

Demand for Populism as a Symptom of Learned Helplessness



*

ESZTER
NOVA

If we are to tackle populism, we should pay more attention to its demand, rather than its supply. The demand for populism may seem confident and powerful, but it is merely an expression of learned helplessness in the face of (real or perceived) threats. Oppressive regimes thrive on helplessness. A population reduced to helplessness is docile and passive – even when it is outwardly loud and belligerent. Its symptoms include the dissolution of individual perspectives (identifying with the leaders), active inaction, as well as the onset of a survival mentality – unsuitable for everyday life. The presented article sets out to explain the creation and nature of learned helplessness – as well as its political implications.

The best predictor of receptiveness to populism is what political scientists call authoritarian world view¹. Authoritarian world view, in turn, is firmly rooted in an overemphasis on threats (fear) and the sense of inability to cope with them. In other words, helplessness. The problem with populism is that it erodes liberal democracy and ushers in authoritarianism (the erosion of freedoms, rule of law, democracy and checks and balances).

The theory of learned helplessness proposes that once the so-called outcome-response independence is internalized by the victim, it is very hard to unlearn. When we look at the political implications, we will find that it is also used by authoritarian regimes. Populistic politicians also instinctively play on this instrument – only to a lesser degree and at an earlier stage. It

is therefore less obvious. Studying authoritarian regimes thus sheds light on often overlooked mechanisms of the gradual disempowerment of people, such as appealing to and promoting learned helplessness.

Populists, as well as authoritarian leaders communicate that individuals are not in the position to cope with threats and should rely exclusively on a strongman. A populist in a democracy has to attract support first by continuously emphasizing threats, such as terrorism – and offering himself as an effective strongman. An authoritarian leader can enforce this sentiment from above, only using threats as a justification (or even posing a threat himself). It is no coincidence that dictatorships have been created by populists, who only offered to take care of threats effectively. Demanding that their power should not be limited by the rule of law is one way for populist voters to compensate for their own sense of helplessness (in a way, to empower themselves, given their strong identification with their leader).

¹ MacWilliams, M. (2016) *Donald Trump is attracting authoritarian primary voters, and it may help him to gain the nomination*. Available [online]: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2016/01/27/donald-trump-is-attracting-authoritarian-primary-voters-and-it-may-help-him-to-gain-the-nomination/>



OUR SPACES OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE ARE LITTERED WITH BEHAVIORAL AND ATTITUDE “NUDGES”. MOST OF THEM POINT TO UNFREEDOM. WITHOUT BRINGING THESE NUDGES TO LIGHT WE ARE REDUCED TO CHASING THE SYMPTOMS, SUCH AS POPULISM, XENOPHOBIA, CORRUPTION, ANTI-DEMOCRATIC RELAPSE, STATE CAPTURE, AND ANTI-SEMITISM

When invoking threats, populists create the sense of emergency – it then triggers the feeling of helplessness in their victims. They also erode social capital (horizontal bonds of trust in society) by eroding trust in one’s own competence. By the end of the vicious cycle, freedoms are decimated, democracies reduced to majoritism, the rule of law dismissed as ineffective.

The underlying problem is a self-reinforcing spiral consisting of: fear of failure, the absence of horizontal bonds of trust, reflexivity, fear of the unknown, the dissolution of the individual’s own perspective, clinging to and encouraging fear, victim blaming², learned helplessness, identifying with the powerful, and considering freedom to be a luxury. [See Figure 1.]

Our spaces of political discourse are littered with behavioural and attitude “nudges”. Most of them point to unfreedom. Without bringing these nudges to light we are reduced to chasing the symptoms, such as populism, xenophobia, corruption, anti-democratic relapse, state capture, and anti-Semitism. It is also popular to address the excuses on the surface, such as emergencies, enemies, economic or security challenges of the day.

SUPPLY AND DEMAND FOR POPULISM

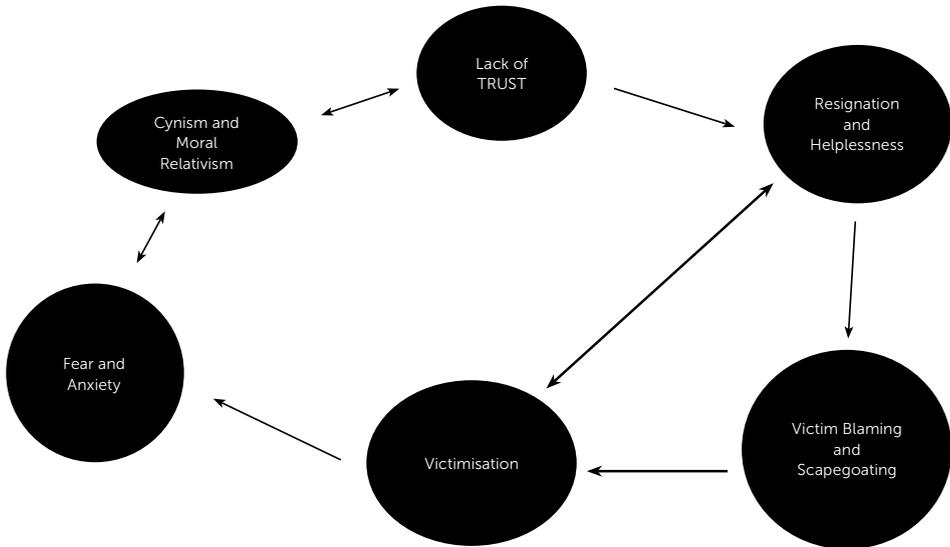
“And do you have anti-Semitism in your village?”

