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Global Affairs 2017, 3(1), 73-80.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2017.1302309>

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Global Affairs* on 12/04/2017 available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2017.1302309>

DOI link to article:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2017.1302309>

Date deposited:

09/11/2017

Embargo release date:

12 October 2018

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THE POPULIST OBSTRUCTION OF REALITY: ANALYSIS AND RESPONSE

Hartmut Behr

Abstract-

Populist movements are on the rise in Western societies. With US president Donald Trump, “Brexit”, and the likely significant 2017 election results of Le Pen in France, de Wilders in the Netherlands, and the AfD in Germany, a “cordon populiste” threatens to strangle liberal democracy. Among the long list of threats of populist politics is – besides its crusades against democratic constitutional law, institutional checks and balances, civil and human rights, and international diplomacy – the strategic obstruction of our perception of reality. As the latter concerns the intellectual and moral fabric of a society, the delusion of reality is among the most severe dangers for democratic politics. We have been handed down analytical language to focus on this threat by the generation of scholars, who witnessed totalitarian movements in the 20th century. Not unsurprisingly, but indeed worryingly, their analytical frameworks apply to contemporary right-wing populist politics.

The following considerations will use Hannah Arendt’s characteristics of totalitarian movements and Eric Voegelin’s notion of “apperception” to analytically grasp the contemporary problem of obstructed reality, followed by some thoughts on how to respond to respective challenges. These final reflections focus on Higher Education.

Keywords

Populism, totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt, Eric Voegelin, education

Outline of an analysis

It’s time to wake up and to add to moral disgust and democratic rejection the recognition that the contemporary right-wing populist threat to democracy is serious and its strategists are determined and resolute in transforming current societies and their constitutional, legal, institutional, and intellectual arrangements. They call themselves a movement, anti-establishment and anti-political, and indeed evince, in line with totalitarian movements in the 20th century, certain important characteristics:

- (1) demonstrating disrespect for the current (in our case ‘democratic’) political system while prioritizing the movement over the political system;
- (2) claiming the authentic representation of some genuine will that would provide a higher form of legitimacy while delegitimising different political views, thus being genuinely anti-pluralistic ;
- (3) an ideological claim of the possession of higher wisdom and subsequently the claim to truth and ubiquitous righteousness;
- (4) the call to action parallel to a rude devaluation of deliberation and reflection; and finally
- (5) the distortion and obstruction of our perception of reality through propagandistic simplifications and purposeful misleading ‘alternative’ representations.

Among these five characteristics of totalitarian movements – with continuous relevance analysed by Hannah Arendt in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) – the last one on the distortion and obstruction of our perception of reality through propagandistic simplifications shall be looked at here a little closer. We are familiar with plenty of evidence of such distortion and obstruction through the creation of “alternative facts”, the career of conspiracy hypotheses among populists, or ‘fake news’, all encapsulated in the language of the so-called “post-factual”.

It is, of course, a philosophically complex and difficult question what “reality” is; I do not want to delve too deeply here into this question, but quite straightforwardly suggest Arendt’s notion of “factual truth” (*Tatsachenwahrheiten*) that helps us to immediately understand that we are facing the attempt to manipulate our perceptions: If, just one example, Kellyanne Conway, one main figure of Trump’s inner propaganda circle, speaks of the “Bowling Green massacre” to justify Trump’s anti-immigration order which, however, indeed never happened, while addressing our ignorance of what ostensibly she ‘knows’ by the non-coverage of this ‘event’ by the mainstream media, we have just one illustration of a strategic attempt to distort and obstruct (our perception) of reality. This adds to a long list of likewise propagandistic strategies to manipulate reality during Trump’s election campaign and the first two weeks of his reign. Another example is Boris Johnson’s use of the manipulative number of £ 350 million in his “Brexit” campaign. Arendt became familiar with such strategic distortions and manipulations of reality from studying Joseph Goebbels’ propaganda machinery and subsequently calls this, too, the “refusal of reality” (which is strategic; and probably psychopathic, too), typical for totalitarian movements. The *coup d’état* of the current system and the erection of a new one necessitates the obstruction of society’s perception and the manipulation of factual truths according to the movement’s interpretation of politics and history. In this context, the denial of factual truth and the re-interpretation of reality à la Conway or Johnson based upon its distortion is comparable to a factoid or half-truth – in contrast to an outright lie (this does not mean that outright lies would not happen and not be used, too) – that are more difficult to devalue than a clear lie as such devaluation necessitates some form of deliberation and opens up interpretation that are shut-down, however, immediately by propagandists or allow for the introduction of *further* distortions (Trump’s White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer is an example at hand). A spiral of deliberate confusion begins, paired up with language games and new terminologies (such as “alternative facts”), so very well depicted by George Orwell in “1984” and portrayed by Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator*, with the aim to accomplish exegetic authority over reality.

