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Estefanía Cruz Lera*

The Politics of Resentment, Protagonist in the Storyline Of Global Populism

How have we gotten to the point where, amidst one of most serious pandemics in human history, we are witnessing things like the denial of scientific evidence about the SARS-CoV-2 virus and a blind belief in conspiracy theories? What kind of rational thinking is behind mass protests defending “my body, my decision” in the face of mandates of obligatory mask-wearing to protect public health? What explanation can we offer in our hyper-diverse contexts for the increase in hate crimes against people with Asian features for completely baselessly being considered propagators of the virus? How is it possible for people to demand a supposed right

to purchase the vaccine even if they’re not a frontline worker or a member of a vulnerable group? Are these trends new or are they only one more facet of old evils like social individualism, political mistrust, racism, or apophobia (the rejection of the poor)? How are all these variables a breeding ground for the rise in the politics of resentment and the reinvention of global populism?

Today, the sources of meaning for personal and group identities have diversified. The geographical space where we are born, our ethnic group, or the class we identify with are no longer the only variables that feed our political ideology. To that extent, we see a proliferation of opposing rhetoric: progressives vs. reactionaries, liberals vs. conservatives, rural vs. urban, open vs. closed, rational vs. irrational.

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The dimensions of political conflict have changed, but confrontation continues. Before, we were mainly divided by our positions on economic decisions; now, cultural and social dimensions have been added to the mix. Thus, in the political sphere, suspicion, distrust, indignation, frustration, and resentment are constantly emerging.

Given social diversification, we can observe two contrasting dynamics: the first is greater tolerance in the public sphere, which facilitates the adoption of inclusive policies. This can be seen mainly in cosmopolitan, progressive contexts gradually exposed to diversity, which have had more time and a larger number of interactions to be able to assume the new demographic reality. The second occurs in places where people feel excluded from national projects, on the margins of societies in which they consider that their demands are eclipsed by the voices of the urban elites and liberal intellectual ghettos, people who have had to abruptly deal with diversity. These contexts breed profound social indignation and political resentment.

In 2005, in the little town of developed Switzerland, Wangen Bei Olten, which has a small Turkish community, local inhabitants engaged in a controversy that opened the door to the conservative/nationalist change in the entire country. The Turkish community dreamed of its mosque having a large minaret that could be visible from anywhere. The minarets are the towers next to mosques from where the muezzin calls to prayer five times a day. The non-Turkish locals thought that construction would be contrary to Swiss national identity and that such an ostentatious Muslim symbol had no place in the city. The local government opposed the minaret’s construction and the conflict grew and grew until it reached Switzerland’s Federal Supreme Court, which authorized the tower’s construction.

In response, in 2009 a conservative political party promoted a national referendum to prohibit the construction of minarets: the proposal received 58 percent of the

vote and was added to the Constitution.¹ The paradox is that the Supreme Court, which had authorized the construction based on the principle of religious freedom, is not elected by popular vote, while the local government is, as are referendums. In these supposedly democratic spaces, the politics of resentment are flowering. And Switzerland is not alone in this.

In 2016, Katherine Cramer did a field study in rural Wisconsin.² Her main objective was to understand how Pastor Scott Walker, from a small local community, had become famous enough to run in the U.S. Republican presidential primaries on an ultra-conservative platform. Cramer discovered that rural communities in the United States feel that the country’s liberal elites do not respect their values and way of life; that, in addition, values like hard work, religious devotion, communitarianism, and nationalism, were part of the authentic U.S.-American way of life, which they felt was eroding. Fukuyama points out that “the indignity of invisibility is often worse than the lack of resources” and that this perception is the arsenal of the politics of resentment.³

These kinds of episodes of indignation and signs of resentment, considered scandalous in urban areas, soon began to crop up in suburbs and in many cases spread to central U.S. cities. Then came Donald Trump, who demonstrated the fragility of the belief in a receptive, inclusive society. However, the politics of resentment is not exclusive to U.S. exceptionalism. With Orban in Hungary, Erdogan in Turkey, Modi in India, Bolsonaro in Brazil, López Obrador in Mexico, and on many other points on the planet we see how populist leaders, both right and left, come to power as a result of this politics of resentment.

The insurgencies of our time, including the nationalist movements and the rise of the extreme right, reveal a collective fury that almost no contemporary society has escaped from. But, the most concerning issue is that public spheres and common spaces have also become arenas for social resentment. Even places that have gone through profound civil conflicts, that were experiencing greater tolerance and receptiveness to contemporary dynamics related to new freedoms and greater diversity, have also been shaken by the echoes of this way of understanding politics.

