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THE POPULISM ISSUE



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find yourself in twenty-first century London, Budapest, or Washington, DC.

Indeed, the red flags have changed. On the savanna you had to worry about strangers outside your tribe. In the modern world we encounter strangers all the time to little effect. But our evolutionary history nonetheless makes us wary of strangers and, under certain circumstances, downright paranoid about them. This is why there is always an appetite in times of rapid migration for the fear-mongering rhetoric of demagogues whipping up hatred for immigrants. In this century as in the last, one can find millions dining out on it.

How are we to make sense of the world then? Borrowing from a neat taxonomy devised by Isaiah Berlin, University of Pennsylvania psychologist Philip E. Tetlock says pundits generally divide rather neatly into two kinds of fortune tellers: foxes and hedgehogs. The foxes know a lot about a single subject or two. The hedgehogs are generalists. In a series of experiments that lasted decades, Tetlock showed that the hedgehogs performed badly at prognostication. While their ideological orientation gave them a convenient lens through which to view world events, their telescope

often proved flawed. The foxes generally did better—at least when focusing on subjects in which they had expertise. Still, few performed well enough to be regarded as clairvoyant.

While the neuroscientists have been busy explaining that the human brain is basically a predicting machine, in point of fact we are not very good at it.

Ah, but some did. This was a revelation. It turned out that there is a category of people—whom Tetlock has dubbed “superforecasters”—who can in fact predict future events rather well, at least when considering events a year or so out.

Their secret? They are numerate, open-minded, critical of unspoken assumptions, and alert to their own biases. They dig into research with zest and are careful in their assessments. As Nobel prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman teaches, they make sure when beginning their research to establish the base rate for whatever it is they are investigating.

If, say (to take a really simple example), one is trying to establish the likelihood of a corner store being robbed in the next year in a particular city, one would be wise to find out how many stores in the neighborhood had been robbed in the past few years. This would give one a basis for prediction. If none had been robbed, one could guess that probably the particular store under observation

was unlikely to face the prospect of a robbery. To be sure, as Nassim Nicholas Taleb warns in his best-selling book *The Black Swan* (2007), there are always black swan events one cannot predict. Perhaps as a result of a breakout from the local jail, thieves are let loose and robberies became rife the corner store might be in trouble. But if one is really careful, one can indeed, more or less, predict the future.

Which brings us back to our prophets of doom. Should we listen to them? Are they superforecasters or just super pessimistic? To answer the question let us consider for a moment what a superforecaster might make of the situation in the United States at present.

Looking at the base rate would suggest that we have little to worry about. While America has faced demagogues periodically on both the left and the right who threatened its democracy—Huey Long on the left, Joseph McCarthy on the right, for example—voters traditionally stuck with more conventional leaders. But maybe the base rate is irrelevant when you are dealing with a figure like Donald Trump. He, after all, got himself elected president—a black swan event few pundits expected. So the base rate no longer applies.

Given how he has handled himself since assuming office, there is plenty to worry a devotee of democracy. A serial breaker of democratic norms, Trump has managed in just a few years to test the durability of the guardrails put in place to protect us from abusers of power. He has refused to honor subpoenas issued by the U.S. Congress. He has conspired to rid himself of law officers who were hot on his tail. He has lied to voters thousands of

times. He has refused to release his tax returns. And as we just recently learned, he has tried to pressure foreign countries to hand over dirt on his domestic political opponents. He may even have withheld hundreds of millions of dollars in aid for Ukraine in an extortion scheme designed to force its new president to launch an investigation of the one Democratic presidential candidate who seems capable of contesting Trump’s hold over white blue collar workers in the American Midwest.

Given all that, it is difficult not to think that the pessimists are onto something.

INCONVENIENT TRUTHS

This past summer I heard a talk by Shawn Rosenberg at the annual meeting of the International Society of Political

Psychologists (ISPP) that suggests the scope of the challenge we are facing. Rosenberg, a renowned politics and political psychology professor at the University of California (Irvine), began his talk by noting the numerous demands modern societies make on their citizens. We have to understand complex social, political, and economic systems, he said. We have to comprehend the abstract principles underlying these systems. And we have to be willing to accept the fact that not everybody thinks the way we do about important stuff. We may think we are right, but we have to be able to tolerate people who think we are wrong and they are right.

