

Populism: a Foreshadowing of the End of Enlightenment Values in (Western) Society?

By Professor Alex de Ruyter, Director, Centre for Brexit Studies, Birmingham City University

In this article I want to consider whether the current focus on “identity politics” can simply be discussed in terms of “populism” – or whether a resurgent nativism across countries represents a deeper rejection of Enlightenment values – namely, that the empirical (Cartesian) method of thought that has underpinned “progress” in the last three hundred years or so is now itself in danger.

In so doing, I want to emphasise that there is nothing innate in progress being an inherent “force for good” or otherwise free from malign influences. In this regard, I take particular aim at schools of thought that are teleological in taking some pre-conceived endpoint as an inevitable outcome of the cycles of history.

Indeed, the dominant mode of thinking, that is the Cartesian-Empirical (named after sixteenth-century French philosopher Rene Descartes, who famously posited “I think, therefore I am”) has been characterised by two striking notions: that of the primacy of rational behaviour, and the concept of a benevolent notion of progress as improving the well-being of the economies and societies that we live in. The struggle to attain this was evocatively captured in the motto of the Alchemist, that being “purge the horrible darkness of our mind and light a light for our senses!”

And dominant paradigms in economics and the wider social sciences have posited the primacy of the rational economic agent, with its precursor in the utilitarian pleasure calculus of philosopher Jeremy Bentham, and subsequently formalised in the mathematical models of the mainstream neoclassical school. In Marxism of course, the notion of history as having a predetermined outcome reached its apogee in the teleological notion of dialectical materialism; whereby capitalism would inevitably give way to a benevolent socialism.

However, against this were those who sought to posit that societies have always been vulnerable to those that would offer simple solutions; and moreover that the above notions were fallacious. Human nature could also be fundamentally irrational; and there was no reason why scientific progress would necessarily do away with the more animalistic sides of our nature (as an example, as societies, we are far more “educated” than we were two hundred years ago, but this has not eliminated our recourse to violence as a species, as any trawling of the daily news would attest).

George Orwell was an early prophet in this regard. When writing about the rise of totalitarian states, he argued that science was serving superstition: “The order, the planning, the State encouragement of science, the steel, the concrete, the aeroplanes are all there, but all in the service of ideas appropriate to the Stone Age. Science is fighting on the side of superstition” (Orwell, 1941). Orwell took particular aim at other writers of his time such as H.G. Wells who – in his view – were naively optimistic in regarding technological progress as an inherently rational, liberating, democratising force.

Turning to the more contemporary era, discourse surrounding the virtues of information and communication technologies have been underpinned by the notion of technological change as being liberating and empowering in the creation of the so-called “network economy” (Shapiro and Varian, 1999). According to this view, as depicted in the writings of *Wired* magazine and labelled as “techno-positivist” by Bridges (2017: 5), the Internet is seen as “a democratising media which has lowered the barriers to entry held by previous gatekeepers and revolutionised personal freedom” (ibid.).

However, in practice the Internet has been characterised by a) the dominance of a few oligopolistic platform providers in the form of Google, Facebook and Amazon; and b) moreover, enabling an easier platform for a whole range of disparate, questionable views to reach a potentially global audience. Indeed, the nature of technological change, given associated developments in digital imaging and computer editing, has made it far easier to “doctor” or falsify items to further particular agendas.

This, coupled with the sheer volume of information and opinions on offer, can reinforce tendencies for individuals confronted with

increasing pressures on their time to retreat to judging the veracity of information solely through the lens of their own direct “experience”. For someone on relatively low wages with a poor educational background having to work long hours to get by, leisure is in short supply and probably not characterised by time to read and listen to a wide range of extant materials to gain a broad view of current events. Such people are more likely to fall prey to those who offer simple solutions.

In this sense, at one level, the resurgence of nativism, as epitomised by Brexit, Trump, Putin, Erdogan and so on, can be seen as a rejection of the open liberal-democratic consensus epitomised by globalisation over the last thirty years. Indeed, at one level, the emphasis on liberal market capitalism has certainly created winners and resentful losers epitomised in the “rust-belts” and “left-behind communities”.

However, I think that it is more than this. If we are seeing a reassertion of evaluating information on the basis of gut feeling and “what makes sense” – then we are seeing a wider rejection of modernity and progress itself? By this I mean a rejection of the empirical method of thought that has sought to explain societal workings by a process of cause-and-effect that could be used to make predictions under a given set of assumptions. Whilst not necessarily tangible to the everyman, these would nevertheless be explainable by illustrating a sequence of logical assumptions.

The current Brexit context in the UK, and general widespread distrust of public figures and “experts” does, to me, alarmingly point in this direction. If history is any guide, then we can only expect further upheavals to come, if one’s guiding motto now, in contrast to Descartes, is “I feel, therefore I am”.

References:

Bridges, L. (2017), ‘Flexible as freedom? The dynamics of creative industry work and the case study of the editor in publishing’, New Media and Society, 1-17.

Shapiro, C. and Varian, H. (1999), *'Information Rules: A Strategic Guide to the Network Economy'*. Harvard Business School Press: Boston, MA.

Orwell, G (1941) *'Wells, Hitler and the World State'*, *Horizon*. Available at: http://orwell.ru/library/reviews/wells/english/e_whws