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TIME IS UP: THE ASSAULT OF POPULISM TO DEMOCRACY IN EU

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INTRODUCTION

The results of recent elections in Hungary and Italy signal a turning point. The victory of Viktor Orban in Hungary strengthens the trend of his populist leadership towards the decay of democracy in his country and points to deepening steps towards some form of authoritarianism. The confirmation of the populist 5 star movement of Bebbe Grillo, now headed by Luigi Di Mayo, as the most voted movement-party in Italy and (to this writing) the possibility to form a coalition government between this movement and the populist Lega of Matteo Salvini , may lead to a new, more radical populist government in Italy, after the more moderate, but still negative, populist experiences led by Silvio Berlusconi.

Both cases confirm a trend towards democratic decay in EU and, given their nationalist orientation and euro-skepticism, towards the end of present efforts to revitalize its integration process.

The purpose of these notes is to sustain the thesis that populism represents a progressive erosion of liberal democracy, leading to its slow death (Guillermo O'Donnell).

I will do so by reviewing critically a paper by Francis Fukuyama on why democracy is performing so poorly in recent decades, appeared in the **Journal of Democracy**, in January 1995, an issue dedicated entirely to the analysis of the question on whether democracy was decaying and why.

WHY IS DEMOCRACY PERFORMING SO POORLY

Fukuyama, in the article mentioned above, stated that “a single important factor lies at the core of many democratic setbacks over the past generation. It has to do with the failure of institutionalization – the fact that state capacity in many new and existing democracies has not kept pace with popular demands for democratic accountability.” He continues by stating that “it is much harder to move from a patrimonial or neo-patrimonial state to a modern, impersonal one than it is to move from an authoritarian regime to one that holds regular, free and fair elections.”

He then continues by providing some basic definitions of key institutional components of a liberal democratic order – the state, the rule of law and democratic accountability- reaching the conclusion that a liberal democracy “balances these potentially contradictory institutions. The state generates and employs power, while the rule of law and democratic accountability seek to constrain power.”

New democracies, and even some existing ones, have failed to achieve, and/or maintain, the above-mentioned balance, because, while state activities have increased in complexity and technical difficulties, due to globalization and technological innovation, state capacity has lagged other components of a democratic order, because of lack of resources, qualified personnel and technical expertise. This unbalance has led to difficulties in creating the infrastructure and the public goods required in the development of competitive economies and in responding to the demands of large sectors of the population for basic services, thus leading incumbent governments to poor performance and to their delegitimation.

Fukuyama concludes his article by stating that “many countries around the world will have to develop modern states at the same time that they build democratic institutions and the rule of law.”

This is a sound prescription but a poor description of what is happening in many so called “illiberal democracies”. If we observe recent political events in countries like Hungary and Poland in EU or Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and especially Venezuela in Latin America, just to give some examples, we realize that the prescription not only does not work in reality but that, in addition, it is based on a tacit false assumption, namely that their political leaders want to build impersonal states but fail to do so because of lack of resources or qualified personnel.

Contrary to this assumption, available empirical evidence shows that its opposite is true: the populist leaders of the above-mentioned countries want full control over State institutions and resources, want to exercise personal power with few or no limits, bend “the rule of law” in their favor, by manipulating some civic and political rights of opposing political actors and use elections as the legitimating basis of their personal power.

These observations bring me back to the problem of populism and its incompatibility with liberal democracy (see my article in the 1st number of OSI Review). In this respect, I agree with Jan-Werner Muller, who states, in his conceptually solid and documented book on **What is Populism?** (Pennsylvania University Press, 2016), that populism shows a well-established pattern of action when it achieves power, even because of regular, competitive elections. First, it attempts to colonize or occupy the state, by assigning all key positions to loyal followers of the party in power, even those that should be given to neutral bureaucrats. This occupation of state positions is followed by centralization of power in the executive branch of government, together with the undermining of the independence of the judiciary systems, by modifying the procedures of existing courts and/or by appointing new judges. These practices go much beyond a normal spoil system that occurs in democracies when there is a rotation in government. In addition, what

distinguishes populists' manipulation of existing institutional structures is that they carry it out publicly, pointing out their moral justification in doing so as they are the only legitimate representative of the people.

