

# Populism: the symptom of a democracy in crisis ?

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Sean Scull, Project Manager at SKEMA Publika, has just published a book on populism entitled *Le Populisme : Symptôme d'une crise de la démocratie - Comment le néolibéralisme a triomphé en France et en Suède* [Populism: the symptom of a crisis in democracy - How neoliberalism has triumphed in France and Sweden], through Editions l'Harmattan. With populism in the headlines both in France, with the recent legislative elections, and abroad, for example with the American elections in November, we thought it would be interesting to discuss its key points in an interview with the author.

## **What are the reasons for the rise of populism in liberal democracies?**

This is the main question my book seeks to answer. I was careful to take an explanatory approach, to understand the roots of populism. I didn't want to fall into a descriptive approach of trying to define or name populism; instead, I tried to understand the factors that lead to its emergence.

My theory is that contemporary populism is the result of a process whereby economic power has come to dominate political power. In other words, liberal democracies today are governed by economic rather than political logic. For my book, I took France and Sweden as case studies. Power is no longer in the hands of politicians; it is in the hands of extra-political institutions such as rating agencies, international economic treaties and international organisations. The role of rating agencies such as Moody's and Fitch Ratings is to assess the creditworthiness of a country through financial analysis mechanisms. This rating then tells private banks whether a country will be able to honour the debt it has contracted. This creates a state of dependency, as governments find themselves trapped in this system of borrowing and debt: to finance welfare state spending, governments need a good credit rating in order to borrow the money needed to fund public services. International economic treaties also limit the power of democratically elected politicians. In the European Union, the European Central Bank (ECB) is responsible for monetary policy, and its tasks are determined by European economic treaties. The problem is that the governments of the member states have no power over this institution, because it is independent. In other words, the member states have no power to influence the ECB's economic policy decisions. The stranglehold of economic power over political power is also illustrated by international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). These organisations have real power to influence governments. The WTO aims to promote free trade and avoid isolationism, while the IMF provides loans to countries in financial difficulty and advises member states on their economic policies.

As a result, today's governments now design public policies to satisfy economic power rather than political power, as was once the case. Liberal democracies are governed by economic determinisms whose interests do not always coincide with the will of the people. The French, for example, have never shown massive support for the EU's economic austerity policy. The victory of the "no" vote in the 2005 referendum on the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe proves this. The rise of populist parties is a reaction to this power dynamic, as people feel they are no longer in control of their own destiny.

This paradigm shift has been gradually taking shape since the 1980s and the advent of neoliberalism. This politico-economic theory emerged in response to the failure of Keynesian interventionism, the opening up of economies and the slowdown in growth. Neoliberalism is first and foremost an economic theory according to which the state impedes the potential of the market. In other words, the economy does not need the state to reduce inequalities, because it is self-regulating. The role of the state should be limited to creating the institutional, political and ideological framework for the smooth functioning of the market. Neoliberalism is also a social policy based on the idea that the market is the solution to all problems, and that society must be managed according to economic factors. Finally, neoliberalism is a set of values, promoting the individual to the detriment of the collective. This famous sentence spoken by former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher sums up the neoliberal way of thinking: *"There is no such thing as society. There are only individual men and women..."*

The rise of populism cannot be understood without first understanding the dominance of the neoliberal consensus in our Western democracies. In France and Sweden, this neoliberal consensus is illustrated by a disenchantment with the political dichotomy of the left-right divide, and by the rise of populist parties: in France, Rassemblement National and La France insoumise, and in Sweden, the Sweden Democrats and the Left Party. What these populist parties have in common is their opposition to neoliberalism and their defence of economic sovereignty, unlike the governing parties of the left or right, which have been united around neoliberalism for 40 years. In France, the death of the left-right divide was sealed with the electoral defeats of the Republicans (les Républicains) and the Socialist Party (le Parti socialiste), the two parties that had dominated the political scene since the beginning of the Fifth Republic. Since 2017, when Emmanuel Macron took office, the power struggle between the neoliberal globalist trend and the sovereignist trend embodied by populist parties has shaken up the traditional left-right divide. In France, the Rassemblement National and La France insoumise parties openly denounce the neoliberal project by taking a sovereignist line. The former through economic patriotism, the latter through ecology. We note that, since the election of Emmanuel Macron as president and the end of the left-right divide, the populist parties have experienced a meteoric rise. The most recent legislative elections illustrate this, with the Nouveau Front Populaire (dominated by La France insoumise) and Rassemblement National parties coming first and third respectively. This political reality confirms this new political opposition between neoliberal globalism and sovereigntism.

