

THE VIRUS OF POPULISM

Duncan McDonnell

POSITION



DUNCAN McDONNELL is a political scientist, fellow researcher at universities of Birmingham and Torino, and expert on populism and populist parties in Europe. His books include: 'The Spectre of Western European Democracy' (2007) and 'Populists in Power' (in print)

■ *To what extent does the relationship between the elites and the masses in Europe manifest conflict? How deep is the gap between them? Is it fair to say that we have seen a rise of anti-elite sentiments? How does this process affect democratic institutions?*

I think we can say that the pillars of representative liberal democracy — in particular, political participation and the parties themselves — are creaking as a result of mass distrust of elites. If we look, for example, at the data presented by Robert Putnam, Susan Pharr, and Russell Dalton in their book 'Disaffected Democracies', we see that while support for democracy *per se* seems greater than ever, public faith in the agents of

democracy (i.e. parties and politicians) and in representative institutions has declined across the western world. As Richard Katz and Peter Mair wrote in their work on cartel parties, there is a process of mutual withdrawal by both elites and the masses from common ground in established democracies. Most contemporary political parties do not have the territorial presence that mass parties used to have — they have fewer members and less direct contact with people in their constituencies, other than during election campaigns of course. For their part, the masses are voting with their feet, as demonstrated by the almost uniform and steady decline in electoral turnouts over the past two decades in western democracies. There is also a public perception that political, economic, and cultural elites are 'distant,' self-interested, and often corrupt. None of this of course enhances the legitimacy of representative democracy.

■ *Who are the main proponents of anti-elite sentiments? Is it the middle class? What factors cause the rise of such sentiments and what factors tend to diminish them?*

I think there is a mixture of indifference and dislike of elites among both the middle classes and the poorer ones — as we can see from the cross-class support for anti-establishment populist parties. There are a series of structural factors which contribute to the rise of anti-elite feelings. Economic and cultural globalization is, and rightly so, perceived as a process driven for and by the elites. As Danilo Zolo said in his interview on 'authoritarian pop-

ulism,' there is a perception of a transnational capitalistic class dominating the world from the 'crystal towers of world megapolises.' Likewise there is a perception of political and cultural elites as being self-referential and self-legitimizing. Of course, it is worth mentioning that this phenomenon is not entirely new. We have seen strong anti-elite sentiments in the past. For example, Wall Street financiers and 'machine politics' were the targets of many reformers and populists who blamed them for the problems of the masses in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In regards to what would decrease anti-elite sentiments, **a genuine re-engagement by mainstream party politicians with their constituents would certainly help.** Likewise, not allowing banks and other financial institutions to emerge with seemingly unchanged behaviour and bonuses from the economic crisis would be a positive sign. It would also help if the European Union respected national referendum results. In my own country, Ireland, referendums on the European integration process have twice been defeated and twice then been re-proposed shortly afterwards in only slightly repackaged formats. The consequent perception is obviously that the EU will keep asking the public the same questions until it gets the answer it wants. However, I do not think that we are likely to see any of the above changes! **Changes of this type would only occur if absolutely necessary, and clearly the elites feel that this is not the case. We have not reached a 'tipping point' in this sense.**

■ *What are the elites blamed for? What are the main points of the 'anti-elite' rhetoric? Why does blaming the elites often result in grotesque exaggerations, that they are all thieves and they only think of themselves? How substantial are the claims against the elites?*

The elites are blamed for pursuing their own interests, for being undemocratic, and for not considering the needs and wishes of the people. This is the key argument of populist and anti-establishment politicians: that the elites have 'stolen' democracy from the people and that the people's voice, rights, identity, and traditions are under threat as a result. Populists can thus present themselves as the 'real' democrats. In regards to the accusation that political elites 'are all thieves,' obviously this is a dangerous generalization as it undermines faith in representative democracy and its agents. Of course, there is also some truth in it as the exposure of very serious scandals involving political and economic elites in countries like Ireland and Italy have been uncovered. Moreover, the fact that in both these countries very few people have been punished for corruption only adds to the perception of the elites as 'untouchable' and as 'playing by their own rules.' I am not sure though whether we can say that corruption has definitely increased over time or whether it is simply the case that the media are now much more willing (and able) to expose it. To return to the examples of Italy and Ireland — corruption has been rife for a very long time in these countries, but in previous decades the media in both did not feel they could investigate or discuss it in the ways they do now.

■ *Do anti-elite sentiments have the potential to bring together the masses and bring about the emergence of a new political order? Are*

there any groups present in the political arena that can successfully play on anti-elite sentiments? Would you expect a renaissance of populism, populist demands, and parties in this century?

While, to an extent, mainstream politicians have increasingly (and paradoxically) tried to jump on the anti-elite bandwagon themselves, the key political groups promoting and profiting from anti-elite sentiments are populists. As Daniele Albertazzi and I wrote in our book 'Twenty-First Century Populism', populists base their appeal on the juxtaposition of a virtuous and homogenous people with a series of self-interested and corrupt elites. As we have seen in elections over the past fifteen years across Europe, from France to Poland to Italy to Norway, this is a powerful rhetoric and one that finds favour among increasing numbers of voters.

I think we certainly can expect populism to grow. Indeed, the big change over the past decade has been that not only have populist parties increased their vote shares in many countries across Europe, but that they have also entered government in a number of these. In other words, **populism is now not only about protest from outside the centres of power, but also about governing them.** Populism will continue to grow in Europe as long as the structural conditions favouring its rise exist (elite corruption, mainstream party withdrawal from grassroots interaction, an elite-driven European Union integration process, immigration, etc.) and as long as there are populist politicians capable of exploiting those conditions. In this sense, I think **we can see European democracy like a body whose immune system is compromised and so is particularly exposed to these 'viral attacks.'** In other words, the 'viruses' are simply exploiting an underlying and

continuing weakness in the democratic body and will continue to do so for as long as that weakness is left uncured. If we think for example of the Netherlands, Pim Fortuyn's party swiftly collapsed after his assassination, but was equally swiftly replaced by Geert Wilders who has exploited the same conditions as Fortuyn and has been extremely successful.

Finally, when considering the changes in democracy, I do think it is important to bear in mind that democracy as we know it — i.e. universal male and female suffrage, regular and fair elections, free media, multiple political parties and so on — is still, historically, in its infancy and it may well be that the golden period for western democracy after the end of the Second World War of mass political participation will turn out to have simply been a 'honeymoon period' and a product of a series of very favourable structural factors and popular enthusiasm, rather than a democratic rule or 'norm.' In that sense, I have to say that I find **much of the debate about a 'crisis of democracy' to be premised on very shallow foundations. It seems a bit like condemning a moody adolescent for not being as energetic and carefree as they were aged five.** Perhaps we should wait until democracy is a bit nearer adulthood before drawing conclusions about what it 'is' and what it normally 'looks like.' Democracy, in the sense of polyarchy as Robert Dahl describes it, is very young and in transition. As Gerry Stoker says in his book 'Why Politics Matters': 'Achieving mass democracy was the great triumph of the twentieth century. Learning to live with it will be the great achievement of the twenty-first.' I agree completely. Although I would not take for granted that we will necessarily learn to live with it very satisfactorily. ■

*Yulia Netesova exclusively for
Yaroslavl Forum*