

Populist Challenge and Political Judgement

Written by Hartmut Behr

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HARTMUT BEHR, NOV 28 2016

Brexit does not seem a gaffe anymore (if it ever did to anyone) after the election of Donald Trump as the next US president. After one week of deep breathing and analysis of this election, we see a little clearer what the challenges in our times of 'post-factual' democracy are: namely, as hyperbolic as this may sound, the thread of democracy itself; or at least of democracy as we have known it. This does not mean that democratic societies would be in perfect order and that there were no reasons for critique. On the contrary, the rise of populism signals exactly deep problems with democratic societies; problems that are the fertile ground and conditions of campaigns like those of Trump, Farage, Johnston, et al. to emerge and be successful. Research has until recently located the populist problem in South America, South East Asia, and Eastern Europe – i.e., in so-called 'transition societies' – and apart from the question of whether, or not, this was naïve, we at least know that populism has arrived in 'our' societies, too; and there will be elections next year in France and Germany who both have strong populist movements. Let's hope there won't be a 'cordon populiste'! But what can we learn? The following sketch of an analysis does not suggest an easy solution and concedes that we have, for quite some time, to live with populism that manifests itself as right-wing populism in the Western world (and not only here if we look into Russia, Turkey, and the Philippines, for example). We have to accommodate in a turbulent world until we have restored political, democratic judgment in our populations.

There may be many reasons for the rise of right-wing populism, but what seems most puzzling is that campaigns based on fabricated and manipulated perceptions – one cannot speak of evidence any more – are resonating with numbers of people large enough to make them successful in popular votes, thus they are resonating with dozens of millions of people even if figures are (nearly) head-to-head. There may be idiosyncrasies of election systems, ok, but still numbers are very high. The resonance of manipulated numbers, assertions, stories, and programs does not prevent people from voting for populist campaigners. This is post-factual, but why does this not render Trump et al. non-credible? Why do people buy-in these post-factual conditions to give them their vote? Again, there may be many reasons (frustration about life chances and kicking the establishment maybe the most decisive), but it is also worthwhile and important to reflect upon the capacity of political, democratic judgement and the lack of it, respectively. What characterizes such judgment?

I argue that, without speculating about the content of such judgment, it must be at least a balanced one, balanced against what Hannah Arendt has called 'factual truth'. Consequently, the arguments, assertions, stories, and figures that campaigners throw into the ring, have to be evaluated against 'factual truth' to unravel lies. Fact checkers in the US election campaign were a kind of starting point for this (but unfortunately from a campaigner herself ...). But again, credible scrutiny could not prevent millions of people to vote for the post-factual. Although certain assertions have been identified as lies, rational arguments seemed without compelling power for (too) many and lies had an impressive career: they seemed to enjoy at least enough credibility in large parts of the population to vote for their representatives; or their falseness did not matter at all and was trumped by sheer voluntarism. I am therefore inclined to conclude that – and here lies the real challenge – we live in an era of the devaluation of knowledge in which the difference between 'truth' and 'lies' does not count anymore. This makes electorates prone to populists and their demagogies. Restoring this capacity for political judgement that is needed for a democracy to function will take a while and huge efforts as the devaluation of knowledge has been destructed quite successfully and for quite some time by an excessive preference of neo-liberal curricula in primary and all forms of Higher Education on functionalist and individualist targets. It is in the restoration of political judgment that lies the real challenge for democracy and liberal society against all forms of populism.

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