A second measure that is adopted is to control the press, if necessary. In fact, journalists are not independent of political power. They cannot openly criticize government actions without incurring in some sort of repressive action. If they report critical news, they are openly accused of violating the true interests of the nation, which of course are coincident with the interest of the movement in power and with those of the people.

A third action which is undertaken by populists in power is to strongly limit political pluralism. Opposition movement and parties see their basic liberties restricted and selective repression of dissidents is practiced making clear that power belongs to the people and their legitimate representatives. These limitations apply also to critical organizations of civil society, like NGO. They are publicly accused of collaborating with anti-national forces against the true interests of the people. Their critical activities are considered morally wrong because they bring divisions within the people and undermine their unity and solidarity. In addition, they are often accused of being supported by external enemies of the country, like the well-known case of the George Soros foundation which finances the International University Center in Budapest, which is being accused of organizing illegal immigration into the country.

A fourth undertaking is what is generally called mass clientelism, a system by which the state delivers material resources to large sectors of the population in exchange for political consensus and loyalty. It has been argued that this sort of clientelism was often practiced by democracies in their early stages of development and is still practiced by deficient democracies. But again, what distinguishes this activity under populism is that it is done publicly with the moral justification that the people has a right to receive the support from its state.

All the above practices, if successful, undermine the social, political and cultural basis of liberal democracy.

ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY OR AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM?

There should be, by now, enough empirical evidence to support the thesis that populism, in all its varieties, constitutes a serious threat to liberal democracy. Yet, there are still many intellectuals who defend its democratic credentials and believe that it can be a healthy corrective for democracies.

In a recent book, **What is Populism?** (2017), Alain de Benoist, reviews most of the authors that argue in favor of populism, reaching the conclusion that populism denounces liberal democracy in the name of a stronger exigency of more participatory and direct democracy. This statement forgets to take into consideration all the existing experiences of populism in power, since the first one of peronismo in Argentina in 1946, which have failed to positively respond to its original claim

and have led to increased conflict, polarization, democratic decay and often terminated with authoritarian outcomes.

On the other hand, many critical observers of populism in action have preferred to use the concept of “illiberal” democracy to characterize the specificity of its political dynamics. But, as Jan-Werner Muller argues, this conceptualization of populism is misleading. Not only it does not do justice what is really happening under populist power, but it gives populist leaders like Orban in Hungary, Kaczynsky in Poland and Maduro in Venezuela, as examples, the opportunity to call their regimes democracies, even if they are against “extreme forms of liberalism”. While it is true that liberal democracies may vary in adopting or rejecting certain civic rights, like divorce, abortion or gay liberation, without losing their status of democracies, they cannot deprive their citizens of basic political rights, like expression of speech, access to a plural information or pluralism of political views and organization. When the restriction of these basic liberties is enacted by populist governments, they not only attack liberalism per se, but they also undermine the very foundations of liberal democracy.

In view of the above I would propose to characterize populists in power with the concept of populist authoritarianism, knowing full well that we require more empirical investigation on at least three central issues: first, what are the socio-economic, political and cultural determinants of the emergence of populism, second, what kind of leaders, discourses, forms of articulation with followers, are likely to transform diffuse discontent in radical political action and third, and most important, what is their logic of action with respect to some basic components of liberal democracy, to be carefully defined and operationalized. This last point requires particular attention. Many analysts of populism claim that its leaders, when in power, realize the complexity and difficulty of government and tend to reduce their radical statements, promises and actions.

This is a misleading and dangerous interpretation. Populist leaders may limit their radical announcements only if they are contained by existing institutional restrictions, they cannot count on sufficient popular support and are confronted by organized opposition. In the absence of these conditions, they proceed with their programs and, if necessary, are prone to write new constitutions that will “legalize” their actions. It should not be forgotten that they act as the only legitimate voice of the people, which is the ultimate source of power.