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THE DELUSION OF POPULISM

Post-truth politics and the anti-war movement

Truthfulness has never been an over-riding concern for politicians and lobbyists. It is about what you can get away with in the hurly burly of media debate: how far the facts can be spun or used selectively to advance the cause. The danger, of course, is that the lie may be exposed and the credibility of the argument lost.

But now the rise of populism and non-truth politics is changing the rules of the game. Lies are quite acceptable, particularly if they reinforce what people want to believe. Take, for example, the 'hot pants' remark by Newt Gingrich's in the US presidential campaign.

In an interview with CNN, after a speech in which Donald Trump wrongly claimed that violent crime was rising, Newt Gingrich (former US presidential candidate and Trump supporter) tried to defend him by cherry-picking the facts – then abandoned them altogether. 'The average American does not think crime is down,' he said. As a political candidate, I'll go along with what people feel.'

New Scientist editorial, 10 September 2016

For those with any understanding of political decision-making, such dismissal of basic facts is baffling, cynical and scary. Imagine the unintended consequences for critical health and defence policy issues. How and when did facts lose their currency in public debate? And what are the implications for our anti-war campaigning?

The answer to the first question is, in part, technological change. Social media allows people with fringe opinions to hook up with the like-minded, filter out competing sources of information and let half-truths, lies and conspiracy theories run riot. But then, there is nothing especially new in this except the vast reach and speed of modern communication.

Like most campaign organisations, the anti-war movement has a tendency to use suspect information - largely in the form of questionable assertions - while much of its real deception is unintentional: unreliable information that conveniently strengthens the case is circulated and repeated so often that it becomes accepted fact among activists. These 'factoids' go unchallenged because the movement speaks mostly to itself, so they are rarely tested in the fire of debate or publicly contradicted. A classic example (and the elephant in the room) is the belief that unilateral military disarmament will unquestionably prevent wars. And then there is the view that Western (US-instigated) colonialism is the cause of most of today's military conflicts.

I shall return to these concerns later after considering: (1) the characteristics of populism and (2) the arrival of Corbynism. As you read on, you might spot some resemblances between the two; you might also recognize a few populist characteristics that are common to the anti-war movement.

The rise of populism

This new politics is finding its voice on both sides of the Atlantic – in the Trump phenomenon in the US, in the Brexit vote in the UK, in other separatist movements in the EU. Populism is the

people pushing back against elites and giving voice to dissatisfaction about the way politics works for them. They believe that the differences between the mainstream parties are a sham, seeing a cross-party system in league with special interests including the media. Their collective voice finds expression in a political figurehead.

The idea of the media as an establishment puppet has developed as it has been displaced by millions of online voices using Twitter and Facebook. There is also a convenience in this for populist politicians because they can always blame the media for failure, as Mr Trump did when his campaign showed signs of failing.

Populist politicians of Left and Right thrive by offering seductively simple answers to such economic and cultural grievances, and their publicity teams have become adept at exploiting people's feelings. The movements they lead are to varying degrees anti-intellectual and sometimes put forward eccentric solutions and policies. Expert advice, characteristically that of establishment experts, is scorned and emotion rules rather than factual debate.

Some may argue that this has merit since it encourages public involvement in politics; but we should also beware unintended consequences because populist movements can be fertile ground for subversion. Human discontent, looking for an answer to its troubles, can generally find a hawk waiting in the wings with a solution. Those of us concerned about peace and justice should reflect on this if extremists begin to capture and direct populist sentiment.

And there are other concerns. As populists gain influence, they are inclined to build regimes that resemble democracies initially, when they are really designed to perpetuate power. They do this by colonizing the party or state, placing loyalists in what should be non-partisan jobs. Attempts to perpetuate power are not exclusive to populists, of course. But they do this brazenly: 'Why?' they can say indignantly, 'should the people not take possession of their party/state through their rightful representatives?'

Inherent in this logic is the implication that those who do not support populist leaders are not fit or proper. You may recall Nigel Farage celebrating the Brexit vote by claiming that it was a victory of 'real people'. Other leaders including Mr Trump and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey speak in the same terms. This logic can easily turn politics into a battleground, with their supporters seeing themselves as soldiers. It also opens the door to abuse and violence by unprincipled followers as the Brexit campaign has clearly done in the UK.

Populists also claim that they will fulfill the people's will – the will, that is, of those they specify to be 'real people'. But this is a fallacy since no single will or opinion exists in a modern, complex, pluralist democracy. If a state were run on populist reactions to current affairs – say by referendums on all significant issues – the outcome would be chaos.

But crucially, anyone who argues with populists in person, at meetings or on social media will have noticed that they are not interested in debate. Their view is irrefutable, and there is an answer to every doubt. Often, this quite easily reduces to the motivations of critics whose agenda is to discredit the populist view and support the corrupt elite that governs the country. If a journalist or opinion pollster produces evidence, they are biased or bought.

