

Why Populism is On The March Everywhere  
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Recently, I heard a TV discussion between Fareed Zakaria and Tony Blair, the former Prime Minister of the UK, about the puzzling rise of anti-democratic "populism" around the world.

Populism does not just mean "popular," but is a movement in which the institutions of democracy (press, courts, congress) are declared "corrupt" and the solution is a "strong" leader. Throughout history when legitimate rulers ignore current problem, people could be roused to try another form of leadership. In Medieval Europe, people were taught that their King, noble Lords, Pope and Church, were ordained by God to rule over them. However, when conditions for the masses grew so terrible that anger overcame fear, there were unsuccessful peasant revolts. The French Revolution was one of the first to (temporarily)succeed because it represented peasants, workers, and intellectuals.

Unfortunately, popular revolutions (Populism) always usher in anarchy and chaos, conditions usually worse than traditional governance. A "strong leader," a dictator who has killed or coopted all rivals for leadership, takes over. Such a leader then begins a reign of terror to further eliminate any competition to his rule. The populists who created this monster take a very long time to realize that they have been hoodwinked. The new leader exploits them, enriches his own family and friends, and often plunges the country into warfare with its neighbors. Hitler is the model for this sort of populism. The Germans lived to regret it.

In the discussion between Fareed Zakaria and Tony Blair, the question arose about this modern populist resurgence. Why did the British vote to exit the European Union (Brexit), a decision not to their financial advantage? Why have populists in Poland, Hungary, and now Italy, replaced their hard-won democracies with autocratic governance led by Strong Leaders?

How can one explain the mystery of the election of Populist Donald Trump, who ran on a platform attacking the democratic institutions that protect us from tyranny. Why were Trump's "base" hostile to the press, the courts, the Democrats whom many once supported, and the educated "elites" (scientists included)? Why were they ready to believe that their coal mines would be reopened, hiring them? Why did they believe that Trump would "drain the swamp" in Washington, and get rid of the experts and snooty billionaires?

I have always believed in "enlightened" self-interest, the Jeffersonian idea that people, properly educated, will support laws that are both good for them and for the general well-being of the country. Populists, however, are moved only by self-interest. The demagogue that leads them promotes self-interest, his own. What separates enlightened self-interest from selfish self-interest is the definition of "enlightened," which means educated. We know that the majority of populists are from the lesser educated sector of the country, both here and abroad. Candidate Trump validated this in one of his rallies: "I love the lesser educated people!" he said. Indeed.

But even lesser educated people should care about their economic self-interest, shouldn't they? Shouldn't they care that their leader has not "drained the swamp," but has instead appointed not only the richest among us, but also those opponents of every program designed to help those very voters? Don't they want clean air and water? Don't they want affordable healthcare? Do they really want to trash government departments such as Food and Drug and Environmental Protection?

Apparently more important to them are perceived attacks on their "culture." Populists are threatened by outsiders (immigrants) taking their jobs, living in their neighborhoods, or marrying their daughters. All the populist movements among formerly liberal democracies have the same targets: immigrants, or already existing minorities. The flood of Muslim refugees to Europe and to the US has the misfortune of being accompanied by Islam's own internal struggle with a fanatical sect, a valid, although exaggerated, popular concern.

Populist concern is not unreasonable, but the values of the educated elites fails to address them. The Democrats promoted "identity politics" (dividing us into categories of race, gender, and culture), while ignoring the unifying culture of the American Creed: responsible citizenship, common language, manners, and values. This, not populism, is what Enlightened Self-Interest is.

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