

THE CATEGORICAL MISTAKE OF "LOOKING FOR AN ANSWER TO NATIONAL POPULISM"

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After the victories of the Leave campaign in the Brexit referendum and of Donald Trump in the U.S. presidential elections of last year, the progressive debate has seen a flurry of articles and thoughts on how to “respond to populism”. In opposition to that trend, we argue that “looking for answers to populism”, as it is currently framed in the progressive debate, is an error in itself. It is a “categorical mistake”, an error on the ontology of populism itself, that prevents us from properly understanding what is truly at stake.

We are not prescribing ignoring populism or not trying to understand it. On the contrary, it is precisely because we want – we need – to understand populism that the categorical mistake has to be avoided. But it is in the search for *an answer to* populism that progressives fail both to understand and to find political horizons that will then provide answers to the many questions and challenges of today’s world: globalisation, insecurity, fear, unemployment, political corruption, and a general dispiritedness or lack of hope regarding the future.

Looking for “answers to populism” means entering into a conversation on the topics and terms chosen by populists and for the benefit of populists. This is the strategic mistake that comes after the categorical mistake: because progressives tend to see populism as a set of claims regarding policy rather than a claim to a monopoly on politics, they will veer off from their own obligations to look for answers – not to populism, but simply to the rapidly changing nature of the social, political, and ecological reality around us.

The most commonly used objection in the current political debate is: “it is precisely because of that (attitude/strategy/idea/argument) that the populists are winning!” Every time someone somewhere stumbles across a good, progressive idea, immediately we hear a fearful choir berating us for providing more opportunities for the populists to seize and grow. In due time, progressives will grow afraid of defending the EU, immigration, tolerance, or cosmopolitanism. This is a self-defeating reaction to nonsense. It is only natural that the populists will want to make us feel any progressive idea is on its own a terrible idea that we shouldn’t even touch. This is understandable, if objectionable. It is when the Left uses the same arguments that it becomes self-defeating. In order to win, we will need a plurality of fierce ideas courageously held. Making us feel ashamed of our values is as unhelpful as it gets.

THE ‘BLOOD, SWEAT, AND TEARS’ OF POLITICS

The world is undeniably undergoing change at a rapid pace. Avoiding the issue will only add to the insecurity, the frustration, and even the rage people feel about the aloofness of politics, and particularly of progressive politics. Not only should progressives not deny reality, they should tell the truth: the rapidity of change is increasing. Many of the tendencies that have preoccupied us in the last decade – automation, unemployment, and climate change – will only

accelerate in the coming years. As a result, it is probable that financial and international instability, military conflicts, and terrorism will become even more serious problems in the near future. This in turn will make the debates about immigration, inclusion, and equality even more arduous.

Admitting as much doesn’t mean progressives have to accept a compromise with reactionary forces. On the contrary, it means accepting the ‘blood, sweat and tears’ of politics. Sometimes we will feel isolated, sometimes miserable, sometimes ready to quit. The only way to pull ourselves together throughout what may well be the fight of our lives will be by knowing how progressive values are, in each case, the best answers for the problems that we are facing and by fashioning these answers into their cleverest, simplest, and most mobilising versions.

Fear and insecurity are both the drivers and the by-products of the main trends in our current political debate. National populism thrives on fear, feeds on fear, and produces more fear than we are able to consume. But it would be the wrong answer to just deny the legitimacy of fear. People cannot be reasoned out of the fear that they were not reasoned *into* – as David Hume once wrote about the very real belief in irrational things. The point of fear is that whether it is rational or irrational is beside the point.

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Consequently, one already sees that the populist answer to terrorism and the possibility of military conflict is reduced to, at the European level, making the EU looking more like a traditional state, with its security apparatus, its own intelligence agencies, and even its own joint armed forces. In this sense, national populism, while being Europhobic in nature, may be providing the impetus to a much greater integration of the EU than even most of the progressives would suggest possible. As national populists emphasise the “impossibility”, in their view, of the EU protecting itself against external threats, they may well be pushing the EU into the form of the super-state they so vociferously claim to want to avoid. Again, we are falling into their trap. In order to maintain its internal peace, the EU first needs strong economic cooperation and joint tools for social cohesion, strong mechanisms of democracy, and rule of law protections.

WHY DO WE PROGRESSIVES FALL INTO THEIR TRAP SO EASILY?

In order to apprehend these dynamics, one has to understand the role that populism plays in politics and, in particular, what populism in the 21st century is about.