Such dismissal of evidence is not an uncommon experience in the anti-war movement, where the expression of unpopular views may lead to rebuff, even when the point being made is factually correct. It is, also, a rare occurrence for the anti-war movement to organize conferences or debates with representatives of the armed forces or, indeed, anyone who believes that the military has a valuable role to play.

Then there is the issue of purity and the way propagandists strive to keep the faithful in line, even more than they seem to want to secure converts. You can't be a half-convinced populist: you must commit to the package (warts and all) or walk away.

Corbynism as pseudo-populist movement

Mr Corbyn does not act or look much like a populist leader. In the conventional mould the leader is a charismatic demagogue who claims to give unmediated voice to the authentic will of the people. Corbyn tends to do the reverse: his appeal to supporters is couched in a lack of ego and the dissolution of the leader figure into the collective movement which he, nevertheless leads by the strength of his personal convictions. The more unprofessional and inexpert he appears the more authentic he becomes; a figure onto which his supporters can project a host of virtues and aspirations.

Mr Corbyn's support group, Momentum does have populist features. It operates efficiently and was the engine of his victory in the Labour leadership contest, growing to some 20,000 members. But a civil war over aims is now beginning to cause disruption.

Momentum came into being as a cudgel for the party's Left and a power base for the leadership, just as Labour First and Progress had been for the party's Right. But now there are members, especially younger recruits to its steering committee, who see it as a means to create a 'new kind of politics' and possibly a separate party to Labour's Left. (Stephen Bush discusses this and the roles of the various individuals involved in the *New Statesman* of 4 November 2016.)

Like Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, and Bernie Sanders in the US, Corbynism (which I take as the whole *mélange* of interests around Corbyn) is of the radical Left and aims to replace neo-liberalism with something it claims will empower ordinary people. They say their policy is municipal, inclusive and promotes horizontal democracy. At best this may be true; but, at worst, it could simply be an expression of revolt and a list of unrealistic demands made by people who have not thought through the implications of their actions. And all this will be influenced significantly by what the leader thinks: supporters being moved more by personal loyalty than by specific policies.

Populist movements are sometimes breathtaking in their claims and the Corbyn Left portrays itself as speaking for the many when in reality it is narrowing dramatically the appeal of the Labour Party, distancing itself from the more moderate MPs and the wider public, and making it virtually impossible, to form alliances with more centrist political parties. As a consequence, it is in danger of becoming everything to its adherents and nothing to the electorate as a whole. We see this when rallies dominated by admirers become the political norm and meetings where the skeptical can safely question policy are few.

Corbynism and the anti-war movement

Many in the anti-war movement view the rise of Corbynism as a heaven-sent opportunity. After so many decades of near fruitless campaigning, here is a conviction politician and, more importantly, a party leader who shares the movement's aims. But it would be wrong to see Mr Corbyn's anti-militarism as part of an election-winning manifesto. It does not appeal to the wider electorate, who are becoming increasingly aware of the security threats the country faces. Credibility is the foundation of effective radicalism: if you are not credible in your intentions, your

trustworthiness and your judgment, then your radical policies will not be given a chance to breath. This is something else the anti-war movement should take to heart in its political campaigning.

Another problem is that Corbynism rails against anti-Western colonialism, and blames the US, in cahoots with its allies, for most of the world's military conflicts. Accordingly, it is uncritical about the military aggression of authoritarian nations sometimes to the extent of giving it tacit approval. We see this particularly with Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its brutal support of the Assad regime in Syria. Indeed, Britain's parliamentary opposition, to the extent that it is Corbynist, has become all but incapable of contributing to the debate about the balance between hard power and diplomacy necessary for a settlement in the Middle East. This is a major failing when it is clear that diplomacy alone has failed to protect hundreds of thousands of civilians caught up in the various conflicts.

Stop the War Coalition is especially steeped in anti-Western colonialism. Mr Corbyn is closely associated with it: he promoted its formation, has served as chairperson and continues to be a leading speaker at its rallies.

Stop the War was set up by members of Hard-Left groups including members of the Socialist Workers Party shortly after the al-Qaeda attacks on America and President Bush's announcement of a 'War on Terror'. Effectively, the anti-war sentiment was hijacked to create a front organization with an air of political respectability.

Stop the War's main claim to fame is the massive demonstration against the 2003 invasion of Iraq. CND and several Moslem groups are also involved with its activities but not formally members of the coalition. Since then it has gained little political traction, but has been involved in promoting Mr Corbyn and influential in the creation of Momentum.

Stop the War's supporters claim to be on the side of the oppressed, but they are all too eager to side with the enemies of freedom if their ideology demands. The organisation has never, for example, attempted to hold Russia or President Assad to account for the brutal bombing of Aleppo and other Syrian cities, and neither apparently has Mr Corbyn.