This raises of course the question of what an appropriate perception of reality and “factual truth” is. This question is likewise worthy of extended philosophical discussions and we receive very different answers from, philosophically speaking, realist, idealist, or rationalist perspectives; to cut these discussions short, however, I want to refer here, too, to Arendt’s notion of plurality in her *The Human Condition* (1958)

in combination with her observation of a totalitarian refusal of reality. According to Arendt, reality is genuinely pluralistic and we have to open ourselves up to this plurality. And perceiving reality as pluralistic must manifest in the language which we use to describe our experiences of this reality, does solidify in her notion of power through deliberation, and distinguishes humanity as social togetherness (in contrast to loneliness and isolation).

We do not yet have enough evidence to assess populist politics in relation to the exercise of power (apart from indices about Trump's dismissal of the division of power and his proclivity of authoritarian reign) and concerning social coherence, but we do have strong and constant examples of Trump's (and Marine Le Pen and Geert de Wilders use the same language in their campaigns) anti-pluralistic and distortingly simplifying rhetoric. A linguistic analysis of his speeches reveals the overwhelming frequency of some and mostly of two-syllables words as well as of a specific sentence construction that mainly uses short sentences and puts the emphasis of the utterance always at the end of the sentence (therefore often sacrificing grammatically correct language); also many statements are not worded as complete sentences, but are collapsed into incoherent chunks and snapshots of ideas that haunt each other. According to the Flesch-Kincaid Reading Test, Trump's language corresponds to 4th grade. This language is by no means capable of representing the experience of social and political pluralities and the complexities that come with it (even if he liked); and thus is *per se* structurally closed-off, truncated from, and, in Arendt's word, refusing reality.

To connect the arguments so far with the political analysis of totalitarianism and ideologies of Voegelin (and his 1938 *Political Religions* is seminal here), we can term the experience of realities as *participation* in various areas of human existence. The importance lies on experiences of realities *in the plural*, being open to all of them, keeping them in balance, and qualifying them against one another in our political judgment. This openness towards plurality as human condition (a commitment that Voegelin shares with Arendt) is what Voegelin calls 'apperception'. Thus, apperception results from the experience and awareness of the human condition as genuinely plural and contingent upon historical and socio-political contexts. The analytical surplus through Voegelin is the awareness that there are political times when perceptions of reality have become distorted and, moreover, openness towards reality, thus apperception, must be *restored* in order to rescue democratic politics from ideological deformation. Such restoration is called by Voegelin the recapturing of reality that works mainly via a reconstruction of the fundamental categories of political existence and political reality through a genealogy of political symbolizations of human experiences. At the same time, one has to explore the grammar of the deformation (i.e., here the grammar of populist politics) as empirical evidence for such deformations as well as directions and political strategies for restoration. What results from this?