And those are just the cognitive challenges we face. There are also numerous difficult emotional pressures with which we have to grapple. Though we humans hate uncertainty, for instance, we have to learn to live with it. We also have to learn to deal with strangers respectfully.

Whew! Few of us can honestly say we can shoulder all of these responsibilities well. I dare say no one can. Psychologists have shown that we do not think very clearly about complicated subjects owing to our instinctive desire for simplicity and certainty, not to mention all of our natural cognitive biases—confirmation bias, for example, which alone may be responsible for more wrong-headedness than any other. Who does not want to think that they are right?

(And to discount evidence that suggests they are wrong.) And yet that is our natural fallback position.

But—you may be thinking—democracies have managed to thrive over the last couple of centuries, even under these constraints. So what is to stop them from continuing on in this way.

Here is where Rosenberg delivers one of those famous inconvenient truths. We have been fooling ourselves, he warns. We may have thrived but we were not actually all that democratic. Party bosses, labor bosses, and others he describes as veritable oligarchs were actually in control much of the time. So it did not matter if *the people* employed flawed thinking in making decisions. The oligarchs of democracy, as it were, saw to it that the right decisions (more or less) were made when big questions arose. If mistakes were made, as was inevitable, the oligarchs retooled.

Our problem today, Rosenberg opines, is that the authority of the oligarchs—the elites of society—have lost their ability to keep things on track. Why? The answer, he suggests, is that we have become so democratic in recent decades that ordinary people are now in charge of their own destiny in a way they never were before.

Party bosses? Gone. Labor bosses? Gone. And thanks to social media

issues are now debated endlessly, unfiltered by the demigods of old, like the legendary CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite, who in his heyday set the terms of debate constructively. Now all manner of wild ideas and—yes!—genuine fake news are leaked on social media promiscuously. It is no wonder millions think Barack Obama is a Muslim born in Kenya.

Under such circumstances it is not only that democracy cannot thrive, it cannot really endure. When voters acting on their own are faced with a menu of political choices, Rosenberg argues, they are likely to pick the ones that are simple and instantly appealing, the very kind of fare that authoritarian populists specialize in. Ergo: good-bye, democracy!

THE PEOPLE PARADOX

Given what has transpired since Donald Trump descended an escalator into history in 2015, pessimism seems warranted. But who knows? In mid-October 2019, the *Washington Post* reported that 58 percent of the American people back an impeachment inquiry into his (mis-)dealings with Ukraine. Even more promising, the inquiry is supported by 29 percent of Republicans. Maybe democracy even under modern circumstances works.

And it is worth pointing out that neither Germany's Adolf Hitler nor Venezuela's Hugo Chavez had majority

support for a strongman approach when each first came to power. Failures in democratic leadership and party politics were to blame for their rise, not popular demand for a hard-nosed dictator.

In several European countries right-wing strongmen have come to power, to be sure, and they have already succeeded in breaking the guardrails established to curb the power of people like them. In Hungary the Fidesz Party Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, has packed the courts with party adherents, used state resources on a massive scale to subsidize government-controlled media, and gerrymandered districts in such a way as to achieve a two-thirds majority in Parliament with less than 50 percent of the popular vote in several national elections. And several others in his general neighborhood have followed his lead.

On a recent visit to Budapest I spoke to half a dozen thoughtful and impressive intellectuals and journalists. Troublingly, they support him wholeheartedly. At dinner not one volunteered any criticism. When pressed, just one (a journalist) opined that *maybe* Orbán had gone too far in his campaign to drive George Soros's foundation and university out of the country.

As a polite guest I did not want to spoil our lovely meal by offering a view in dissent. So I kept my thoughts to

myself. But if I had spoken up what I would have told them was that I was shocked at their acquiescence. Even the journalist who had dared to mildly express reservations about Orbán's campaign against Soros seemed unwilling to take an independent stand. He actually said at one point that several times he had thought Orbán was making mistakes but each time, excepting the Soros matter, darn it all if Orbán was not proved correct after all.

I had been invited to the Hungarian capital by a foundation close to the Orbán government to give a lecture and appear on a panel. I was delighted to do so but wondered why I had been invited. Ostensibly it was because I had written an article in *Politico* about Professor Rosenberg's paper. Somehow they found this intriguing. But why?