I remember well attending a Stop the War conference in London when there were chants of 'No more wars' as delegates tried to drown out a pro-Syria (anti-Assad) counter-protest by activists who wanted to see civilians protected. It was reminiscent of Airstrip One in Orwell's *1984* with its reality-inverting 'War is peace' slogan. Ensuring that Western governments stay out of Syria won't ensure 'no more war': it will merely make it easier for these 'peace' activists to ignore the carnage.

And more to the point, statements by Stop the War's leaders sometimes figure in the propaganda broadcasts of Russia and Iran where they are used to demonstrate the groundswell of popular opposition to democratic governments. This appears as a conscious validation of Kremlin messages, giving them credibility and creating a willing echo chamber in the West. It would be easy to dismiss this as an historical irrelevancy if the sentiment did not play so obviously into the current policies of Momentum and Corbynists generally. Mr Farage and Mr Trump have both said they admire Mr Putin's political style.

This anti-colonial ideology also leads to a criticism of Israel because it is viewed as a Western colonial implant in the Middle East. In his book, *The Left's Jewish problem* (2016), Dave Rich examines the relationship of this with the current spate of anti-Semitism. He points out that 'anti-Semites have evidently imbibed a feeling of empowerment from the rise of Mr Corbyn whose political assumptions are taken from the anti-Zionist New Left. This New Left shows little interest

in the Western working class so humanity's liberation must come from the "global South" that encompasses anti-Semitic groups like Hamas and Hezbollah.'

The anti-war movement also tends to be overly critical of Israel (as compared with some more repressive regimes), something that is important to reflect on, especially if the movement is to align itself with the Corbynist agenda.

Making the world more secure

The foregoing raises serious concerns for global peace and security if the truth is to be openly flouted for ideological purposes, populist or otherwise. As authoritarian states challenge the free world for dominance in certain regions of the world is it sensible or even moral to support a populist international policy. As anti-war activists, we might say so if it were in the Corbynist model and help promote our aims. But how would the UK electorate react to a defence policy that involves a major reduction in our armed forces, the withdrawal from NATO, a repudiation of our military alliance with the US and a neutral stance in regard to potentially aggressive countries. Certainly there is virtue in neutrality, but the security of the free world remains an important consideration in this time of threat.

Mr Trump's policy, which he says is to tear up the international rulebook, is dangerous here. He has repeatedly welcomed the idea of Saudi Arabia, or South Korea, or Japan having nuclear weapons. The thinking is that this will achieve a balance of terror, which will keep the peace better than costly American intervention.

But the deadliest threat to European security is Mr Trump's attitude to NATO. He has repeatedly questioned whether the US should continue to protect European countries, most of which fail to pay their way on defence. He also shows undisguised admiration of Putin, the single greatest threat to the stability of Europe. Several of Trump's advisers/supporters are Russian enthusiasts.

As the descent into a post-truth world continues at a depressing rate, we as anti-war activists should be cautious about what we say – and what we wish for. We need a far more honest understanding of the degree to which unilateral disarmament will reduce the likelihood of war – as well as a more nuanced insight into the precise ways in which it might do so. We should also beware any bias that enters our arguments from the anti-Western ideology of the Left. The fact that it is very difficult to persuade people to change their mind should not be an excuse for misrepresenting the truth; and our campaigns should be tested on those who don't share our views.

And let us show a little more Intellectual curiosity, tolerance, plurality and perhaps even a dash of mischief in our dealings: all the qualities that seem to be strangely absent among the New Political Left.

And let us be honest with ourselves. All of us know we all skate on thin ice sometimes and say things that are blatantly untrue, especially in the heat of the argument. The important thing is that we recognise this so that we can perhaps look back and smile – and (perhaps) resolve to avoid doing it again.

We are living through a crisis of liberalism. Liberal democracy must stand for more than the people's will, but mainstream politicians have a duty not only to acknowledge this, but also address people's frustrations and deeper feeling of alienation. Should they prove incapable of doing so, the anti-system populism of Mr Trump and others like him will endure and intensify.

End piece

I end with a piece from Rowan Williams's recent article in *New Statesman*: 'A nervous breakdown in the body politic' (29 April) where he asks the question: 'Are we too complacent in thinking that the toxic brew of paranoia and populism that brought Hitler to power will never be repeated.' He says:

'The threats now faced by "developed" democracy are not those of the 1920s and 1930s; whatever rough beasts are on their way are unlikely to have the exact features of Hitler's distinctive blend of criminality and melodrama. But this does not mean that we shouldn't be looking as hard as possible from the lessons to be learned from the collapse of political legitimacy, the collective panics and myths, the acceptance of delusional and violent public theatre that characterised Hitler's Germany.

For evil to triumph, what is necessary is for societies to stop thinking, to stop developing an eye for the absurd as well as the corruption in language and action, public and private.'

Reference and sources that inform the text

Points on populism were taken (1) on an article by Nick Cohen in the September 2016 issue of *Standpoint* and (2) another by AC Grayling in the September 2016 issue of *Prospect*.

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