNDER THE POPULISM RADAR

In view of the many dead ends that the populism focus entails, it can be tempting to return to square one and rationalize populism as the narcissistic ego trip of power-hungry, wannabe leaders who, for all intents and purposes, remain wanderers in the dark (Chu, 2018). This thesis is made all the more compelling by the axiom that populism coincides with a reinforced standing of charisma; it is provided with ample ammunition by the political sleepwalking of a Donald Trump or the leading Brexiteers. On the other hand, the media hype that came into its own after the election of Donald Trump (call it the “Trump effect”) owes more to *Tagespolitik* (day-to-day politics) than to a genuine long-range perspective. When, shortly after the 2016 US election, Henry Kissinger was asked to comment on the “competence” and “seriousness” of president-elect Trump, he returned the question to the interviewer (Goldberg, 2016). Kissinger did not explicate, but his caution could have very well been motivated by the realization that politicians should not be measured by their own rhetoric, or that personality and “celebrity” are not the only factors that count in politics.

It is regrettable that so much political debate has come to be so dominated by a fixation on the personality of Donald Trump and the almost hysterical clamoring about the “barbarians at the gate.” If we were more cool headed we might choose other grids of analysis, such as what this presidency tells about the consolidation of the state and large corporations into “Corponations” (Mikler, 2018). While the foundations of the Westphalian system have been wobbling since 9/11, Trump indicates a further change in direction, to a world where geo-economics, hard economic power, and economic warfare take pride of place. The undue focus on Trump also does not make the most of existing sociological work on the rural–city divide (and its impact on voting behavior), which is a global phenomenon. As far as the United States is concerned, the divide favors the Democrats in the long run. For the time being, however, this is still impeded by the archaic nature of the American voting system (Badger, 2018; Paris, 2016). There then is more than a grain of truth in the idea of Trump as the personification of the anger of white men who are losing their hitherto privileged position to newcomers, such as ethnic minorities and women (Kimmel, 2017; Moore, 2016).

In addition to nurturing a false consciousness, populism therefore also functions as a diversion. It is not as though the glaring scandal brought to light by Edward Snowden suddenly abated in 2013, only that any new development, such as recent “Five Eyes” demands toward Facebook and other tech giants to provide “encryption backdoors” (Murdock, 2018), is now muted by populism noise. This also prevents us from heeding the historian Yuval Harari (2018), who argues that “big data” holds the key to the actual (but unaccountable)

government of the world, a theme that is also reflected in Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) notion of "surveillance capitalism."

If we shift the view to Brexit, we might consider that its most outspoken proponents, the "Brextremists" ready to take the plunge into the unknown of a hard Brexit, are often identical with the ultras of the Tory Party, who have been railing against the EU for decades. Molly Scott Cato, a British MEP (Member of the European Parliament), gives us a useful breakdown of what motives—beyond the catchphrase of "restoring British freedoms and taking back control from a semi-dictatorial EU"—could be driving these predominantly white men and women. What she comes up with are three categories: regulation burners, money men, and Russian connections (Cato, 2018). The last one on this list is the one with the least evidence. As Cato (2018) writes, "Because of the nature of the Putin regime . . . Information about Kremlin involvement in the Brexit referendum is much sketchier than for the US election." At the same time, it should be a secret to nobody that Putin's strategic interest is to undermine the EU in order then to be able to play off one national government against another and slip into the role of the continent's ultimate arbiter.

The most enduring myth about the European Union is that its main job is to keep foreign competition out; that this undermines competitiveness; and that the tons of unnecessary and cumbersome regulation it produces serve only those business interests that have pockets deep enough to deploy armies of lobbyists to Brussels. This portrayal is flawed for a number of reasons: for one thing, the EU took a neoliberal turn at least two decades ago. The environmental protections, safety standards, and consumer rights it creates through regulation have very little to do with any slackening competitiveness of parts of the EU. If one wanted to cite a culprit, then one would have to point the finger at the pre-2008 era of unfettered *laissez-faire*, the common currency (the euro), and the adoption of austerity policy. Regardless of this, hardline Brexiteers make no bones about their visceral, all-engulfing aversion to regulation, which stands in for the purported dictatorial ambitions of the EU. Opposing the EU is thereby transformed into a redemptive act of salvation, not unlike standing up to Hitler in World War II, for which no sacrifice can be great enough (O'Toole, 2018). The journalist Simon Heffer couched this *jusqu'au-boutisme* in unmistakable terms, suggesting, in the run-up to the referendum, that even if he knew he would be "stewing grass" with his family as a result of Brexit, he would still vote for it (Durkin, 2016, 1:08:40).