**In your view, populism is a symptom rather than the cause of the crisis in liberal democracy. This runs counter to a certain discourse that portrays populists as extremist enemies of democracy. Why?**

It's true, in common parlance, populism is identified as the cause of the crisis in liberal democracy. Populism is described as a threat, because it is seen as an authoritarian and demagogic political movement that only seeks to pander to the masses. In a sense, that is true, but can't the same be said for all politicians? Don't all politicians pander to their electorate in order to get elected? Yes, there are extremists in the populist parties, but it would be a mistake to reduce them to that, because these parties embody a fundamental trend that needs to be understood. In my opinion, it is a mistake not to make this effort to understand.

In the book, I argue that populism is the symptom or consequence of a crisis in liberal democracy, precisely because political power has been swallowed up by economic power. Democratically elected politicians no longer have any room to manoeuvre, as their power is limited and restricted by rating agencies, international organisations and international economic treaties. Brainwashing by the ideology of neoliberalism is undermining the democratic ideal. Neoliberal democracies have turned their back on the democratic ideal and replaced it with an economic approach to managing society. These days, aren't politicians elected based on their ability to reduce unemployment, fight inflation, create more jobs or redistribute more welfare benefits? People no longer question the moral or political legitimacy of an action, only its economic profitability. Liberal democracy is therefore already in crisis, in the sense that it no longer embodies its own ideal. Democracy is supposed to be a regime of political, not economic, legitimacy. Populists denounce the stranglehold of neoliberal ideology and, in my view, that is why they are so successful.

**You claim that democratic debate in France and Sweden is being undermined by anti-populist rhetoric. Why do you think that is?**

These days, the term 'populist' is used pejoratively to discredit a political opponent. Most people who use the word are probably not aware that populism originally had a positive connotation. The first populist movement appeared in the United States of America with the People's Party, which opposed corporate concentration, the oligarchic excesses of the federal government and the influence of the moneyed world on American democracy. This has nothing to do with the term they are now trying to sell us, which limits populism to xenophobes, demagogues and authoritarian enemies of democracy. The problem is that by pointing the finger at populists as *personae non gratae* and not really wanting to understand their grievances, the anti-populists, represented in my book by the media, academics and politicians, distort and prevent democratic debate. Democracy is suffering, and the crisis of confidence between the people and their leaders is proof of this.

**Populism experts distinguish between left-wing and right-wing populism, but you don't. Why not?**

While studying the political agendas of the populist parties Rassemblement National, La France insoumise, the Left Party and the Sweden Democrats, I noticed more or less the same opposition to neoliberalism. These populist parties more or less directly denounce the supremacy of economic values over political ones. In the name of France, the Rassemblement National party opposes the policy of austerity, condemns the neoliberal turn taken under the presidency of François Mitterrand in 1983, and advocates economic patriotism. While in the name of ecology, La France Insoumise opposes the consumer society and advocates re-industrialisation, economic protectionism and the cancellation of public debt. Left-wing and right-wing populism are therefore two political ideologies that have more in common than one might think.

What distinguishes the two forms of populism are the social issues of minority identities, multiculturalism, immigration and the concept of the nation. Right-wing populism embodies conservative values and opposes immigration and multiculturalism. Whereas left-wing populism defends multiculturalism, immigration and embodies progressive values.

### **So would it be fair to say that populism is a poorly understood political phenomenon?**

Yes, because no one is quite sure what exactly is meant by it; the term is somewhat vague. Everyone uses it in their own way according to what serves their own interests — often to discredit a political opponent. Even academics are unable to agree on a consensual definition. There are a multitude of academic definitions of populism. Cas Mudde<sup>1</sup> and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser<sup>2</sup> define populism as a thin-centered ideology, Paul Taggart<sup>3</sup> as a political style, and Gianfranco Pasquino<sup>4</sup> as a political mentality.

Moreover, populist movements themselves do not consciously or unconsciously understand what they really stand for. They are prisoners of the left-right divide or the "left-wing populist" or "right-wing populist" label. What I try to demonstrate in my book is that left-wing and right-wing populists share a common analysis: that the economic sphere dominates the political sphere through neoliberalism. These two populist camps would benefit from uniting to promote their shared views on the state of liberal democracy. But left-wing populists are trapped in a pseudo anti-fascism that prevents them from joining forces with right-wing populists.

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