

**Jan Sowa, *The Populist Desire***

For too long, a small group in our nation's Capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished – but the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered – but the jobs left, and the factories closed. The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country. Their victories have not been your victories; their triumphs have not been your triumphs; and while they celebrated in our nation's Capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land. That all changes – starting right here, and right now, because this moment is your moment: it belongs to you.

The inaugural address of Donald Trump

The word “crisis” derives from the old Greek verb κρίνω (*krinnō*), meaning “I separate”, “I choose”, “I decide”, “I judge”. Every crisis is a moment of judgement and decision: What are the merits of our societies and the values they pursue? What is worth saving and what is not? What goals would we like to collectively achieve? Thus every crisis opens up a possibility to reshape the world, realizing what Hannah Arendt believed to be the truly and uniquely human ability: to start everything anew. Is this what is going to happen when Covid-19 is gone?

Some believe that once the pandemic is over there will be no going back to *status quo ante*: cars would not come back to pollute our cities, social spending would get a substantial boost as the necessity of robust public services would have been proven beyond doubt, incompetent populist leaders would get discredited and disappear because anxious citizens would yield for the stable and rational rule of reliable politicians. That may happen, however such an outcome is rather the less likely scenario. There is no defeatism behind that statement. On the contrary, I believe now is the time to fight for a better world. However, a struggle that does not rely on the understanding of its own context is nothing but a futile *passge à l'acte*. To map this context we have to understand both the moment we are in as well as the constitution of subjectivities that will try to use it for their own sake.

It is quite telling that the Greek way of presenting verbs puts them in the first person singular: “I judge”, “I decide”; there is always an agent behind an action – it may be an unconscious, collective or non-human one, but it is still there. The form of infinitive used in modern languages renders verbs impersonal and anonymous – it looks as if change is just happening: “it changes” like “it rains”. It seems to be the assumption of those who think that

the current crisis will automatically mean either this or that: triumph of ecology, perish of populism, renaissance of the welfare state, etc. In reality the outcome of the transformation will depend on the actions of subjects involved. While every crisis creates an opportunity, more often than not it is an indeterminate, open, contingent and ambivalent opportunity. The chance to act is up for grabs and those who seize the moment will be able to claim it as their own. In this respect I can only agree with Jan-Werner Müller<sup>1</sup> in his skepticism when it comes to a quick and automatic death of right-wing populism.

While many outcomes are possible, not all are equally easy to achieve. Every action is limited by its own conditions of possibility, every *agencement* makes some lines of flight more accessible than others. To evaluate a possible influence of the current crisis on populist politics we have to roughly map these two dimensions: subjective dispositions and structural limitations.

What obfuscates the attempts to grasp the nature of contemporary populism is the assumption that its success are an outcome of manipulations and machinations undertaken by evil politicians who use people to advance their own agenda. It seems to repeat the mistake made in the case of fascism, *toutes proportions gardées*, and epitomized in the Thomas Mann story *Mario and the Magician*: good and well-meaning people are being deceived by vicious demagogues and tricked into positions that they do not “really” occupy. I believe a radically different analysis is needed, one that would repeat the approach of such thinkers as Wilhelm Reich or Klaus Theweleit: people are not tricked into being populists, they deliberately choose to be ones. There is a genuine and widespread populist desire and it is precisely that desire that will influence the outcome of the current crisis.

Of course, there is nothing natural or spontaneous about desire – it is a part of the *agencement* and as such it always bears the traces of the social entourage where it has developed. What kind of environment is that in the case of the populist desire? The dystopian science-fiction horror *The Platform* directed by Galdera Gaztelu-Urrutia offers a metaphorical insight into that murky and depressing reality: a couple hundred inmates are enclosed in a vertical prison that descends hundreds of levels down. The small cells holding only two inmates are stacked one upon another with an empty shaft cutting across all of them from top to bottom. A platform goes down through all the levels once per day. It contains food: delicious and sophisticated dishes prepared by top chefs. The inmates are allowed to enjoy the meal for a limited period of time after which the platform goes down to the next level. Those situated lower are eating what is left by those who are above; an ironic, yet pertinent metaphor of the (in)famous “trickle down of wealth”. There are no guards and the shaft allows the inmates to

freely communicate across the levels, yet we do not witness any solidarity nor coordinated efforts to collectively break out of the prison. We rather see sadism, egoism, ruthless competition and cruelty of inmates who are oriented solely on their own survival.