But this determination to extricate from the EU is also owed to factors that have little to do with EU regulation. As Ferguson writes in *Civilization* (2011, pp. 2–6), we are currently witnessing the "great re-convergence," an unprecedented and seemingly irreversible shift of global power to the Asia-Pacific region that ends 500 years of Western dominance. Brexit has to be put in context with this monumental shift of gravity. That the Old Continent is old hat

also conforms to the views of the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. In an interview with *Le Point*, Sloterdijk described the EU as a club of "has-beens," who were bonding together trying to make things a bit better for themselves, or to avoid the worst (Ono-Dit-Biot, 2018). It is hardly a surprise then that the more risk-prone section of the British elite would no longer be interested in betting on a rather too predictable EU horse and would want to modernize its trading position by seeking closer involvement with the new economic powerhouses.

It is when weighing in this context that one comes to understand somewhat better the hysterical tone, the self-inflicted and nonsensical contradictions, and the absence of compromise of Brextremist discourse. Of the many logical dead ends, I will mention only one: people who perceive themselves as paragons of unfettered free trade relinquishing their country's stable situation in the largest free-trading area on the planet in exchange for half-baked promises by the likes of Donald Trump and others tempted by protectionism (Chu, 2018). That the ultras are prepared to engage in what looks like arson has led some to believe that they must be in thrall to self-destruction, or that, in a sort of Freudian death wish, they want to take everyone down with them (Cohen, 2018). Equally frequent is the supposition that they suffer from a loss of sense of reality, accompanied by a more or less characterized loss of control on the part of the Tory-led government and party leadership. In reality, the direction could not be more lucid. Namely, the Brextremists may very well want to turn Britain into a low-tax or no-tax jurisdiction (Grayling, 2017). The Brexit context offers a unique chance to reboot the neoliberal project commenced by Margaret Thatcher in 1979, which has been in tatters since the advent of the financial crisis (Eaton, 2018); a project that would not pass democratic hurdles in "normal times." What is being conducted here, in front of our very eyes, is an experiment in "economic restructuring," or, as Schumpeterians would say, in creative destruction. It is the final consequence of Thatcher's famous "There is no alternative!" It indicates the determination to allow no breaking of ranks from the neoliberal order and that the only allowable disorder is the kind of permanent revolution and anarchy engineered by neoliberalism itself. The collateral damage will be what remains of Britain's manufacturing industry, as well as the millions of Joes and Janes whose livelihoods depend on being embedded in international supply chains. This brings us to the third, very different, reservoir of hard Brexit enthusiasts, who have no such stake in manufacturing and industry.

The city of London once was the poster child of the Tory Party. Then came the financial crisis and the bailouts. And then, in March 2016, the City of London Corporation endorsed the Remain Campaign (Fedor, 2016). At this point, one might be forgiven for commending the British electorate on its deep democratic instincts. In putting moral principle above lucre, did the

2016 referendum vote not prove that the British could not be held hostage to their economic fortunes? If they were beholden to their material well-being, wouldn't they have found ways to undermine the vote? On closer inspection, however, the singlemindedness with which the city endorsed Remain must be subject to serious doubt. If we weigh all the elements, the decision of the city to come out on the side of Remain starts looking a lot more like a tactical favor granted to David Cameron, the then-prime minister.

It is correct that a significant percentage of City of London Corporation products and services are destined for the continent. When the City of London Corporation loses its current access to the single market, companies plying this trade will have every interest in having transferred their European market activities to locations inside the EU (EU Financial Affairs Sub-Committee, 2016; Christensen, 2017). But past that date, the City of London Corporation will still be able to do trade with Europe, using a sector-specific agreement similar to the one regulating the access of Swiss financial institutions to the EU. Although this will be less advantageous than the current passporting system, UK financial services institutions will not be barred from access to the EU (O'Grady, 2017). Foreign exchange trading in euros and euro-denominated financial products, the lion's share of which is handled by the City of London Corporation, will hardly be impacted at all, regardless of which form Brexit takes. It is not for the EU to decide where euros are traded, and customers will simply continue to use those markets in which they prefer to do business (Worstell, 2016).

Another consideration is that it is much easier for services and banking to switch their immaterial products to new markets than for an industrial producer who needs to physically move goods across borders. The City of London Corporation has switched before, when it converted from colonial business to the Eurodollar market in the 1950s (Shaxson, 2011), and it can do it again. It is worth remembering that London is a global, rather than a regional, financial center. Taking into consideration that the share of Europe in total business has been decreasing over the years, in the long run, Brexit promises more gain than loss for the City of London Corporation (Lyons, 2018). This applies, in particular, to firms offering tax optimization (offshoring), as well as speculative outfits. After the financial crisis, these activities had come under increasing EU scrutiny; after Brexit, they will be out of the line of fire of further potentially damaging EU regulation (Udale, 2016).

