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Populism, Johnson, and Brexit

Andrew Richard Ryder

Right and left forms of populism are a manifestation of the crisis that capitalism and democracy find itself in in the 21st century. This is one of the conclusions of my book 'Britain and Europe at a crossroads: The Politics of Anxiety and Transformation' (Ryder, 2020). In terms of the populist surge that has seen leaders like Bolsonaro, Erdogan, Modi, and Trump come to power, it can be said that the rightwing and nationalist variant of populism has been more successful.

The premiership of Boris Johnson needs to be appraised in this context and presents an important example being one of the few leaders in western Europe who can be ascribed as a populist. Berlusconi, the former prime minister of Italy could be described as the first such western European leader in the cold war period though. Fascism in the inter-war period had traits of populism and it was to avert the recurrence of such political extremes that the post-war order was framed in Europe, with its emphasis on liberal democracy, human rights, and cooperation through partnerships that evolved into the European Union. However, this liberal consensus has faced considerable stress and challenge in recent decades and the premiership of Johnson may prove to be an important indicator as to whether the new approach to politics that he espouses is viable in Europe.

What is populism? Populism can be perceived as a desire for a strong leader, who is charismatic, at times messianic, and willing to support issues popular with the masses despite offending the political and cultural sensibilities of supposed elites. Populism is said to be able to effectively connect with the masses through speech acts, which resonate with emotions such as patriotism, resentment and nativism. Populism appeals to folkloric traditions and a desire to preserve and maintain idealised notions of national identity that are perceived to be at risk from cosmopolitan elites and globalization. Populism can also be said to encompass conspiratorial fantasy and forms of communication that can be deceptive, giving rise to the term 'post-truth' politics. Populism is an outlook, derided by some, as lacking refinement and

complexity, considered by some as voicing the most base thoughts and anxieties of the masses. Sentiments that in previous times might have been easily dismissed as demagoguery or opportunism. At the core of this political phenomenon is a critique of the establishment and adulation of 'the people' portrayed as 'decent' and 'hardworking' whose collective positions must prevail (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

Frequently, in the wake of the Brexit referendum, politicians like Johnson brandished the referendum result as the '*will of the people*', a kind of populist super-mandate that could trump previous conventions and standards. It is a notion of the people that does not encompass everyone, it is reliant on binary codes creating an 'us' and 'them', it thus creates outsiders. Again such political methods are as old as time but perhaps reached their zenith in the pre-war period. German thinker Carl Schmitt was one of the intellectual inspirations for the concept of agonism, for him identity could only be constituted and defined by the identification of an adversary. Schmitt's concept of 'us and them' was nationalistic and meant to promote nation building and in his case was supportive of the Nazi movement. The case of Nazi Germany is illustrative of the dangers that can be released when dialogue and compromise are pushed to the margins of politics. The Schmittian conception of antagonism creates a public enemy who ultimately cannot be engaged with in partnership, they can only be vanquished (Edwards, 2013). Johnson has been increasingly drawn to such binarism in his political strategizing.

Anxiety and trauma, in particular since the financial crisis of 2008, has been articulated through a global wave of populism where radical new frames of thought are being advanced centred on nativism, chauvinism and authoritarianism, which manifested itself in the UK through Brexit. Former Conservative Prime Minister John Major in comments highly critical of the rhetoric and division generated by Brexit, noted:

"I caution everyone to be wary of this kind of populism. It seems to be a mixture of bigotry, prejudice and intolerance. It scapegoats minorities. It is a poison in any political system – destroying civility and decency and understanding. Here in the UK we should give it short shrift, for it is not the people we are – nor the country we are" (Sculthorpe, 2017).

The increasing scandal facing Johnson over police fines for breaking Covid-19 restrictions and engaging in rule breaking parties in Downing Street has been one of the biggest constitutional tests of recent times in the UK. Perhaps symbolic of the populism of Johnson he has refused to resign, despite the negative impact on public standards and has sought to deflect attention through the highly controversial plan to send refugees coming to the UK to Rwanda to be processed.

Events, actions and statements such as those outlined above would have been undreamt of over a decade ago such has been the pace of change since the 2016 referendum. However, the book 'Britain and Europe at a crossroads: The Politics of Anxiety and Transformation' outlines that these changes do not just have their roots in the referendum and financial crisis of 2008 but are also symptomatic of a deep cultural crisis in the UK, a rampant English nationalism in particular has failed to come to terms with the UK's changed place in the world that came from the loss of Empire. Brexit nationalism also reflects a desire for a nostalgic and monocultural vision of the UK that fuels national chauvinism and nativism. The book also points the finger at the UK's broken political system that appears to be archaic and out of touch with many but which has been further undermined by a media that is partisan and slavish to the establishment and has nurtured a tabloidised form of politics dependent on sharp invective and hysteria. The book argues that alongside radical economic and social change that returns the UK to the postwar consensus of welfare expansion and full employment, based on the economics of Keynes, there is a need to modernise democracy through proportional representation, media reform and the promotion of deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy encourages consensus but also rational debate and provides the opportunities for intercultural dialogue needed in a diverse and multi-racial society. A return to membership of the European Union should also be seen as an essential factor in the UK's move towards stability and fairness.

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Ryder, A. (2020), Britain and Europe at a crossroads: The Politics of Anxiety and Transformation, Bristol: Policy Press.

<https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/britain-and-europe-at-a-crossroads>

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