“No,” says the old man.

“Good,” says the researcher and takes down a note.

² Read more in: Peterson, C. & Seligman, M. (1983) “Learned Helplessness and Victimization”, [In:] *Journal of Social Issues*, 39: pp. 103–116. Lerner, M. (2002) “Pursuing the Justice Motive”, [In:] Michael Ross, Dale T. Miller: *The Justice Motive in Everyday Life*. Lerner, M. J. (1980) “The Belief in a Just World A Fundamental Delusion”, [In:] *Perspectives in Social Psychology*.

Figure 1: Combinations of these elements can mutually trigger and reinforce one another and together they cause a (re)lapse into an authoritarian (unfree) thinking habit, starting a vicious cycle that uses the gravity of fear.



*"Although," continues the old man
"there's demand for it."*

There are always two sides to political ideas: supply and demand. The interaction of those two creates politics. In other words: without receptiveness for populist rhetoric, a populist politician is highly unlikely to succeed.

Is populism done by voters or political elites? The answer is most likely both – or something that occurs during their interaction – however the literature seems to be obsessed with the supply side only. The demand, however, is rarely studied. The receptiveness to populist ideas is hard to quantify and thus often neglected. The difficulty of quantification should, however, not stop us from trying to understand it.

The focus will therefore be put on the people who appear to be more or less receptive to the rhetoric of populism. In order

to understand the role of learned helplessness in the receptiveness to populism one could look at the creation, maintenance and usage of helplessness by authoritarian regimes. Examining societies with an authoritarian past sheds light on the mechanism as helplessness makes one more receptive to the messages of a strongman, a simplistic solution, and unconcerned by the erosion of the rule of law.

Oppressive regimes thrive on helplessness. A population reduced to helplessness is docile and passive. It is inactive and more likely to come up with justifications for the system and their own place in it, better than any ideology could. They will also discourage dissent among their own lot, to defend this world view.

The sense of one's own competence can be eroded by learned helplessness. Low confidence in one's own (political) influence is also correlated with a low trust level

in society. (I am unable to change things and so is everyone else – I therefore should not trust them, or their competence.) It is crucial to understand how authoritarian regimes pursue helplessness, and how their people internalize it, along with how this sentiment is conveyed by peers and society by projection and reflexivity.

The lack of trust in one's own competence causes a sense of dependence. Complete dependence and seeing no way out of the situation triggers terror-bonding, bonding between the victim and the aggressor. And that causes the dissolution of one's own individual perspective – and makes them identify with the leader.

From this viewpoint it does not matter whether dependence has been imposed on the victim by force from above, or has crept up in the form of an all-encompassing welfare regime. Whether this helplessness was caused by one big shock, or the gradual erosion of one's own sense of agency. It is also irrelevant whether the dependence is straightforward (government keeps me safe) or reversed (government can choose to kill me). Any combination of the abovementioned can result in the erosion of one's sense of agency, or learned helplessness.

As a consequence of helplessness, survival mentality overtakes aspirations and undercuts innovation and prosperity in a society³. Prolonged rationalization of inaction prepares the ground for complicity, a form of Stockholm syndrome with relation to the system, and makes it less likely to reverse the process. The latter is better understood if we take a look at the arguments people use to rationalize their own inaction.

³ Inglehart, R. & Welzel, Ch. (2005) *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence*, Cambridge University Press.

THE THEORY OF LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

The original learned helplessness theory comes from an experiment by Richard L. Solomon, who had trained dogs to induce the sense of helplessness and the resulting inaction.

In his experiment, dogs were placed in a box divided by a chest-high barrier. An electric shock would come on and the dogs would learn that jumping over the barrier makes the shock go away. After repeated shocks, the dogs learned without difficulty that jumping over the barrier relieves them from unpleasant shocks. Except for dogs that were first exposed to another experiment, in which there was nothing they could do to alleviate the shocks. The dogs that were exposed to the first experiment acted helplessly in the second one as well. They did not learn to jump to safety, or just very slowly. They simply stayed put and did not even try.