The populist desire has come to live in such a prison of postmodern capitalism. Confronted with the game of pitiless competition for recognition and the struggle for material success, right-wing populists try to limit competition to maximize their own chances of winning. They aim at getting rid of contenders through symbolic recognition (minorities – racial, ethnic, sexual – as well as emancipated women) and by limiting the material competition in job markets by keeping immigrants out. However ethically horrible such a decision might be, it is a rational one in terms of formal rationality (selecting available means to achieve desired results).

It is such a populist desire that makes people susceptible to the propaganda of populist demagogues. We have put much intellectual energy into condemning their lies and manipulation while ignoring a more fundamental question: Why do people listen to them? In any given moment one can find idiots claiming the most absurd things, yet most of the time most people pay no attention to them. Obviously, one needs to have some fundamental grievances to be susceptible to the populist propaganda; nobody who thinks of themselves as a winner would subscribe to the message delivered by Trump in his inaugural speech. So Jan-Werner Müller does not get to the core of the problem when he quotes Kate Manne's concept of "trickle-down aggression". There is rather a trickle-down of **permission** to express anger in a violent way. The anger itself is there for structural reasons as a toxic left-over from the accumulation process. The politicians just give a go-ahead for its violent acting out.

In such a social landscape the most likely outcome of the current crisis will be a combination of some measures of welfare with vicious nationalism, a kind of a national neo-socialism that is pertinently described as "welfare chauvinism": social protection for us ("the true people"), perish for them (the minorities, the refugees, the migrants, the cosmopolitan traitors etc.). Far from being revolutionary it will fit well in the ideological landscape of contemporary capitalism. As it was neatly expressed by Polish right-wing politician Antoni Maciarewicz in an unexpected flash of intellectual ingenuity: Law and Justice is building "a private welfare state" in Poland. It relies on cash transfers to individuals instead of robust public institutions. That money being spent on consumption stimulates demand so it benefits enterprise. A really uncanny and dialectical form of privatized Keynesianism.

There are already signs of this kind of development in Poland. The xenophobic link between the epidemic and immigration has not been openly established yet, however Jarosław

Kaczyński warned that “refugees bring diseases” already in 2015. Given widespread anxiety it will not be difficult to resuscitate that mindset if there are political gains attached.

The economic response of the Polish government to the crisis neatly follows the established wisdom of market fundamentalism: in line with supply-side economics the bulk of action is aimed at helping enterprises, not workers. There are cash transfers, but also exemptions from contributions to social security (sic!). The labor law is posed to be relaxed to make layoffs and wage reduction easier. Hikes in minimum wages and pensions advertised during the 2019 electoral campaign have been suspended as the public debt ceiling of 60% cannot be breached.

The polls also show a grim picture. The support to the ruling populists is a little bit down, but those votes have been transferred to other right-wing formations, including the most somber one that assembles hard-core nationalists and free market fanatics – “Konfederacja” led by infamous Polish ex Euro MP Janusz Korwin-Mikke. Although the left has made healthcare one of its key themes, it made literary zero progress in the polls. Its presidential candidate, Robert Biedroń, lags behind with a negligible support of around 5%. The populist desire does not seem to favor equality and solidarity – it just makes it easier to grab as much as possible before the platform advances lower.

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<sup>i</sup> Cf.: Jan-Werner Müller, “Populists Are Likely to Benefit from the Coronavirus Pandemic”, published in this focus as well.