

Populism Across the Globe
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Angry people with grievances are making themselves felt around the world in elections. These are not the historically familiar revolutionaries demanding freedom or hungry mobs torching the palaces of their masters (French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions). Instead, these are people rejecting the values that shaped the modern Western world, liberal democracy (a system promoting liberty, but with checks and balances). "Power to the People" has a long and ugly history.

In Europe in 1099, European Christians finally reacted to several centuries of Muslim expansion: the enforced conversion to Islam of most of North Africa\222s and the Holy Land\222s Christians. Christian pilgrims were barred from Jerusalem where the holiest church in Christendom had been built over what they believed was the burial place of Jesus. This pilgrimage route was now in the hands of Muslims, who kidnapped wealthy pilgrims for ransom and robbed and often enslaved other pilgrims. The Pope and the Emperor in Constantinople sought help from the kings and knights of France and England. The first Crusade was called and the promise of remission of sins (and loot) proved irresistible.

It took a year for the nobility to raise their armies and put their properties into the hands of their wives. But footloose peasants were ready to go immediately, creating the "People\222s Crusade." They didn\222t know where the Holy Land was, but one crazy hermit named Peter led the mob down the Rhine River Valley where they murdered every Jew they could find. It was, after all, a Crusade against the infidel, wasn\222t it? They then trekked into Hungary where they found people who did not speak a language derived from Latin. They spoke Hungarian, which the peasants thought, incorrectly, that they were infidels. They were not infidels; they were Christians. The Emperor had to send troops into Hungary to protect his subjects; they slaughtered the rabble.

In history, most societies had three classes of people: the elites (kings and nobility), merchants (often wealthy), and peasants, the vast majority downtrodden and on the edge of famine. When crops failed or a king appeared weak, peasants would revolt. In China, for example, resentful peasants brought down many Chinese dynasties over the centuries. In Europe and Muslim lands, however, such peasant rebellions were put down ferociously---until the French Revolution in 1789, which got them anarchy followed by dictatorship.

Today, after a century in which almost all countries have been the beneficiaries of exposure to Western Civilization\222s democratic values of rule of law, independent judiciary, and free press, most rebellions have been by people wanting more, not less, democracy. The Arab Spring was an example of this, and it failed because only a minority of the citizens understood Enlightenment values; the majority only understood traditional Islamic values.

Today, the rebels come from rural, versus urban populations. There has always been a difference between the people in the countryside who are insular, close to the edge financially, and religiously and educationally conservative. The urban populations are better educated, more tolerant of diversity, and are less afraid of change. This conflict is producing a global challenge to Enlightenment values.

The Trump election, the British exit from the EU, and the close elections throughout Europe where cosmopolitan elites barely won, show the new power of populists. But taking a long view, this is a temporary challenge to Enlightenment values. The demographic changes in the world favor the continued growth of cities and continued rural meltdown. We need fewer farmers to feed us and robots will replace menial labor.

The danger facing cities is economic inequality. If the urban underclass continues to grow and not to share in their nation\222s wealth, we can expect more populists with pitchforks (or suicide bombs) who will challenge the educated elites. Venezuela is an example of bad elites and ignorant masses. They elected a demagogue (Hugo Chavez) who raided the treasury to give the mob benefits that could not be sustained. The pitchforks are back and the food shops empty.

Resentment and anger do not create great societies; they only bring demagogues who promise the moon but provide only disaster.

682 words

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