It was the uncontrollable nature of their environment that debilitated the dogs, not the discomfort of the shocks. The sooner in their development the experiment came, the less likely they became to eventually unlearn the sense of helplessness and discover that jumping over the barrier alleviates the discomfort. It affected not just their ability to discover and learn (cognitive deficit), it caused a motivational deficit as well – which largely translates into depression.⁴

⁴ Seligman, M. (1974) Depression and learned helplessness, John Wiley & Sons. Seligman, M. & Friedman, R. J. (Ed); Katz, M. (Ed), (1974) "Depression and learned helplessness", [In:] *The psychology of depression: Contemporary theory and research*, Oxford, England: John Wiley & Sons, XVII, p. 318. Seligman, M. (1990) *Learned optimism: How to change your mind and your life*. New York, Simon & Schuster. Abramson, L. Y., M. E. Seligman & J.D. Teasdale (1978) "Learned helplessness in humans: critique and reformulation", [In:] *Journal of abnormal psychology*, 87.1 (1978): p. 49.



“According to the original learned helplessness theory, experience with uncontrollable events can lead to the expectation that no responses in one’s own repertoire will control future outcomes. This expectation of no control leads to motivational deficits (lower response initiation and lower persistence), cognitive deficits (inability to perceive existing opportunities to control outcomes), and, in humans, emotional deficits (sadness and lowered self-esteem)” (Hoeksema, Girgus & Seligman 1986:435)⁵.

The victim of such conditioning thus learns to expect the so-called response-outcome independence – the feeling that nothing that remains in their power can change the situation. The resulting motivational, cognitive and emotional impairment is widely researched, partly because it is a symptom of depression⁶. The inability to control one’s environment has repeatedly been shown to create not only anger and frustration but, eventually, deep and often insurmountable depression. In a sense, inducing learned helplessness makes a person give up. But the effect runs even deeper: many of the animals used in the studies died or became severely ill shortly afterwards.

INDUCING HELPLESSNESS

Authoritarian leaders instinctively play from the age-old rulebook of oppression – and so do populists, to a lesser degree. But if one is not familiar with the mechanisms of this oppressive tool, one must not despair. There is a manual for inducing

helplessness (or regression, in the 1980s jargon) in people. The manuals of torture elaborate on the subject of inducing helplessness.

As the recent findings of the U.S. Senate Committee on Intelligence have revealed, the military has long used the findings of the psychology of learned helplessness⁷. Seligman’s work turned out to have inspired many, including the intelligence establishment- he has even given at least one lecture on learned helplessness to the U.S. Navy in 2002, although with the intention to protect soldiers from the state during torture. His techniques, designed to ameliorate the effects of torture, were reverse engineered and transformed from ensuring the resistance of American soldiers to destroying the resistance and orchestrating the torture of detainees in Guantánamo, Afghanistan and Iraq. This, however, is no recent development. The C.I.A.’s *Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual* escribed various non-violent means to induce psychological regression in 1983⁸.

“The purpose of all coercive techniques is to induce psychological regression in the subject by bringing a superior outside force to bear on his will to resist. Regression is basically a loss of autonomy, a reversion to an earlier behavior level. As the subject regresses, his learned personality traits fall away in reverse chronological order. He begins to lose the capacity to carry out the highest creative activities, to deal with complex situations, to cope with stressful

⁵ Nolen-Hoeksema, S., Girgus, J. & Seligman, M. (1986) “Learned helplessness in children: a longitudinal study of depression, achievement, and explanatory style”, [In:] *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 51.2 (1986): p. 435.

⁶ Maier, S. F. & Seligman, M. (1976) “Learned helplessness: Theory and evidence”, [In:] *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, Vol 105(1), Mar 1976, pp. 3-46.

⁷ Senate Select Committee on Intelligence – Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency’s Detention and Interrogation Program (Released: December 3, 2014), Available [online]: <http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/study2014/sscistudy1.pdf>

⁸ C.I.A. Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual (1983), Available [online]: <http://americanempireproject.com/empiresworkshop/chapter3/DODHumanResourceExploitationTrainingManual1983.pdf>

interpersonal relationships, or to cope with repeated frustrations." (C.I.A. Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual, 1983).

The report set forth the so-called D.D.D method of interrogation, what stands for Debility, Dependency and Dread. Debility is here understood as physical weakness (*"Many psychologists consider the threat of inducing debility to be more effective than debility itself"*), they also signify the need to ensure the sense of dependency, where the prisoner *"is helplessly dependent upon the "questioner" for the satisfaction of all basic needs"*; finally, dread is defined as intense fear and anxiety:

"Sustained long enough, a strong fear of anything vague or unknown induces regression. On the other hand, materialization of the fear is likely to come as a relief. The subject finds that he can hold out and his resistance is strengthened."

