The new identity politics

Rightwing populism and the demand for dignity

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Francis Fukuyama’s argument that far-right identity politics were pioneered by the left has been criticized as blame-shifting. But this is a partial reading, he counters: identity politics are inherent to the democratic ethos and rooted in modernity itself. Understanding their use by the far-right enables us to form a response.

For most of my life, I have been thinking about how we expand the realm of democracy, how we move from authoritarian governments to democratic ones. And then, all of a sudden, 2016 happened. Two very disturbing developments occurred that year: the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, and the vote in Britain to leave the European Union. These came against the backdrop of a changing global environment.

Ever since 1989 or 1991, we had been living in a growing liberal international order. This had been put together largely by the United States, together with its allies in Europe, NATO, and the Far East. It had an economic component, which was the system of free trade: the mobility of goods, people, services, ideas, and investment across international borders. And it had a political component, which was the alliances of the US in Europe and in Asia. And this was a really, really successful set of initiatives.

The number of democracies in this period went from about 35 in 1970 to a peak of 115 to 120 – depending on how you measure a democracy. By the early 2000s, the global output of the world economy had quadrupled. In virtually every respect, economic conditions were getting better: not just in terms of incomes and rising middle classes in places like China and India, but also in terms of quality of life, for example child health: infant mortality was going down.

All of this went into reverse sometime in the mid to late 2000s. You had the rise of a couple of very self-confident and newly assertive authoritarian powers: Russia and China. But the most disturbing thing was the emergence of populism within established democracies – in fact, within the two most established democracies in the world: Britain and the US. It seemed to me that it was vital to figure out why this was happening,
because the entire third wave of democratisation looked as if it was being undone.

**Definitions**

Now, there are many understandings of populism. I just want to run through three, because it is important to be able to distinguish between them.

The first definition is an economic one: a populist is a leader who promotes economic policies or social policies that are popular in the short run but disastrous in the long run. In Venezuela, for example, Hugo Chávez opened eye clinics and gave out free food; gasoline cost less than 10 cents a gallon. None of these measures were sustainable: the price of oil collapsed in 2014.

The second definition concerns political style more than anything else: a populist leader tries to be charismatic and says, ‘I have a direct connection with you, the people’. That is important because it makes a populist anti-institutional *ipso facto*. The populist says: I represent you, the people. And here are all these other institutions like the courts, media, legislature, bureaucracy, and they are all standing in the way of my ability to deliver what you want me to give you. Populists go after all of those institutions. What it leads to is the democratic part of liberal democracy attacking the liberal part. The liberal part of a liberal democracy is all of the constitutional structures, the checks and balances that try to limit executive power. A democracy is not just popular elections, it is also the protection of minority rights, it is also having a moderate government that truly reflects the will of the people. Populists tend towards authoritarian politics because they do not like institutions getting in the way. When Donald Trump accepted the Republican nomination in 2016, he had this remarkable line in his speech: ‘Nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it.’ This is something that Juan Perón might have said in Argentina back in the 1940s.

The third definition is that a populist, when they say, ‘I support the people’, often do not mean the whole people. They mean a certain kind of person, usually defined by race or ethnicity and often in terms of traditional cultural values or a traditional sense of national identity. And that does not correspond to the actual population of that country. Viktor Orbán in Hungary has said very explicitly that the national identity of Hungary is ethnic Hungarian. Meaning that if you are not ethnic Hungarian, you are not part of the nation. And that if you are an ethnic Hungarian living outside of Hungary – and there are lots of them – you are part of the nation. And that is problematic for reasons that are self-evident.

So, this allows us to distinguish between different forms of populism. Chávez was a classic number one type populist: an economic populist and a leftwing populist. He also was, by definition two, very charismatic. But definition three didn’t really apply to him, because he didn’t have a racial understanding of who a Venezuelan is. Orbán has populist economic policies and he tries to be a demagogue, a charismatic leader. And he certainly has a very restrictive view of who qualifies as a Hungarian. All of us are familiar with the litany of new leaders that fall into this category. It is Orbán, it is Kaczyński in Poland, it is Erdoğan in Turkey. We have a populist coalition in Italy, and Latin America elected its first Northern European style populist in Jair Bolsonaro. Most Latin American populists have been like their southern European counterparts: leftwing, not ethnically exclusive,
more economic populists. But Brazil has decided to join the crowd, and elected a leader that is racially prejudiced and has a Christian fundamentalist understanding of what the country should be about. This is a way to distinguish between populists of the left that are number one and number two populists, and populists of the right who tend to be number two and number three.

