

Five pieces on populism

Bart Nooteboom

283. What answer to populism?

published on 1-10-2016

There is a pressing need to give an answer to the rising populist revolt, in Western countries. There are legitimate grievances behind it, and when left unanswered, they make society vulnerable to a takeover by demagogues that destroys justice and democracy, and is beginning to reek of a new brew of fascism. So, what can we learn from populism?

In my view, this revolt has the following grounds.

First, the lower paid and educated classes feel that they have suffered more setbacks than benefits from globalized trade, in large contrast to the increase of income, wealth and power of higher paid and educated classes. This injustice is not addressed, and seems to be excused as the inevitable side-effects of the blessings of free trade.

Second, people are angry that multinational firms successfully press national governments for extending advantages (in taxes, exceptions to regulation, e.g. for protection of the environment, energy subsidies, premiums for locating businesses, etc.), on the threat of locating activities elsewhere. In particular, the EU is seen as being there for the sake of markets rather than for justice for the people. This also contributes to distrust of markets and free trade.

Third, people feel that they have no grip, no influence on what is going on, and consequently lose their faith in democracy. They also feel a loss of social coherence and shared cultural identity. This provides a breeding ground for renewed nationalism.

To address these grievances, I have three proposals.

First, concerning the inequality of benefits from global trade between the lower and the higher paid and educated, the lesson is not, in my view, to abolish international trade, but to compensate for the inequality of its effects.

Second, build countervailing power regarding multinationals who take nations hostage. There are also other issues that require bundling in supranational integration, as in the EU: concerning foreign policy, defence, refugees, the environment, security (anti-terrorism), and international crime.

Here also lies an opportunity for the EU to regain acceptance and allegiance by proving it is there not only for the market but for the people. The going of this will be tough, against present ill feeling against the EU, partly as a result of its one-sided focus on facilitating markets. The EU is already making moves in this direction, in its policies concerning banking and taxes.

Third, as I proposed in the preceding item in this blog, utilize present opportunities from technology and higher levels of education to decentralize many decisions and designs in policy and projects to the local level of communities, in towns or city quarters, for local debate on ethics and morality, in closer, more personal contacts for building trust and mutual understanding and tolerance in collaboration.

These proposals entail that the grasp of nations becomes less, in a surrender of competencies to on the one hand supranational collaboration, as in the EU, and on the other hand decentralization of initiatives within nations to localities.

A complication is that release to local initiatives will not only profit from local variety but will also generate inequality of outcomes. Maintaining a demand of strict equality everywhere will kill variety and space for local initiative. A second complication is that release to local initiative may generate local clientism and corruption, with power concentrating in local bobo's and their entourage.

Here, there remain tasks on the national level, not only for issues and projects that transcend localities (jurisdiction, security, transportation, ...), but for preventing excessive inequalities and local clientism.

All this is needed as an answer to the present populist revolt in Western countries.

287. The crisis of liberalism

published 29-10-2016

There are various forms of liberalism. Loosely, it means liberty of choice for the individual. But what kind of liberty? Choice of what? What does it mean for an individual? The cardinal present form of liberalism consists, I think, of the following principles.

First, autonomy of the individual (as opposed to its social constitution).

Second, a focus on negative freedom; lack of interference with the individual. This stands in contrast with positive freedom, to pursue one's view of the good life, on the basis of corresponding values, virtues, and competencies. In liberalism that is left up to the individual, free from public meddling.

That has indeed been liberating, with its contribution to momentous achievements such as human rights, legality, ownership rights, police monopoly of violence, equality under the law, being innocent until proven guilty, independent judiciary, and different forms of emancipation.

Third, the assumption and ideal of rationality driving human action and public policy.

Fourth, a reduction of human nature to the drive of self-interest, even at the expense of others. Other human features that might keep this back, oriented at relationships rather than autonomous agents, such as benevolence, care, trust, empathy, and altruism, are not regarded as being part of human nature, and are felt to be 'wishy-washy', intangible, not satisfying rational requirements of objectivity, logical rigour, and measurability.

And then there are markets. Their miracle is that through self-interest they promote maximum material welfare. Without that, liberal self-interest would not have been palatable.