One of the best-selling books in post-war Germany is *Germany Is Abolishing Itself: How We Are Putting Our Country in Jeopardy*.⁴ In it the author argues that the “open arms”

immigration policy would turn the original German population into a minority in a future that he hopes will never arrive. On the other side of this coin, France has become the stage for terrorist attacks directed at organizations that, exercising freedom of expression and cultural progress, critique very conservative practices of the French Muslim minority. The 2015 terrorist attacks on the *Charlie Hebdo* weekly are clear examples of how “the others,” immigrants and racial and religious minorities, are participants in the politics of resentment and are willing to take it to an extreme.

More frequently, people come to the conclusion that we do not understand the nation we live in. This can be because we do not agree with a social uprising; other times it is because we oppose the direction of reforms and decisions made by our representatives, or because the principles that made us belong seem to be getting weaker and weaker. Panjak Mishra explains it this way: “And yet we find ourselves in an age of anger, with authoritarian leaders manipulating the cynicism and discontent of furious majorities. . . . Suddenly . . . , humanism and rationalism can no longer explain the world we’re living in.”⁵

To gain power, populists offer such solutions that are so simple that their followers think that previous governments’ lack of political will, and not these measures’ possible pernicious effects on the common welfare, is the reason that they were not implemented before. Mounk explains, “When populists are running for office, they primarily direct their ire against ethnic or religious groups whom they don’t recognize as part of the ‘real’ people. Once populists hold office, they increasingly direct their ire against a second target: all institutions, formal or informal, that dare to contest their claim to a moral monopoly of representation.”⁶ This shows that the politics of resentment has the collateral effects of putting institutions in check and risking the foundations of democracy.

Populist political leaders win office with promises to return power to the people, to redirect the course of the nation, to reestablish the relationship between government and the governed, damaged by the corrupt elites, and to renew the national spirit. Taken together, economic insecurity, the feeling of having lost social status, conflictive social interactions, unfulfilled promises of growth and progress, and the perception of not being a participant in the cultural elites or of enjoying their proportional amount of power are the components of the politics

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of social resentment that populists take advantage of to take the helm.

One of the main problems is that populisms arise from unexpected places. Rich and poor, native and immigrant populations, minorities and majorities can all equally vote for populist leaders. Donald Trump became president thanks to poor, Midwestern, white U.S. supporters, but he was also backed by businessmen from the economic elite. He got votes from the white majority, but also from Afro-Americans, Latinxs, and people from universities. From different political identities, in almost all the corners of the Earth, the politics of resentment materializes with populist impetus. A president with that orientation is elected by a people moved by that impetus, a people who buy his messages and projects. That is how autocrats, demagogues, psychopaths, misogynists, nativists, racists, and their ilk are taking power.

The problem is, then, that all the resentment and social rage are discovered only late in the game, once they have become a political movement, whose noxious effects on democratic institutions have already made themselves felt. Only societies’ common sense, the existence of viable opportunities for indignant communities that have been made invisible, and clear horizons of social reconciliation can stop the onslaught of these leaders, who will take things to their most dire extremes without the slightest hesitation. As long as these conditions do not exist, there will continue to be unreasonable, aggravated violence like what we have seen over and over in world history.

When public health is challenged in the supposed defense of individual freedoms, when xenophobia and nativism stigmatize Asians and attempt to put immigrants in the last place in line for vaccination, when economic elites demand their right to purchase a vaccine instead of putting frontline workers first despite their greater vulnerability, we see how it is easier to feed the politics of

resentment than its antidotes: unity, resilience, empathy, and communitarianism. Populist leaders can be thrown out by democratic organizations and movements, but the populist impulses fostered by resentment and social rage will persist.

The ideas of social equity and individual empowerment have never before had so many defenders, although at the same time they have never felt so distant and difficult to achieve. The truth is that politics can be chaotic and destructive, but it also has its redeeming moments, even the politics of resentment. The question here is whether populist leaders will withdraw after being defeated in elections. But, will we overcome the politics of resentment and leave behind the era of social rage? These complex challenges cannot be overcome by decree; they require more than a change of colors in our governments. **MM**

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Notes

- 1 Dina Wyler, "The Swiss Minaret Ban Referendum and Switzerland's International Reputation: A Vote with an Impact," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* vol. 37, no. 4, 2017, pp. 413-425; doi: 10.1080/13602004.2017.1405506.
- 2 Katherine Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press/Urbana, 2016).
- 3 Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), p. 80.
- 4 Thilo Sarrazin, *Germany Is Abolishing Itself: How We Are Putting Our Country in Jeopardy* (Berlin: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2010).
- 5 Panjak Minshra, "Welcome to the Age of Anger," *The Guardian*, December 8, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/dec/08/welcome-age-anger-brexit-trump>.
- 6 Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy. Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 43.

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