

What Elites Still Don't Understand About Populism

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COMMENTARY

According to prominent members of the progressive elite — and a few members of the conservative elite — the election of Donald Trump signaled the rise in the United States of fascism or racism or both. These sweeping smears of Trump and his supporters, which began during the primaries, backfired in 2016: They helped fuel the discontent among ordinary voters that provided the real-estate mogul's slender margin of victory in key Rust Belt states. The elites' intemperate condemnation of the people's judgment bolstered the people's dim view of the elites.

The elites' fear, both before and after the election, that Trump was leading a fascist takeover of America has been fueled by his shoot-from-the-hip tweets and off-the-cuff public pronouncements, many of which evinced an ignorance of the rule of law and an enthusiasm for strong rulers. But hyperbole and bombast do not a fascist takeover make. Moreover, elites would be well advised to recall -- or learn -- that America's sturdy constitutional constraints, starting with the separation of powers, anticipate the ascendancy of unenlightened statesmen and are designed to keep dark impulses in check. In addition, fascism rests on the acquiescence to a powerful leader of the military, business community, media, entertainment industry, and academy. Trump cannot even unify his own party around his leadership.

The accusation that Trump's victory represented the recrudescence of a deep-seated American racism was equally scurrilous and equally implausible. Racists still exist in America and some felt emboldened by Trump to purvey their hatred. But there is no reason to suppose that if a white, male, progressive Democrat had governed in the manner of Trump's predecessor that popular frustration would have been less robust. President Obama rammed through Congress a fundamental transformation of health care in defiance of popular will. He usurped Congress's lawmaking powers by issuing executive orders that appropriated funds to sustain the Affordable Care Act, that imposed extensive environmental regulations, and that altered the legal status of illegal aliens. He presided over an Internal Revenue Service that methodically impeded his political opponents' participation in the democratic process. He downplayed or dismissed voters' anxieties about jobs, trade, and immigration while adopting measures that exacerbated them. Abroad, he coddled adversaries and alienated allies. The notion that ordinary Americans are inveterate racists because they rejected the third term for Obama governance that Hillary Clinton represented exhibits the elites' own bigotry.

A considerably more illuminating explanation of Trump's victory comes from understanding the power of populism. The 2016 election returns reflected a revolt of the less well-off and less influential against political elites whom they regard as arrogant and self-serving.

Populism is inherently ambiguous. It is usually wielded as a term of reproach evoking charismatic demagogues who erode liberty and democracy by pandering to the people's base instincts and fomenting intolerance and mob violence. But liberal democracy is, by definition, popular government, resting on the consent of the governed. If elites disrespect the people, neglect the public interest, and betray founding principles, the people are not only permitted to throw the bums out but are obliged to do so.

In "Vox Populi: The Perils and Promises of Populism," editor Roger Kimball and an all-star lineup of conservative intellectuals place the resurgence of populism in America in broader historical and intellectual context. The essays collected in the volume began as articles commissioned by Kimball in one of his several day jobs — editor and publisher of *The New Criterion*. Also a *PJ Media* columnist, art critic for *National Review*, and president and publisher of *Encounter Books*, Kimball stringently explains in the book's introduction that the authors are united by the anxiety that "under the cloak of democratic institutions," the "essentially undemocratic activities" of today's administrative state advance "an expansionist agenda that threatens liberty in the most comprehensive way, by circumventing the law." The "common aim" of their contributions is to determine the relation between the populism roiling our politics and the preservation of national sovereignty, liberty, and democratic self-government.

In a concise survey of post-World War II American conservatism that leads off the collection, historian George Nash shows that the haughtiness and incompetence of elites have been a persistent theme of right-leaning intellectuals. Meanwhile, popular resentment of elites has been building for decades, as evidenced in the emergence of the religious right in the late 1970s, the mid-'90s Newt Gingrich revolution, the Tea Party movement in 2009, and today's Trump insurgency.

Classicist Barry Strauss elicits sober advice for contemporary populists and elites from an examination of Roman precursors to contemporary populism. "Shrewd populists will want to adjust the regime, not destroy it," he writes. "Wise elites, for their part, will take populist movements as a wake-up call. Instead of merely denouncing populism as false consciousness, bigotry, resentment, bad manners, mental illness, peevishness, superstition, or class warfare, and instead of adopting a 'Problems? What problems?' attitude when faced with protests, they will inquire as to whether genuine grievances might underlie populism's appeal."

According to journalist and former member of the European Parliament for South East England Daniel Hannan, Brexit was an example of a populist impulse deriving from a genuine grievance. The vote to leave the European Union, Hannan approvingly argues, was

populist in that it reflected “frustration with the establishment” but classically liberal in standing for a more global and free-trading Britain, and more democratic in returning to the British people greater control over their political destiny.

Several contributors focus on ideas and intellectual influences. Writer Fred Siegel traces the left-wing contempt for regular people — which stirs up the very populist energies that it deplores — to the impact on American intellectuals of German philosophical sources, especially the Frankfurt School. James Piereson, president of the William E. Simon Foundation, reconstructs the founding political thinking that fortified the Constitution against the perennial form of populism embodied in tyranny of the majority. And philosopher Roger Scruton shows that “the real question raised by the upheavals of 2016” concerns the ability of Western liberal democracies to arrest the decay of that “pre-political loyalty,” crucial to well-functioning democracies, that enables political partisans to treat electoral opponents as fellow citizens.

Lawyer and columnist Andrew McCarthy and scholar and columnist Victor Davis Hanson, my colleague at the Hoover Institution, provide masterful overviews of the 2016 campaign. McCarthy highlights the potency of the progressive populism that opposed Trump and remains a significant political force within the country while Hanson explores the complex mindset of the politically estranged working-class and middle-class voters, many of whom cast ballots for Obama in 2008 and 2012, but who in 2016 swung to Trump.

Conrad Black — a publisher, businessman, and Franklin Roosevelt biographer — sets forth a brief history of populism in America. He boldly contends that notwithstanding a penchant for demagoguery, Donald Trump’s truth-telling about elites’ smugness, folly, and ineptitude brought about “the supreme triumph of populism in American history and in the modern democratic world.” This populist triumph, in Black’s estimation, has opened “the only avenue to national renovation.”

Agreeing with Black about our grim situation and unexpected opportunity, Roger Kimball, in a concluding essay, underscores that national renovation is bound up with the restoration of limited government that energetically safeguards the people’s liberty, promotes their interests, and advances their prosperity and security.

Such a government cannot function properly with an elite that patronizes the people. And it cannot flourish without an elite that earns the people’s respect through a disposition, in the words of James Madison in Federalist 10, “to enlarge and refine the public views.”

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