As noted by Milbank and Pabstⁱ, while values and virtues, as instruments for positive freedom, are seen as up to individuals, beyond the pale of politics, the potential for vice, in excessive self-interest at the cost of others, is a public matter, since it limits negative freedom. Containing the hazards of self-interest then becomes the only moral task of government. No appeal can be made to virtues since those are outside public discourse, and are too vague, various and 'irrational' to have any bite. Only imposition of control is left.

This idea goes back to Hobbes' idea of the need for a 'Leviathan' to contain the 'war of all against all'.

To be rational and without regard to individual values, motives, talents, experience and conditions, control has to be bureaucratic, uniform and impersonal (one thinks of Weber here), imposed by the state (or in name of the stateⁱⁱ). As a result, conduct is increasingly regimented and strangled by an accumulation of control.ⁱⁱⁱ

Efficiency is objective and measurable, as minimum monetary cost, while value is subjective and hence unwieldy, if it goes beyond mere exchange value, expressed in price. This reduction of value to exchange goes by the name of ‘commodification’.

As a result, in the realm of rational policy efficiency always wins. If quality is to play a role, it is to be fixed in objectified, quantifiable, standards of skill, process or outcome, which contributes to the accumulation of stifling control.

As noted by Milbank and Pabst, taken together, this explains the puzzling phenomenon, in present society, of an alliance between market ideology, demanding maximum negative freedom for self-interested conduct, with centralized control of such conduct, to limit threats to negative freedom. Socialist ideals of a strong state can thus ally with liberal ideals of negative freedom. A requirement for this was only that socialism drop its old ideals of upholding social justice beyond the decrees of laws, in humane conduct, protecting the weak, and guiding and ‘uplifting’ the populace with education and culture.

This results not only in a reduced scope for positive freedom, for the pursuit of a flourishing life, but, ironically, even of negative freedom, in that limitation of scope. And so liberalism swallows its own tail.

302. How illiberal is nationalistic populism?

published 11-2-2017

In item 287 of this blog I discussed what I called ‘The crisis of liberalism’, but there I considered only one face of liberalism: the libertarian, neo-liberal form, which I criticized. I neglected what I would call liberal democracy, which I want to uphold. Liberal democracy entails constitutional constraints on government, in the rule of law, equality under the law, being innocent until proven guilty, freedom of speech, of association, and of religion, openness, tolerance, and separation of powers (legislative, executive, judicial).

The latter does not necessarily include the autonomy of the individual, free trade and laissez faire, with minimal government intervention. In my understanding, those are features added in libertarian liberalism. Neo-liberalism develops this further into a striving for deregulation and liberalization of markets. Libertarians claim that you cannot have the one without the other: no democratic liberalism without free markets. I contest that. I propose that underlying all this are a utility ethics and a preoccupation with only negative freedom, only absence of interference, as discussed previously in this blog.

The distinction between the two liberalisms is important for an adequate understanding of the present populist revolt, on the right and on the left, and an adequate response to it. I think that populism (left and right) has legitimate grievances against libertarianism, whose free market ideology has caused injustice to large segments of the middle and lower classes. The injustice was economic, in the loss of jobs, in globalization, but also ethical, in derision of lower class values and their craving for security and social identity in communities, which were seen as backward, misplaced in present cosmopolitan society. Those people felt loss of recognition, which has been seen, by Hegel, for example, as an existential abyss.

The problem, however, is that the nationalistic populism on the right, in contrast with populism on the left, threatens to become illiberal also in the sense of eroding democratic liberalism, with authoritarian rule, leading to erosion of equality under the law (for women, immigrants, foreigners, transgenders, muslims, and non-white races), freedom and independence of the press and the judiciary, and rights of people who are excluded from ‘the people’ by the mere act of opposing the populist leader. That leader represents the people, so if you do not agree with him you do not belong to the people. We see this happening in

Russia, Turkey, with beginnings of it in Hungary, Poland, and forebodings of it in the US, the Netherlands, France, and Germany, among others

What now? I am seeking a way, in this blog and elsewhere, to replace libertarian politics and 'old economics' with a new politics and economics that still uphold democratic liberalism. An important element in this is to see the individual not as fully autonomous but as socially constituted. Also, I have pleaded, in this blog, for a shift from utility ethics to a form of virtue ethics, with attention to positive next to negative freedom: not just absence of interference with people striving for the good life, but also enabling them to engage in that striving. A puzzle then is how to include virtues that sustain 'the good life' without falling back into old paternalism, maintaining the freedom of choice of what that good life is. I note that liberal democracy, which I want to maintain, already includes virtues such as justice, reasonableness, moderation, tolerance and openness.