The result from this is a twofold practical-political consequence. *First*, any politics that attempts to, or actually does, violate the human condition, i.e., that pursues and implements political strategies that

harm plurality and the balance mentioned above are to be resisted. Voegelin calls the turning away from deformed politics '*apostrophe*' and a disease of the mind. And *second*, politics that apperceives and is aware of the human condition aims at allowing and supporting the expression and symbolization of diversity and plurality. The thus concluding norm for democratic politics is the creation of openness and of spaces where such expressions and symbolizations can flourish. We can call these spaces ideal-typically democratic or republican spaces, or just spaces of humanity.

So far we have an outline of an intellectual analysis of contemporary populist dark ghosts haunting democracy. Such an analysis entails, as alluded, mainly the elaboration of obstructions of our perception of reality as well as a related analysis of populist strategies to fabricate and spin-doctor a 'new', different (perception of) reality. The latter very importantly comprises an analysis of populist language. Some evidence and theoretical discussion could be provided here; the remainder of this paper shall now be devoted to the *practical* question of how to respond to the threat of populism.

Political responses

The main focus of restoration is to resist populist distortion and deformation and to create at the same time democratic spaces for the expression of pluralism and diversity (next to resistance in terms of constitutional, legal, and institutional fights within the constraints and possibilities of democratic political systems). This vital focus entails the restoration of political judgment that enables the form of resistance mentioned above in the first place. The practical question thus comes down to how restore and create democratic political judgment that seems to have gone lost in so many Western nations, otherwise the electoral successes of Trump and the "Brexiters" and the looming significant results of populist movements in approaching 2017 elections in Germany, France, and the Netherlands would not be possible. The main avenue for restoring political judgment is, so the argument that will be sketched out below, education.

The idea of the university as an institution for the education of a democratic citizenry has been very prolific in Germany after the experience of the collapse of the Weimar Republic and National Socialism. Amongst writers, educators, and philosophers who emphasised this idea was most prominent Karl Jaspers who declared the university not only as a shelter and hotbed for the education of a democratic citizenry established with the skill of respective political judgement, but even as a *condition* of democracy *per se*. And the reason for this is quite clear: at university, but harking back to high school, young generations learn the ability to critically judge things of political importance, most importantly, among subject-specific knowledge, the distinction of different modes of knowledge claims and their respective validities. Given the wide range of academic subjects and all the diverse skills that young people are educated in, the mentioned ability to distinguish knowledge claims and their validities is in one way or another core to *each* discipline as they all teach epistemology and methods (indeed of very different kinds and occasionally very diverse, de-

pending on the discipline and even within disciplines, yet they all have in common questions of knowledge production and means to scrutinise knowledge claims). Ideally speaking then, someone educated in critical thinking (I here do not allude to a specific social science version of critique, but to the general habitus of being sceptical and questioning; and this is not limited to the humanities or social sciences, but includes the 'hard sciences' and economics, too) should be well equipped to, first, recognize, and second, resist the manipulative strategies of populist – indeed of all kinds of – propagandists; and to consequently disclose and debunk every attempt to manipulate and to then discredit everyone who attempts to manipulate; and, to be more concrete, to consequently turn one's back to the likes of Trump, Johnson, de Wilders, le Pen, etc. and unvarnishedly unmask their language, policies, and statements as totalitarian attempts to distort our and mine, and your, and her, and their perception of, and relation to, reality and finally to our fellow human beings. This, we should not allow!

This 'turning the back' and discrediting their politics and political personality has nothing to do with free speech or their democratic right of deliberation, but is precisely a counter-strategy to restore and uphold such democratic rights by exercising them (as someone has a right to speak, ok very well; but I have no duty to listen because the speaker has a responsibility, too, namely to uphold and defend exactly those rights that allow him or her to publicly speak); and is finally a question beyond political nine day's wonders, but an issue of the intellectual and moral fabric of a society, of everyone of us, and of the sustenance of humanity.