**Explanations**

Now, why is this occurring in the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century? I think there are essentially three broad categories of reason. The first is the conventional wisdom on the subject, which says it is the global economy. If you took a trade course at university, you would have learned that free trade raises the income of all participants: everybody gets richer. As I said, global output quadrupled in a thirty-year period. The economists were not wrong about that. But not every individual in every country gets richer. And in fact, if you are a lower-skilled, less educated worker in a rich country, you are liable to lose out to a similarly skilled worker in a poor country.

And that is what has been going on. With outsourcing, with foreign competition, this globalised system of free trade, which began to really intensify in the 1990s after the collapse of communism, led to the export of lots of jobs out of the rich world. And it led to the economic decline of an important part of the old working class. In the United States for example, between the late 1990s and 2015, average incomes for people in 90 per cent of the income distribution actually declined slightly. Which is really remarkable: there was period of two decades during which people earned less. The problem was in a way doubly bad for men, because at the same time we were moving out of an industrial economy into a service economy, where women have a greater role. And so, you had a male worker who had lost his job in a factory flipping hamburgers in a fast-food restaurant, making less money than his father or maybe even his grandfather, and then his wife or girlfriend being the major breadwinner in the family. It involves this big loss of income and a loss of status. This, I would say, is the conventional wisdom that would explain the populist phenomenon.

The second explanation has to do with politics. Right from the beginning, the rap against democracy has been that it produces weak government. Democracies cannot make decisions. There are parliaments that talk, there are coalitions, there are interest groups, there is lobbying, and all of this makes it really hard to be decisive. So there is a big desire on the part of many ordinary people to have a strong man, a leader who can cut through all this blather, make decisions and get things done. In the United States, we think that rich, corporate people are that kind of leader. So there has been this tendency to want to pluck out businessmen to be leaders. But being a corporate CEO is about the worst training you can have for being a democratic leader, since corporations are actually pretty authoritarian, especially family businesses. Nonetheless, a number of people have been elected because people thought they were going to be really tough: Abe in Japan, Modi in India, Trump in the US.

The third reason is cultural, and that is the one that has to do with identity. I think that there has been a tendency to overstate the importance of the economic motivation and not to fully appreciate the importance of the cultural side. Because the fact is that this is ultimately a fight over identity.
Origins

So, what is identity? The term ‘identity’ was not commonly used until the 1950s. A psychologist, Erik Erikson, was the first. But it is actually a very old concept. As I argue in my latest book, it goes back to a word that Plato used in *The Republic*: ‘thymos’. *Thymos* is the part of the soul that craves respect and recognition. We don’t just want material things like food, drink and housing. We also want other people to evaluate us at the rate that we think we deserve. Economists have a kind of blinkered understanding of human behaviour. They say, okay, people have desires, they have preferences, they are rational, and they use their rationality to maximize their preferences. And that explains why human beings do what they do. Actually, if you go back to *The Republic*, Socrates says: is there not this third part of the soul that is not concerned primarily with material goods, but really wants respect? And doesn’t that overpower the desire for material wellbeing in many cases, because respect is linked to the emotions? If you aren’t respected as much as you think you deserve, you get angry; and that drives you to violence, to politics, and to a lot of other things.

Now, the modern understanding of identity is a little bit different, because *thymos* is a universal human characteristic: all people have it to some degree, and it has existed in every historical period. But there is a particular modern version of identity that, in my view, really starts with Martin Luther. Luther said that in God’s eyes, what matters is your inner belief, your inner faith. God does not care about all the rituals of the Catholic Church. He does not care whether you count the rosary or go to mass, or whether you follow the rules of the Catholic Church, because God cares about the inner believer. That is really what is going to save you, and that is what constitutes Christian faith. The entire society around you can be false, wrong, and repressive, because it is denying the authenticity of that inner self, which is a believer. And the only person that can see it, apart from perhaps you, is God. And in a way, this sets up the modern understanding of identity, which is that we have a worth inside us that is superior to the evaluation of the surrounding society. In pre-modern times, one would have said: well tough, you’ve got to conform. Society sets these rules, so just grow up and learn that you have follow them. The modern version says: no, that’s not right, because what is valuable is the inner self, and the rest of society is wrong and false, and *it* is the one that has to change. You get later versions of this, particularly Rousseau, who argued that the whole historical process actually made us into a bunch of phonies, that it created these external rules that suppressed the inner being. And our purpose, what fulfils us, is the emergence of that authentic inner self.