I do not have the space here to show what the new economics might be. I will dedicate a number of later items in this blog to that. One of the challenges for a new politics is to 'bring democracy closer to the people'. I explored that in item 283, proposing to employ new opportunities from internet and social media, dodging their pitfalls and perversities, to go from democracy as a periodic positioning, choosing sides in an election or referendum, to democracy as a process, locally, in communities, with direct involvement of citizens, in the preparation and execution of public policies, in forms of 'commons' (such as internet-based communities, joint public-private projects, and citizens forums).

My hope is that with a combination of such new economics and politics we can address the legitimate grievances of populism, and save the basic principles of democratic liberalism.

303. Populism and the political right

published 20-2-2017

The notion of the political right is confused. There are at least two forms. They have been called old versus new or alt(ernative) right, and economic versus cultural right. In the preceding item in this blog I distinguished two forms of liberalism, and the question now also is how the two rights are related to the two liberalisms.

One right is the old, libertarian, economic right. It is focused on the identity of the individual, who is seen as autonomous, and responsible for its own future. It is based on laissez faire, maximally untrammelled markets, with next to no government intervention, apart from liberal-democratic constitutional safeguards. It does uphold those. Thus, the old right is a combination of libertarian and democratic liberalism discussed in the preceding item in this blog.

The new right, or alt-right, is cultural, in a re-emergence of nationalism. This is appropriated by rightist populism. The focus is on cultural, not individual identity. As I argued in the preceding item, while it challenges free market liberalism it also carries threats to democratic liberalism. It appears to be becoming illiberal in two ways.

Rightist and leftist populism, such as that of Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders, have a number of things in common. They both aim to 'do right' to the 'ordinary', or 'real' people, claiming that those have been betrayed, neglected and damaged by 'the elite'. Both are against free markets and excesses of the financial sector. The free flow of labour is seen as threatening to employment, at least for rightist populism.

However, I do not see populism on the left as gravitating towards a destruction of liberal democracy, rather the contrary, in trying to practice it more fully. It seems to be more radically reformist concerning markets than rightist populism. This may be utopian, but that is

a different matter. Later in this blog I will discuss possible ways of preserving markets while preventing their perversities. I suppose that left populism can be classified as anti-libertarian, economically illiberal, and democratically liberal.

Rightist populism, at least in the form of president Trumps plans, does aim to limit trade to protect low-wage jobs, but on the other hand maintains free markets, in renewed deregulation of the financial industries that he criticised heavily during the election, lower taxes for the rich, lifting environmental regulation, in a denial of human-made climate change, and stopping a rise of the minimum wage. Could one say that it is libertarian domestically and anti-libertarian internationally? That would fit with its nationalist pre-occupation.

‘Right’ is generally associated with conservatism, and left with progressiveness. How does that fit, if at all? These categories are also mixed-up and ambiguous. Is defending the constitution of liberal democracy conservative? Then the old right, the old left and the new left are conservative. Is an attack on libertarianism progressive? Then both the new left and the new right (more or less) are progressive.

The old right is very much nested, in one country more than the another, in the elites of politics and business. So is the old left. They both seem conservative in trying to preserve the elite. But that applies equally to leftist elites (take communist regimes). The elite is the revolution grasping power, and then entrenching and maintaining itself. Clearly, both right and left populism are anti-conservative in attacking the incumbent elite, to craft a new one. Is that progressive?

There are also different forms of romanticism involved. Libertarians have the romanticism of the Homeric, Nietzschean, lone, transgressive hero from the work of Ayn Rand, who thrashes out his own future, with determination, strength of purpose, against the lethargy and moral blackmail of the masses.