The crucial question is whether, or not, the contemporary school and university systems in Western societies are up to the task of democratic citizen education and fit for this mission? Involved are here of course questions of social mobility, access to education and tuition fee systems, research assessments and evaluations, and of curricula design. This is a huge political agenda and research programme that, needless to say, cannot be adequately addressed in this paper. Therefore, the following considerations are necessarily limited in their scope and concentrate on curriculum questions in English education institutions.

There are many voices on school and higher education, including education scholars, but also teachers and academics working in education institutions, who stress the neo-liberal transformation of curricula and the thereby reduction or even removal of humanities and citizenship studies. Neoliberalism shifted governance away from the state towards a system emphasising privatisation, competition, performance management through audit cultures, and the cultivation of subjects who are expected to cope in the high pressure and risky cultures it produces. Schools and universities are supposed and have increasingly been expected to prepare children and young adults to succeed in such cultures by developing curricula that focus primarily on 'transferable' skills.

The 1988 Education Reform Act, concluded under then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, introduced corporate practices through bidding cultures, performance data collection, and niche marketing of

schools, and subsequent developments announced self-governing schools outside local authority control which could be formed in alliance with charities, faith groups, businesses, and other non-educational actors. The subsequent Conservative government of John Major passed an Education Act in 1992, mandating the inspection of schools by teams from the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). The results of both these periodic inspections and public examinations are used to rank schools against each other in league tables, and to extend or terminate the contracts of staff. Indeed, a school's 'survival' is dependent on doing 'well' in auditing results, which come to be seen as determinants of the effectiveness, worth and value of a school. UK schools are thus considered examples *par excellence* of a neo-liberal audit culture in which schools are under pressure to constantly produce evidence of their efficiency and effectivity. Some observers argue that the English schooling system is now constructed and constituted through these data and the data infrastructures that manage them. As hitting key metrics is thus a top priority for a school, it has an enormous influence on how decisions about timetabling are made and curricula are drafted. This logic and the obsession with performance measurement and league tables does not stop at university doors, but actually continues into and seizes the Higher Education system, too.

There is plenty of critical analysis of the UK's 'Research Excellence Framework' (REF) that puts scholarship under similar pressures of assessed research output and performance. Critics emphasise REF's anti-innovative, mainstreaming, and matrix-driven character as well as immense running costs for universities to conduct it that lead to accelerated and thus eventually depth-lacking research activities plus psychological consequences especially for younger academics. Another, a novel government instrument to intervene into Higher Education and to fast-track the neo-liberal shaping of UK universities is the 'Teaching Excellence Framework' (TEF; Department of Business, Innovation, and Skills). The overall design of the TEF is customer and skill oriented with "Employment Destination" and "Potential highly-skilled jobs metric" as the highest 'Student Outcomes and Learning Gain' criteria. The core metrics by which the accomplishments of those criteria is measured are the evaluation of three sets of questions from the so-called 'National Student Survey' (about "teaching quality", "assessment and feedback", and "academic support") as well as the continuation or non-continuation of studies. Not only that everyone involved in the National Student Survey became familiar with, and insightful of, its shortages and deficits (and thus it is utterly questionable in how far it can serve as a fair and appropriate matrix, *assuming that the quality of teaching and education can be measured, and instantly measured, at all*: very often the appreciation of learning and teaching comes much later in life than when being an active student or pupil); but the role, expectations, and experiences of university teachers and students become economically narrowed down to the function of "providers" and "customers" as if the university and learning would be a big market place. (The language of "customer" and "providers" is actually used widely in different versions of the mentioned document). And the positive outcomes of teaching and learning are determined in the section "Aspects of Quality", Paragraph 31, as mainly

consisting in the acquisition of (quotation) “knowledge, skills, and experience necessary to compete for a graduate level job and successfully securing graduate-level employment”. No mention of democracy, citizenship, moral values, or critical thinking, let alone the language which is centred on the idea of competitiveness (rather than, for example, on solidarity or humanity).