If you think about it, this relates to a lot of modern social movements. The ‘Me Too’ movement in many ways has the same structure, about the valuing the inner self. What is the issue involved with sexual harassment? It has to do with the fact that men are not valuing women as whole human beings. Woman has knowledge, abilities, moral character. But man only cares about her sexual attributes. That is devaluing woman. But it is a modern view, because the lesson you draw is not that women have to learn how to get along. The lesson is that the inner self is what is valuable and that society has to change. That is what is happening right now. Men are going through a cultural retraining, they are learning that their rules are not the right ones, and that we need a different set of rules in relations between men and women that respect the dignity of the whole person. That is the modern understanding of identity and that is what has powered
a series of political and social movements over the last 200 or 300 years.

The first manifestation of identity politics, if you take my understanding of it seriously, is actually democracy itself. In 2011 you had this vegetable seller, Mohamed Bouazizi, in Tunisia. He had a cart, it was confiscated by a police woman, he went to the governor’s office and he said: where’s my cart, why did you take away my livelihood? No one would give him an answer. The police woman spat at him, and he was in such despair at not even being able to get an answer from the government that he set himself on fire. That triggered the Arab Spring, because many people in Arab countries saw themselves reflected in Mohamed Bouazizi. The Tunisian government, the dictatorship of Ben Ali, did not treat Mohamed Bouazizi with the respect that a human being deserves. And that is why they came out into the streets in their millions in Egypt, in Libya, in Syria, in Yemen, and in many other parts of the Arab world.

A mild authoritarian government like Singapore’s treats its citizens like children: the government thinks it knows better what is in your interest. In a bad dictatorship it is much worse: you are not a human being, you are just part of the machinery of history that the government can use for its own purposes. A liberal democracy actually recognises us, recognises our dignity, and it does it by giving us rights: we have the right to free speech, to association and to political participation through the vote. We have a share in our own self-governance because the government respects us enough to trust us with something like the franchise.

The universal recognition of citizens as morally equal is at the core of the democracy that I think all of us hold dear. Citizens are equal agents, ‘all men are created equal’, as the American Declaration of Independence says. However, there are other forms of recognition that are partial. In fact, this universal liberal form of recognition competed right from the beginning with the other major form of political recognition, which was nationalism. Coming directly out of the French Revolution, you had these two streams simultaneously. On the one hand, the French Revolution was about spreading the rights of man everywhere in the world. But on the other hand, it was also a manifestation of French nationalism. It was the first modern nationalist movement. The French wanted to defend their country against the invading powers of Europe, kick out the foreigners and have a country that they themselves could control. The liberal interpretation of recognition fought with a nationalist interpretation throughout the nineteenth century. In Germany in 1848, there was a liberal revolution, but also a national revolution on behalf of the German people. And those two understandings of recognition really defined German history from that point onwards. Ultimately, a very aggressive and intolerant form of nationalism took hold in many countries, leading to the catastrophe of the two World Wars in the early twentieth century. And that national understanding of identity is making a comeback in many countries today.

I would argue that Islamism can also be interpreted as a quest for recognition. This would be particularly true, I think, for a lot of the young European Muslims who went to fight for the Islamic State. They had a real identity conflict. They came from families that had emigrated to France, or the Netherlands, or Germany. They did not feel comfortable with their parents’ form of religiosity, which they thought was too old fashioned and traditional, but they also did not feel well-integrated into the society in which they were living. They suffered this kind of alienating inability to answer the question, ‘who am I
really?’ What the Islamists do is to say, ‘I will tell you who you are: you are a proud Muslim, you are part of a large ummah, we are being persecuted and disrespected all over the world, and you can do something about that, you can join up and fight back and make Islam a proud civilisation once again.’ It is a difficult judgment, because I think that some Islamism is driven by genuine religiosity and piety. But a lot of it is also driven by this desire to know who you are, and to accept the form of identity that unites you with a community, that gives you a home and a sense of belonging. These are all different variants of this struggle for recognition.

Transformations

There is a particular form of identity politics that emerged in liberal societies in the course of the twentieth century that brings us closer to what is going on in the present. This is what people refer to when they complain about identity politics. But it really starts in the 1960s in the US, with a number of important social movements: the civil rights movement for African Americans, the feminist movement, the movements on behalf of the disabled, the LGBT movement. All of these groups that had been marginalised by mainstream society. In the early 1960s, that society was white, and it was male. So there was a struggle for social justice and for recognition, to have equal access to the job market, equal treatment under the law, and so on. All of these movements were responding to real social ills, and they were very important in correcting them: for example, racial segregation.

