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Resentful Reactionism – Challenge and Opportunity

I was invited to give you my short account in 3 minutes on Populism and how to Fix It.

As an empirical political scientist, I am trained to measure, understand and predict political phenomena. As a political psychologist, I am trained to examine their psychological origins and consequences. I specialize on the role of emotions in determining political judgements. And I sense the anxiety in the room, the urgency to find a solution to a phenomenon that many identify as a 'problem for democratic governance'. Seeing populism as a problem is also a judgement, and it comes with frustration and anger for its dangerous consequences. Why we see populist as a problem is also worth studying, but that is for another time.

I want to offer an alternative: Populism is a Puzzle. As a puzzle, it invites us to explore it deeper, and to understanding it passionately, but without assuming it is negative. Social scientists have studied populism for decades with a variety of approaches and methodologies. None is better and all are necessary. MY tools is the study of emotions, cognitions, motivations and behaviors of citizens across the globe.

So let's start from what we know. Populism is a particular type of discourse. Citizens are not populists. Leaders are populist, Party narratives (mainstream and on the fringes) are populist. Populism is discourse platform that attracts many citizens who find its message palatable. So let's start from there. What is the PSYCHOLOGY OF POPULISM? Why are populist discourses popular?

We are living in challenging times: we talk about crises that are financial, environmental, related to migration, related to security. The pendulum of politics swings back and forth, and harder in times of crisis.

When resources are cut, when opportunities are not part of our imagined future, when we do not see ourselves as protagonist to a happy story, we live with grievances, anxiety, anger and resentment.

My research on political reactionism highlights the rise of a particular type of orientation, that draws on traditional and conformist values, the reactionary desire to turn back the future and return to an imagined glorious past, which rests of resentful emotions. The narrative of populism is palatable to the reactionary citizen. It offers an alternative, a reactionary exit. (and for those of us in the UK, Brexit).

Citizens can be passive bystanders of politics, indifferent, disconnected, but sometimes they find their voice. And sometimes they cry loudly for attention. Citizens speak up when they feel hope and a sense of efficacy. They feel that when they are provided with an opportunity. The surge of populist support shows us one thing clear – citizens are hungry for hope, for being part of politics, for an opportunity.

So how can we respond to this challenging opportunity: We invest in education, information gain, and build civic competence. The more educated, informed and competent we become, as citizens, as a society, as academics, the more we can understand the experiences of others and ourselves. Educating our young people, offering resources that promote civic competences for adults, investing in a political culture of deliberation and engagement will foster our sense of belonging, and our sense of efficacy. Education and Civic Competence is the way forward. We are not alone – the Council of Europe just released a plan. Look it up and stand behind it!

<https://rm.coe.int/16806ccc07>