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Authoritarian Populism versus Classical Liberal Cosmopolitanism

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According to Democritus of Abdera, a fifth-century BCE Greek thinker, “[t]o a wise man, the whole earth is open; for the native land of a good soul is the whole earth”. Of course, not everyone agrees. A rising tide of angry populism is surging around the globe; its leaders insist that souls are the collective property of the national state and that wise individuals (now derided as ‘globalists’) are, in reality, the enemies of the people. Like pitchfork-wielding angry mobs in the past, they have their own intellectual leaders: a variety of theorists have stepped forward to condemn modern society and call for a revival of ‘tribalism’. Tribalism is the new/old wave in politics, and it’s putting stable, constitutional government, rational discourse among citizens, and, indeed, the modern world in jeopardy.

Before closer examination it’s worth noting that now is a good time for those who do not wish to be consumed in a populist conflagration to start thinking about multiple passports, and about legally putting their persons and their assets out of reach of the self-appointed tribal leaders of the future. Those who choose the modern, nontribal life are definitely in the cross-hairs of the neotribalists. In his 2018 nationalist book, *Ship of Fools*, right-wing populist commentator Tucker Carlson rails against the rootless cosmopolitans he believes are the source of all of America’s current problems and predicts: “When it fails, they’re gone. They’ve got money offshore and foreign passports at home. Our rulers have no intention of staying for the finale.” Holders of multiple passports and those with assets abroad are blamed for the problems of the world, which in fact are caused by politicians who almost never have multiple passports. Turkey’s populist strongman Recep Tayyip Erdoğan thunders against business people who have left the country: “The hands of our nation would be on their collars both in this world and in the afterlife.”

Yoram Hazony’s 2018 book *The Virtue of Nationalism* heralds the re-emergence of tribalism as a political ideal. Hazony categorically asserts that “all political order” (“all”) is founded on small, intimate groups “consisting of individuals bound together by mutual loyalties developed over long years of shared hardship and triumph”. Hazony tries to resurrect, on that pre-modern base, a political theory centered on family, tribe, and clan. Of course, who is in the tribe and who isn’t is never as obvious as Hazony assumes but is itself a political determination, as savvy authoritarian populists recognize. Íñigo Errejón, a leader of the far-left Podemos populist party in Spain, notes that collectivities are created by positing an enemy against which the tribe must struggle, “the casta, the privileged”.

When asked “who are the *casta*”, Errejón responded: “The term’s mobilizing power comes precisely from its lack of definition. It’s like asking: ‘Who’s the oligarchy? Who’s the people?’ They are statistically undefinable. I think these are the poles with greatest performative capacity.” Populist leaders choose who is the enemy: the rich, the privileged, the rootless cosmopolitans, the ‘Jewish financiers’, the ‘Asian entrepreneurs’, the globalists, whomever they tag as the exploitative enemy in opposition to whom they seek to create, as left-wing populist Chantal Mouffe put it, the “sort of people we want to build”.

Today’s populists, often with surreptitious support from the Kremlin, are clamoring to bring down modern, open societies that allow people and goods and capital to flow across borders in pursuit of freedom, the highest returns on investment, or simply happiness. What they want are walls and antagonism. Steve Bannon, the far right American populist, promised in 2016 that “[i]t will be as exciting as the 1930s”, that is, a time when the ability to relocate one’s family, one’s life, one’s assets was especially important; those who were prepared survived and those who were not became victims.

The fight for freedom of movement—of people, goods, and capital—has been ongoing for centuries. Louis XIV issued an edict in 1669 requiring that subjects could not leave the kingdom nor travel from town to town without a passport or an *aveu*, a testament of good character from the religious authorities. Those and many other restrictions on freedom of movement were abolished in the 19th century, thanks to agitation by classical liberal thinkers, notable among them the free-trade economists. As the International Labor Office’s 1922 report *Emigration and Immigration* noted: “During the whole of the 19th century, migration was, generally speaking, unhindered, and each emigrant could decide on the time of his departure, his arrival or his return, to suit his own convenience. Almost all countries kept an open door both for emigrants and immigrants. The USA in particular, the great country of immigration, willingly received the millions of emigrants who went there from all the countries of Europe, and almost all other countries of immigration held out welcoming hands. In the European countries of emigration, the disappearance of passports and a fairly general indifference on the part of the Governments so far as migration was concerned rendered this easy.”

In his lament for the world that was destroyed by tribalism, *The World of Yesterday*, the great Austrian writer Stefan Zweig described his first visit to the USA before the First World War. As an experiment, he went looking for work in New York: “No one had asked me about my nationality, my religion, my origin, and—fantastic as it may seem to the world of today with its fingerprinting, visas, and police certificates—I had traveled without a passport. . . Without the hindering interference of the State or formalities, or trade unions, in that now legendary freedom a deal was made in a minute.”

That world was brought crashing down by the eruption of tribal hatred and violence known as the First World War, when passports were reintroduced, allegedly for national security reasons. We’ve been struggling since the end of the war to make travel easier again. To ‘national security’ concerns we can now add the populists as a powerful force against freedom of movement.

Princeton University political scientist Jan-Werner Müller identified the core of populism: “In addition to being anti-elitist, populists are always anti-pluralist. Populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people.” But Müller didn’t go quite far enough toward understanding the nature of contemporary post-modern populism. The influential leftist populist Ernesto

Laclau, in one of his especially turgid works, *On Populist Reason*, insisted that ‘the people’ are constructed by identifying an enemy, that “in the case of populism...a frontier of exclusion divides society into two camps”. Thus, “[t]he ‘people’, in that case, is something less than the totality of the members of the community: it is a partial component which nonetheless aspires to be conceived as the only legitimate totality”. And who better to be the anti-people than those who travel, those who live and work abroad, those with assets, homes, and businesses outside the reach of the leaders of ‘the people’?

Unsurprisingly, far-right populist Marine Le Pen put it rather less turgidly in 2015: “Now the split is not between the left and the right but between the globalists and the patriots.” When it’s patriots vs. globalists, those designated as ‘globalists’ have good reason to start thinking about their options.

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