Accordingly are curricula contents structured, and I reflect in the following on some experiences from teaching Politics at an English university. The typical curriculum is organised in twelve teaching weeks in which week 1 is usually used for an Introduction and week 12 for a Conclusion or revision for the assessment; thus 10 content-specific weeks remain while there is usually one different sub-topic under the umbrella of the general course theme each week. The time and space for debate and for the thoughtful elaboration of questions and ways of how to engage them is thus genuinely very restricted (in addition to the constraints that are due to a Master degree of 1 year or a PhD programme of 3 years only). This restrictive time-content ratio is supported by so-called text books and their stunning sale rates in the UK that usually edit and reboil a topic in text-inserted boxes with summaries and key questions to remember about this very topic. (These boxes are often the only readings some students do, however, not because they are genuinely lazy, but because they *are* – said and told to be – ‘customers’ and are embedded in a neo-liberal educational culture of the consumption of ‘knowledge’; and what does a customer need to know: “how something is priced, but not why”; thus, such text boxes are epitomes of ‘transferable skills’). As Michael Sandel sharply and aptly observed, we do not only have neo-liberalism, but *are* (made) neo-liberal (subjects).

Of course, there are exceptions, but the narrative above is intended to describe the usual practice as well as some indications of the neo-liberal seizure of Higher Education that could not be more dissimilar to an education culture (“*Bildungskultur*”) that allows for time and space for critical, profound deliberation (of different perspectives on a topic, their knowledge claims, and their evidence and validity) and that therefore realizes the idea of the university as shelter and hotbed for citizenry education and the development of democratic political judgment. To come back to the considerations of the university as a condition for each democratic society and their mission to teach critical knowledge, the current UK education system does not fulfil this condition and mission and has moved a long way away from being able to assume this role (unless, and here lies a unique and maybe the only chance, staff and head of departments/head of schools are creative in carving out spaces that can operate detached from neo-liberal rationalities such as extra-curricula activities). These brief sketches about the UK education system may have revealed some generalizable patterns and trends, at least when looking into the US. (Looking into Scandinavia and Continental Europe is probably delivering different narratives as well as very different aspects of social mobility, access to education and tuition fee systems, research assessments and evaluations. *UK and US developments can then serve at least as alerts.*)

What remains to be done?

Answers to this question, according to the analyses above, do not make optimistic. There will be short-term successes against totalitarian populist politics through constitutional, legal, and institutional fights and these are very important as they keep the democratic principles of rule of law and checks and balances alive and fundamentally belong to forms of democratic resistance. The restoration of political judgment and apperception and the thus recapturing of deformations (and here one may assume that populist manipulation find some conditions for their success already in place, thus utilize preceding deformations of democratic politics as their fertile ground), however, might take some time. And if the argument made about education is correct, then it might even take generations and depends very much upon the reversing of the worst consequences of neo-liberalism – a Samson task. It seems therefore that we have to live with *and resist* populism and its totalitarian politics for quite some time until we have back a citizenry that is accomplished with political judgment and solidarity for their fellow human beings through these being/having become prime education objectives; and who prioritises the democratic common good over their own, individual advantages. The latter is difficult and one may have some understanding for (at least some of) the voters for Trump et al. as there are undeniably structural problems in our modern societies with elites, corruption, global economies that leave behind many, the employment market, hypostatized moral claims, etc.; however, likewise undeniably, the very wrong consequences are drawn as if Trump, de Wilders, le Pen etc. could solve these problems. It thus remains to be feared that large parts of their electorate are and will be let down twice: by the real issues of mentioned problems and by ‘their’ leaders that cannot fix these problems through nationalism, protectionism, and unleashed economic deregulation and their violent phantasmagoria, in addition to the specific problem of their attempts to manipulate our minds. It remains to be hoped that a democratically and critically educated citizenry would come to realise this and comprehensively discredit populist leaders.