When I pressed for an answer I got the same response no matter whom I asked. It was that Orbán loves vigorous intellectual debates and in inviting me (and Rosenberg) they were following the example set by their prime minister. Naturally, I found it gratifying to hear that the PM loves exciting intellectual combat. So do I. But it was somewhat suspicious that each and every person gave the exact same explanation. Were they coached? I don't know, but it was not what would happen

in America. And there no one explaining why they had extended an invitation to someone from a foreign country would couch it in terms of the American president's desire for robust debate. Then again, Hungary is a small country. Perhaps intellectuals feel more intimately connected to their government than we do over in the United States.

This is, it seems to me, no time for complacency. Authoritarianism is on the march; democracies around the world are under stress.

The more I thought about my visit the more I dwelled on the problematic relationship conservatives have had with *the people*. Through much of the past few centuries self-identified conservatives traditionally held *the people* in scorn. British conservatives from Edmund Burke to Winston Churchill almost everywhere identified with elites against the *hoi polloi*. In the twenty-first century things are different now, are they not? From Hungary and Poland to France and the UK, conservatives wrap themselves around *the people* like a close-fitting jacket featuring their country's flag and zip it up tight. Often the justification they offer for their policies is that *the people* like them.

This is bewildering. Aren't *the people* generally a source of angst for conservatives? At the American constitutional convention delegates warned repeatedly that *the people* are easily led

astray. Deeply conservative delegates worried indeed that *the people* would want their government to give them gifts paid for by the wealthy.

Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney expressed similar concerns in 2012: a secret video that was recorded whilst campaigning for president caught him claiming that 47 percent of Americans are dependent upon the state and demand that it take care of them. They "believe that they are entitled to healthcare, to food, to housing, to you-name-it," Romney said. This was good old-fashioned conservatism of the kind the delegates to the constitutional convention would have found much with which to agree. So fearful were they of the power of *the people* that they insulated the government nearly entirely from direct popular control. Only one half of one branch of the federal government was to be directly accountable to *the people*: the House of Representatives. All the other branches were to be composed of key actors—senators, Supreme Court justices, and the president of the United States himself—selected by other office holders. And this was the outcome of a convention consisting of people who held the principles of the Enlightenment dearly!

But of this sort of conservatism I heard nothing in Hungary. Indeed, my hosts went out of their way to point out

that the Orbán government was moving mountains to help Hungarian Roma improve their lives through generous social programs designed to provide them with housing and good schools. In America, one suspects, my hosts would have voted against Mitt Romney for president on the grounds that he was too conservative.

NO TIME FOR COMPLACENCY

So, to return to the question I set out to explore, should we be worried? This is, it seems to me, no time for complacency. Authoritarianism is on the march; democracies around the world are under stress. And as I argued at length in my last book, *Political Animals: How our Stone-Age Brain Gets in the Way of Smart Politics* (2016), it is a real problem that voters today in the United States are left largely on their own. There is no longer anyone to take cues from. Not the party bosses, who have disappeared, nor the union bosses, who are too few in number to have much of an impact. Left on their own like abandoned widows, voters decide political questions in a slipshod manner, reaching conclusions based on an irrational alchemy of partisanship, issues, and the likability of the candidates. Most seem susceptible to the brazen appeals of demagogues peddling both fear and misinformation.

On the other hand: as George E. Marcus argues forcefully in books and

papers he has written about the Theory of Affective Intelligence, voters are actually highly sensitive to success and failure. So a politician who sells the people a bill of goods will eventually come to realize it.

At some point the mismatch between what voters are being told and what they experience will become so great that they actually get an anxious feeling in the pit of their stomach. This, in turn, prompts a reevaluation of their commitments. When the burden of hanging onto a belief becomes greater than the risk of changing

it most will decide to change. That is the gist of what Niall Ferguson wrote in a previous issue of *Horizons*: that populists are bound eventually to disappoint

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their supporters because they “seldom make life much better for the people whose ire they whip up.” This is how we are wired more or less.

So should we be scared? There is some comfort in not knowing whether we should be or not. But prudence dictates that all who love

democracy should be in a state of anxiousness. If ever there was a time to be worried, it is now. ●