But something happened en route to the current form of identity politics. This was a shift in the way that parties of the left began to think about inequality. In the twentieth century, inequality was often seen – especially in Europe – through a Marxist lens, in which the big struggle was between capitalists and the proletariat. And in most developed societies in the twentieth century, the proletariat were white people. In fact, white males. That was the group that the left wanted to help. As time went on, the understanding of inequality began to shift to pay more attention to women, racial minorities, other groups. A lot of the parties of the left began to lose touch with the white working class that had been their core support in the twentieth century. For example, in the US in the 1930s, under the New Deal with Franklin Roosevelt, something like 80 per cent of rural white southerners voted for the Democratic Party candidate. They voted for the more left-wing candidate because he was going to do redistribution and help them out economically.

But as the conception of inequality began to shift in this identity direction, the Democratic Party began to lose touch with that old white working class. So they started to defect to the Republican Party. Ronald Reagan was elected in the 1980s because he appealed to white working-class voters in a way that previous Republican candidates had not. Something similar happened in Europe with environmental issues or, again, identity issues – although they were a little bit different in Europe and often had to do with immigrants or other groups facing discrimination. Many members of the white working class that had been the core support for the French Communist Party began to vote for the National Front. And this, I think, has led to the present.

At this point I want to make something very clear: a lot of people have accused me of blaming the left for the rise of rightwing populism. I am not doing that. I am just trying to
present a history of what happened in the evolution of how we think about left and right. There are many reasons for rightwing populism, and economic ones are definitely among them. But another has also been the borrowing of the leftwing concept of identity by the right. Fifty years ago, if you were a white person in the US, you would not even have thought of yourself as a white person. You would have just thought: I am an American, because that is what an American is. Today, you are getting these white nationalists who say: ‘I am a majority that is being discriminated against by elites. I belong to a group that is not really privileged at all. This is being foisted on me by people that really are privileged, all of these educated people in universities, in the media, and so forth. So, identity – this framing of identity – has moved from the left to the right. It is not the left that has caused this, it’s rather a shared understanding of victimization that has travelled from left to right.

I want to emphasize that, to some extent, these people’s understanding of themselves as disregarded and disrespected is true. There is a tendency to dismiss populist voters as just a bunch of racists and xenophobes. It is true that they are white people who had been dominant in their societies, and who are losing some of that dominance. They resent that loss and are trying to return to their old social position. But I think it is also important to understand that they actually have a case; that they have indeed been disrespected and disregarded by the elites. This is more reasonable if you look at what happened to this white working class in the US, a large part of which actually followed the black working class into a kind of social chaos. Today, among low-skilled white workers, you have a vast increase in the number of single-parent families, you have increases in crime rates in poor white neighbourhoods, you have an opioid epidemic that has killed over 70,000 Americans and actually lowered life expectancy for white males in the US in the last couple of years. So, it is very hard to say that these people are not in fact, in some sense, doing extremely badly.

But the cultural aspect of it is what is particularly infuriating to people. There is a very nice book called Strangers in Their Own Land by the sociologist Arlie Hochschild. She interviewed a lot of Tea Party voters in rural Louisiana and she has this metaphor – the central metaphor in her book – where these people see themselves as being lined up in a queue. And in the distance there is a door, over which it says ‘the American Dream’. They are raising families, going to work every day. All of a sudden, they see people jumping the queue. Some are black, some are women, some are gays and lesbians, some are Syrian refugees. And the people that are helping them jump the queue are, frankly, people like you and me: they are educated, people in the arts, in the media, and in the established political parties, people who have never paid much attention to them. I think that there is a cultural snobbery of the educated, cosmopolitan, urban-dwelling, sophisticated people that make up elites in modern societies, towards people that have less education, that do not live in big cities, that have more traditional social and cultural values. There is a degree of justified resentment at that kind of disregard.

So, this is where we have ended up. This fear that immigrants are taking away our national identity is a theme that unites virtually all of the new populist movements. The reason that immigration is such a big policy issue for them is precisely because they feel that they used to define the national identity and that that is no longer true; that national identities are now being undermined not just by immigrants, but by the elites that support immigrants and want those immigrants to come in. And that defines the political
contest that is ahead of us.

So what to do? That is an obvious question, one I get asked frequently. But it is very tough to answer. I don’t think that you can begin to solve the problem until you have analysed it properly, and have tried to understand, with a little bit of sympathy, what is actually driving people to vote for these parties. The stakes are very high, because they are really about liberal democracy itself. These parties don’t represent a threat to democracy, but they do represent a threat to liberal democracy. That is to say: to the constitutional rule of law. That is what has been eroding in Hungary, in Poland and in the United States. That is really what is at stake for all of us.

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