

# THE TIMES OF STEEP EXPECTATIONS

Daniele Albertazzi

ACADEMIA



DANIELE ALBERTAZZI is a lecturer in European media at the University of Birmingham, and he has authored the following books: 'Resisting the Tide: Cultures of Opposition Under Berlusconi' (2009), 'The Media: and Introduction' (2009), and 'Twenty-first Century Populism: the Spectre of Western European Democracy' (2007)

■ *How can you explain the ubiquitous growth of an anti-elite mood? Why are people demanding more and more from the elites?*

First of all, it is because elites are much more visible nowadays, something that is related to the development of the mass media. For example, someone like Queen Victoria could have been hidden away from everybody else for decades, whereas nowadays people in power are always in the public eye. Look at what recently happened to Berlusconi, and that's just the latest example — the list is very, very long.

So, it is not necessarily the case that elites today are behaving much worse than twenty years ago.

What is certain is that the elites have become much more visible.

This is the first issue, then, that they are much more visible, with the media taking an interested focus on them because of their celebrity status. They are also beginning to focus more on their private lives, so that when they misbehave or do something wrong it usually becomes a big story.

Another factor is that people now have very high expectations and tend to assume that politics has the power to improve their lives. The truth is that national governments no longer have the power to influence a large number of key processes anymore, because in an age of globalization their options are often limited and constrained by what other governments and national institutions do. This leaves people calling out in frustration, 'We are being forgotten, we are being ignored!' Finally, I think that the nature of people's expectations has also changed. It seems to me that there is now much more of a consumerist approach towards politics. Politics is about compromise, it is about allocation of resources, and often it's about taking decisions that obviously are painful decisions for some groups of people.

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ple. But now, at least in the West, there is a very consumerist approach to politics. Everyone now wants politicians to resolve problems immediately and quickly, and that's all anyone seems to be interested in. **People have begun**

**to approach politics as they approach a supermarket. In a supermarket you walk in, and, as long as you have the money, you buy whatever you want.** But of course politics doesn't work this way. You cannot just vote a party in, and then expect that in, say, two years all the issues that concern you will be addressed and resolved.

■ *Which kind of groups actually dislike the elites the most? Are they the poor masses or from the middle class?*

I think it is not just the poor, and it is not just the middle classes. The division is more an ideological division rather than one of class, meaning that anti-elite populist parties can and may be successful among both the working class and the middle class in contemporary Europe. Sometimes you can vote for somebody not because you are poor, but because you are scared that what you have got, which may be a lot, might be taken away from you. Or you could be scared that the country is going in a wrong direction and therefore your wares and your work will come under threat. So, it is not necessarily the case that economic reasons apply only to the people at

the bottom of society, sometimes economic reasons can apply to the middle class as well.

Besides, more than by economic reasons, these phenomena seem to be motivated by reasons of identity. People, to an extent, feel

betrayed and they feel abandoned vis-a-vis some very big changes that are taking place — globalization, immigration, and so on. And sometimes they expect politicians to resolve all these things rather quickly and swiftly, even though many of these processes are much bigger than the national state, and simply cannot be addressed by one nation alone.

An obvious example is the people who reached Lampedusa island, which is a tiny island next to Sicily. Those people were from Northern Africa and were trying to migrate to Europe. The government in Italy has been very outspoken against migration, and obviously the arrival of these people is now a huge problem for them. But issues of migration cannot be addressed by a single government within the EU. Even the EU as a whole has problems trying to manage this, because it's really kind of a process of change that is happening around the whole world.

■ *And what do the elites think about the rest of the population? Do they dislike the masses, or is their attitude more ambiguous?*

I doubt that the elites can even be considered a homogenous and united group, despite there being a lot of conspiracy theories to that end. Of course, there are strong links between the financial and political elites. But it seems to me that it would be an exaggeration to treat them all as a kind of homogenous group. I am afraid I am not sure that the elites hate the masses. I am also not convinced by this idea of a trans-national elite. **It seems to me that in the contemporary world, national interests, national identities, and national values are still paramount.** Yes, there are links between elites across countries, but personally I haven't seen anything to make me think that there is some kind of hidden world government of twenty people who rule the world

through the IMF or some other organization.

■ *Nevertheless, representatives of the elites speak the same language, wear the same tailored clothes, and share the same type of vocation, the same type of interests. So, they have more things in common than, for example, the upper middle class.*

But this can also be said about many middle class individuals in Europe nowadays compared with 50 years ago. Despite the fact that we still have national languages, there are people all across Europe who all share a second language, which nowadays is normally English. They travel around the world 2-3 times a year because of cheap flights, and dress more or less in the same way, because the clothing industry has become globalized. So, in the end, what you are saying is true, but I am not sure it only applies to the people at the very top of society.

These feelings of dislike towards the elites tend to translate into lack of participation and the delegation of this right to some kind of charismatic leader

■ *Can the dislike towards the elite actually become a platform for a new political party? In Italy, for example, there are leftist groups that dislike the elites for ideological reasons. But, is this enough for them to become united and become a real force?*

I think there is a potential of turning to a request for more transparency, for accountability, for more democratic rights. You mentioned Italy, where there is, in fact, a movement of people being lead reasonably well by a comedian. Beppe Grillo has one of the most visited blogs in the world. And he is using the language, which, in some way, is similar to the language used by right wing

populists to attack the political class and the elites. He is doing so, and he has created a movement that is very much about creating a more accountable and transparent system. I think these issues and these requests can be turned into a kind of progressive and democratic force.

In reality, it is true that most of the time in contemporary Europe these requests and criticisms of the elite are often translated into a leader, who can embody certain values and bypass the corrupt elite to put the values into practice. So, it is often a delegation to a charismatic leader, rather than a request for more participation and more democracy. And this is connected with all the studies that have been done in the last thirty years about participation and democracy in Western Europe, which show that fewer and fewer people bother to vote, or to become members of political parties, and an increasing number of people feel detached

from the political system, which is likely related to this kind of criticism of the elite, or even hatred of the elite. In the UK it is quite obvious, but also in very democratic countries, such as Switzerland, the percentage of people who bother to vote is very, very low.

Unfortunately, **at the moment these feelings of dislike towards the elites tend to translate into lack of participation and the delegation of this right to some kind of charismatic leader.** Can this ever translate into something positive? I think the potential is there, but at present there is not a lot of ground for optimism. ■

*Yulia Netesova exclusively for  
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