The new, nationalist, populist alt-right, reverts to the romanticism of transcendent, superior cultural or ethnic roots, blood and soil, exemplified in a largely illusory, mythical past.

How about leftist populism? The romanticism of utopia, if that is romantic? How romantic was More’s utopia? Arcadia? As the classical saying goes (‘et ego in Arcadia’) mortality is there as well. Imperfection on the move.

304. Religion and romanticism

published 25-2-2017

Instead of the word ‘religion’ I would here prefer to use the word ‘godservice’ but while in literal translation that word exists in Dutch (‘godsdiens’) and German (‘Gottesdienst’), it does not, alas, exist in English. I have defined religion as offering transcendence, a connection to something bigger than oneself, but that need not be God, in vertical transcendence. Transcendence can be horizontal, in feeling connected to something in this world, such as nature, or posterity, or an ideology.

In this blog, I have adopted, as is customary, three forms of romanticism. First, putting feelings above reason. Second, feeling connected to something bigger than oneself. Third, the romantic hero transgressing boundaries, being a discoverer, genius artist or scientist, or a master criminal.

Godservice, in contrast with religion, offers all three. God is beyond reason, you belong to the whole of divine creation, and you expect to cross, in death, the boundary between existence on earth and that in heaven. Religion offers the transcendence, but not necessarily the discounting of reason, nor the transgression of boundaries.

The three forms of romanticism do not all apply equally to all forms of godservice. In the Islam, the Shia can live with reason next to God, for the Sunni that is blasphemy. Thus the Sunni is purer, more 'pristine' as someone said, and therefore more attractive to those reaching out for the absolute in vertical transcendence. Better fodder for fanaticism.

Seen in this way, godservice is the mother of all romanticism. Perhaps people are now lured by other manifestations of romanticism because they have lost godservice.

The Nazi's also did well in combining in one package all three forms of romanticism. Putting feelings of racial supremacy above reason. Belonging to the whole of the nation ('Das Volk', the people), united under its leader. Transgressing boundaries of humanity in the lustful aggression of the fascist.

The communists did not do quite so well. They did offer a belonging to the great, international, inevitable, inexorable, march of history towards a communist utopia. They did offer the transgression of the violent purging of capitalists and revisionists. But they made the mistake of not putting feelings above reason but, on the contrary, putting up their march as the march of reason. In that it was closer to the Enlightenment than to Romanticism. However, along the way, revolutionary zeal and fanatic ideology managed to make up for that.

The Cultural Revolution in China, between 1966 and 1976, offered the complete package, in being taken up in a transcendent revolutionary movement, transcending boundaries, uprooting the relics of old, carried along by rhetoric and zealotry, yielding 'a world of enchantment, mesmerisation, and danger, one that combined a sense of infinite possibilities and hopes with a sense of danger and threat ... that gave urgency and potency.'^{iv}

President Trump isn't quite there yet. He is making headway in putting feelings above truth and reason. He offers the emotion of belonging to the nation of a privileged people to be made great again, united under his leadership. He is doing an excellent performance in transgressing a number of boundaries, of coherence, truth telling, receptiveness to criticism, separation of private interests from politics, and acceptance of judicial verdicts in the rule of law.

One cannot accuse him of fascism. But who knows what will happen when he mobilizes his constituency, in defence against movements to depose him that are now gathering force. Or when some attack or crisis is taken to warrant martial law and purges. That is what Hitler did, with the fire of the Reichstag building. Please note that I am not now comparing Trump with Hitler but imagining what might happen.

ⁱ John Milbank & Adrian Pabst, 'The politics of virtue', London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

ⁱⁱ As in the case of the control of hospitals, in terms of detailed protocols for work, delegated to health insurance companies, after the change of the system in 2008, in the Netherlands

ⁱⁱⁱ That has led me to explore a lighter form of control that leaves more room for trust, called 'horizontal control', discussed elsewhere in this blog.

^{iv} Ian Johnson, 'China: The virtues of the awful convulsion', *New York Review of Books*, October 27, 2016, p. 70.