The hedge fund managers also had an incentive to support Brexit for another reason, the kind that has given planet finance such a bad name in recent years. When the hammer blow fell on 24 June 2016, they were able to cash in on the hit on stocks and the 17 percent drop in the value of sterling. Any further volatility, such as in the case of a hard Brexit, only increases future expected windfalls (Cato, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This chapter ends not with a better definition of populism. It endorses the view that populism, as a working concept used to account for a multiplicity of phenomena, is of limited usefulness. Rather than latching on to the “hysterical mawkishness” of the populism debate (Thumfart, 2017), which plays straight into the hands of the new populists, the correct emphasis is to adopt the “democracy in trouble” lens of Berman (2016), Mazower (2018), and others. This entails an alertness to the shortcomings of representative democracy identified by Hannah Arendt and a disposition that is appreciative of the liberal underpinnings of the populism debate. It requires making more of an attempt to identify Arendt’s Worldly People when they do emerge, and to give them right of abode, instead of chucking them into the black, brown, or red basket. A good example of precisely such a framing attempt was the earliest labeling of the Yellow Vest protests in France (Tabard, 2018). However, the “negative press” only lasted for a few days, as polls published on 28 November 2018 indicated that the movement enjoyed the support of an overwhelming majority of French public opinion (Clavel, 2018).

And what about the leaders? Generating “experiences of power” is a focus for leaders to deploy their political entrepreneurialism. As the example of the citizen platform *Barcelona en Comú* (“Barcelona in Common”) shows, there is a potential for experiments in Council Democracy (O’Brien, 2018). This indicates a need for a new breed of contrarians capable of challenging assumptions and trying new departures. While this tallies with what Mukunda (2012) writes about the “extremes”—the truly extraordinary or indispensable leaders necessary for complex problem solving and decision making—it does not go down well with the focus and bluntness of populism discourse.

It also hardly corresponds to the configuration of the Western business school (or b-school)—the principal purveyor of leadership education. That they produce precisely such flexible, unique leaders is of course a claim most of these institutions will make. But the reality is different. The culture of the b-school is characterized by a high level of conformism that endorses a number of neoliberal underpinnings, such as the artificial separation of politics and business, or the idea that the less politics (and government) there are, the better. Its principal focus is on large corporations and growth markets, such as executive education. The b-school, then, is a vital pawn in maintaining the status quo by providing bureaucratic business organizations with the executives that these need in order to function. This has led to calls to widen the b-school remit, to become “public interest business schools” (Tourish, 2013), or even to shut down the b-school entirely and replace it with a school for organizing (Parker, 2018).

Our need for political entrepreneurs also clashes with the general emphasis of leadership studies and leadership theory. With very few exceptions, this still advocates a denaturalized scientism that is indifferent to the inherent conservatism of the positivist tradition and that marginalizes description, replication, and falsification, important components of the scientific process (Collinson and Tourish, 2015). The result is a theory-ladenness of leadership studies that not only produces socially constructed hyper-realities, but is also devoid of practical relevance.

Although there are signs that the neoliberal bandwagon may be heading for the sunset horizon (a litmus test was found in the surprisingly critical overtones of the 2019 edition of the Davos World Economic Forum; and similar “noise” is also being registered in other bastions of global capitalism), the human willingness to endorse change should never be taken for granted. It is the next weeks and months that will decide whether Brexit—a popular vote against globalism that does not need to be blackened as a xenophobic and populist outrage by a *bien-pensant* establishment—can go over the cliff (“very hard, no-deal Brexit”) and turn into an ultra-liberal nightmare. The likelihood of such a scenario materializing has now increased by yet another notch, following Theresa May’s resignation of the Prime Ministry in July 2019. Her successor was Boris Johnson, a hard Brexiteer of the first hour.

A final lesson is that, regardless of whether Trump is a populist leader, or Brexit a populist vote, radical u-turns such as epistocracy, and calls for a second EU referendum in the United Kingdom or constitutional reform in the United States only serve to further erode our polarized societies. Although some media pundits seem to be determined to prove the contrary (Aaronovitch, 2018), none of the arguments are all too convincing. An environment characterized by outright animosity, visible in the widening rural–urban divide, is not the right place for democratic experimentation. Leaders need to learn from the inept and complacent handling of the public sphere by the teams of Hillary Clinton and David Cameron (Moore and Ramsay, 2017, p. 164; Philippon, 2018). Before clamoring about the bigots, we first need to drop our *naïveté* and do a much better job of getting word around.

NOTES

1. As is discussed in Ernesto Semán’s chapter in this volume, “*Guinartism: on Don Quixote, caudillos and political imagination in Latin America.*”
2. Front National was rebranded National Rally (*Rassemblement national*) in 2018.

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