According to Jan-Werner Müller, populism is the allegation that ‘the People’ speak with one voice and that only one person (or movement) is able to interpret what that voice feels or wants to say. And what about national populism? It is the further claim that the locus for that ‘voice of the people’ can only be the Nation. National populism believes that the collective will of the people can’t be expressed any further than the borders of the Nation. The Right understands this much better than the Left: in order for the Nation to speak with one voice, one ultimately has to portray extraneous voices as not belonging to the Nation. As Viktor Orbán – perhaps the initiator of the current strand of national populist movements in the EU – once aptly said: “The Nation cannot be in opposition”. Conversely, it is evident that the opposition cannot be from the Nation.

National populism is much less about a set of coherent policies than it is about a monopolistic claim as to whom shall control any kind of policies and, indeed, all of politics. The only conversation that national populism allows for is a conversation about the undisputed centrality of national populists themselves.

This may be the reason why fear plays such an essential role in populism and also in its national populist variety. Fear is a monopolistic sentiment. When you are afraid, you tend not to be able to process other emotions or to engage in reasoning or reflection. Playing the politics of fear will drag the civic sphere to one discussion and one discussion only – usually the one that benefits the populists – and discard any vision of the present or the future that is about connection, creativity, or solidarity. Most of the time, fear does trump hope.

Many progressives recognise this, and they will, in consequence, avoid interacting directly with populists. But they will then prescribe that while one has to ignore the national populists, one should, however, engage with the questions that populists raise among common citizens. It is the well-known “do not engage with Trump, but engage with Trump’s voters” strategy, which is understandable, but which runs the risk of being severely misguided in its execution; national populists have a keen ability to occupy the

centre of the debate and to monopolise politics. We can easily find ourselves, while ignoring Trump, addressing Trump’s voters only on the topics that Trump has promoted and on the terms Trump has set for the debate. Once put in such a spot, progressives will again find themselves on the losing side of a conversation that they themselves have not chosen and where they will probably have to compromise with the agenda that was set by national populists.

The reason is precisely because progressives have ceased to demonstrate conviction about their values and have started to be seen by the general population as insincere. And yet, Donald Trump or Nigel Farage in the UK are also seen as insincere. In fact, people are well aware that they are liars and cheats. They have as good as admitted so themselves. Which is why they are seen as *authentic* – and, in a political battle between the insincere and the authentic, the authentic wins, even when he is an authentic liar.

SO WHAT?

From this reality, we can derive important lessons for progressive pro-Europeans in the current debate about insecurity, instability, and change. Progressives must not avoid what they believe are the real causes of insecurity, but they must authentically and sincerely defend their values as to the diagnosis, the

prognosis, and the prescription they defend for such problems – in progressive terms. While not accepting the reactionary terms of the debate, they must, however, confront national populists. They must deride them and mock them. They must attack mercilessly. And they must do it in the political arena and in a political way.

Surely, populists and even some progressives will claim that doing so will risk us being seen as patronising, condescending, and definitely – gasp – elitist. Well, of course they would say that, wouldn't they? Remember: whatever you do will automatically be portrayed, especially if possibly successful, as "the reason why populists may win". This is one of the purposes of political rhetoric and one should not be naïve about it. National populists are not here to engage in a cool, cerebral, wonkish debate about policies. On this, we can learn from them: since the beginning, they have been here to invent issues, heat the political debate around their favourite topics, and attack progressives as aggressively as they can on the grounds that they have chosen.

While confronting, attacking, and mocking – with no hesitation – the national populists, progressives should then address all their fellow citizens with their answers to the problems they (and not the national populists) feel deeply about.

HOW DOES THIS TRANSLATE INTO THE CURRENT EU DEBATE?

First of all, if progressives love the EU, they have to say so. If they are critical of how the EU works, but are enthusiastic about the idea of European unification, they must voice their criticisms and address the problems they have spotted but, more than that, they must spend most of their time putting forward a vision of what Europe and our common future can be.

While recognising that the EU must adapt to face the reality of increasing international tensions, probably with an increased level of EU military coordination, progressive pro-Europeans must not waste time in moving to the issues that they feel would really address the everyday sense of insecurity amongst all of us: joblessness, inequality, ever-increasing personal debt, and the lack of a future to look forward to.

We must be bold in our proposals: a European minimum wage, a European social security, federal European universities to reverse brain drain from the South, preparation for the technologies of the future, taxation of multinational companies in the EU, Eurozone-wide sovereign debt, etc. And if someone answers that there are no majorities in the Council to accept that or EU Commissioners good enough to propose it, we must then reply to those objections, content enough in the knowledge that at least the debate is now being had on our terms and on issues that are a real answer to the sources of change and instability of today's world.

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The example of the Green movement across Europe in the 1980s is quite illustrative of the advantages of this strategy. When the Greens started demonstrating against nuclear power plants, almost all governments in Europe were strongly invested in the use of nuclear energy. EURATOM, as a treaty, was little more than 20 years old and the Greens did not need to be anti-European to criticise aspects of the EU integration process. They also didn't need to be concerned with majorities in the Council; they only needed to point to reality and to mobilise people.

In the same way, the bolder EU proposals we are suggesting really do need to be argued for even if one has to posit a political revolution in order to achieve them. If these policies will only come to fruition in the case of millions of Europeans demanding them, so much the better: in that way, we shall have, as an end result, both the policies that we aim for and the movement that we have created in order to achieve them. And, as we have strengthened that movement in order to get those achievements, we will also have preserved and promoted the essential rule of law, human rights, democratically-based European Union that we need to fulfil the European promise.

In sum, instead of ignoring the populists while addressing the fears that they have disseminated among the electorate, what progressives must do is quite the opposite: to confront populists and their fears head-on, in order to create breathing space for disseminating their own progressive views and alternatives among the citizenry. Fear is not always dissipated by reasoned argument, but can be vanquished by a language of alternative emotions that covers a wide range of feelings, from derision to optimism, that can be stronger than fear. While stopping fear from monopolising the political debate, progressives must then put front and centre their vision of how to solve the problems of globalisation. In order to do this, we call for not backing away from cosmopolitanism, but instead putting cosmopolitanism at the core of everything we do politically.

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WHY WE NEED AN EMPHATICALLY POLITICAL COSMOPOLITANISM

It is not only because we have forgotten our historical reflexes and gained a numbing distance from our core values that we have ceased to be able to act politically in the way that we have described in the last paragraphs. It is mainly because the world has enormously changed in recent times.

The existing situation of distress in the international system and of disorientation regarding an increasingly globalised world has resulted into a two-dimensional grid criss-crossed by two axes, at the ends of which lie four distinct systems: nationalism or globalisation, internationalism or cosmopolitanism. While internationalism – in effect, an intergovernmental version thereof – has been the democratic consensus in the last decades, we recognise that the challenges posed by both the current pace of globalisation and the intensity of the nationalism backlash have rendered mainstream intergovernmental internationalism incapable of satisfying the collective anxiety in our societies. We therefore argue for a return to the core progressive vision of cosmopolitanism, understood in its original political sense, as the most promising source of answers in our rapidly changing, highly insecure, world.

At the far-end of one axis, we have the current system in crisis, with its globalisation pushed forward by very powerful impersonal vectors such as technology, corporations, and ecological change. On the opposite side, we have the international system defined by an increasingly outdated intergovernmental method that vainly tries to moderate those fluid vectors of globalisation.

At the two extremes of the second axis, we have the two possible answers to globalisation and to the crisis of internationalism. On the one hand, the nationalist retreat into the primacy of selfishness according to current neo-nationalist thought: self-interested action by the State is always justified, be it for protectionist reasons or transactional ones. At the other end, opposite nationalism, we have cosmopolitanism as defined by the

extension of a citizen's sovereignty to all the political scales where decisions must be taken.

Cosmopolitanism is the alternative in which the crisis in human rights can be addressed via international humanitarian passports for refugees and regional, or even global, human rights courts accessible for every citizen who wishes to defend his or her rights. This is the alternative in which multinational corporations can be taxed and thus provide for the resources we need for the protection of our populations and the investment into our future; where global redistribution mechanisms can be implemented, albeit gradually. This is also the alternative in which the continuing existence of the EU as an example of a highly integrated transnational entity is so crucial. This, in sum, is the alternative where real answers for real problems start to take shape – as opposed to fake answers for perceived problems that are currently being imposed on people.

Although the construction of a cosmopolitan sphere is a tall order in itself, it is only at this level that the pieces of the insecurity and fear puzzle of globalisation, technology, migrations, and addressing climate change or terrorism, start to fall into their proper places. We must not be afraid to promote these answers right away, even though their implementation may still seem to belong to a distant future – because they are already urgently needed.



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