In other words, the threat of repercussions works better than repercussions themselves. Should one wish to reduce a population to helplessness, one is better off keeping the monster in the closet, so to speak, and let people's imagination do the job. Threats (such as imprisonment or loss of employment) are thus used sparingly to ensure the inactivity and erode resistance.

Nevertheless, in order to find out exactly what kind of harassment works best to induce the state of inactivity, let us now take a look at more recent experiments.

INTERMITTENT (CONDITIONAL) ABUSE WORKS BEST

Researchers at Waseda University, Tokyo, have created a method to induce depression in rats in order to test antidepressants on them⁹. A robotic rat was thus used to

terrorism the rats until they exhibit signs of depression, signaled by a lack of activity. But the exact method of harassment makes a difference.

The robotic rats were programmed with three different modes of behavior: "chasing," "continuous attack" and "interactive attack." Each one was designed to induce a different level of stress. Chasing stresses the rats out, while the attacks create an environment of pain and fear. In the interactive attack, the rat is only attacked if it moves, while the continuous attack means it is constantly under fire.

Researchers set the robots loose on two groups of 12 young rats once a day for five days in continuous attack mode. A few weeks later, when the rats had matured, their movements were studied in an open field and while the robot chased it. Then, rats in group A were re-exposed to continuous attacks, while group B was exposed to the interactive attack.

The intermittent, interactive form of attack proved to be the most stressful. It was most effective in creating a deep depression (signaled by inaction) in a mature rat that had been harassed during development.

In other words, after an initial training of *response-outcome independence*, a system designed to suppress action and resistance should only punish action when the victims try and should spare the rod when the subjects are silent and comply. This way, it can achieve deeper helplessness and compliance than by solely applying continuous terror. It also teaches the subjects to hold back each other from trying.

animal model of depression using a small mobile robot", [In:] *Advanced Robotics*, 27:1, pp. 61-69, Available [online]: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01691864.2013.752319>

⁹ Ishii, H. et.al. (2013) "A novel method to develop an

Authoritarian leaders make sure that taking action is futile and only makes things worst. Populist leaders strongly suggest it.

THE NEED TO PROVIDE A JUSTIFICATION FOR INACTION

Weakness, dependency and fear happen to be in the toolkit of not just the C.I.A. but any self-respecting authoritarian leader, and to a lesser degree of any populist leader who wishes to secure re-election and a docile electorate. Citizens may have more options to act than prisoners do. But motivational, cognitive and emotional deficit work against them. Especially in the absence of social capital. Having an intention to protest is meaningless if they cannot hope that others would stand with them. But the option to do nothing is always present. This is when the justification for one's own inaction is needed.

"As soon as possible, the "questioner" should provide the subject with the rationalization that he needs for giving in and cooperating. This rationalization is likely to be elementary, an adult version of a childhood excuse such as:

"They made you do it."

"All the other boys are doing it."

"You're really a good boy at heart."

(From the C.I.A. Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual, 1983¹⁰)

In other words, the political system must provide some excuse for compliance and dropping moral considerations. Eroding trust in other individuals (social capital), allows the subject to blame

it on the system and help in maintaining the illusion of integrity by dissociating one's actions from his or hers moral standing or by inducing moral relativism and cynicism.

POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Oppressive regimes thrive on the learned helplessness of the population. Learning that protest and dissent does not change anything is part of socialization. And as we have seen with dogs, the younger they were when exposed to the experience that taught them that there is nothing they can do to alleviate unpleasant things – the less likely they are to unlearn this conditioning later.

A population reduced to helplessness is less likely to resist, and even when it does, it is by nature more fearful, poorly prepared (*cognitive deficit*) and more likely to fail (*lower persistence*). Such individuals are more likely to come up with justifications instead – for the system and their own place in it (*emotional deficit*) – better than any ideology could. They will even discourage dissent among their own lot to defend this world view, passing the sense of helplessness down the generations.

DISSOLUTION OF PERSPECTIVES AKA. FEARING THE ABSENCE OF POWER MORE THAN ITS ABUSE

Hints of depression such as the belief that bad things happen because of one's own inadequacy are not necessarily limited to self-explanations. Helplessness and negative self-explanatory style can be projected onto society. Statements like "people are hopeless" or "they got the government they deserve" are proof that blaming the victim and a negative self-explanatory style are in action (either directly or through projection).

¹⁰ C.I.A. Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual (1983), Available [online]: <http://americanempireproject.com/empiresworkshop/chapter3/DODHumanResourceExploitationTrainingManual1983.pdf>



ELITES CAN BE
POPULISTIC. ALL
THEY NEED IS
CLAIMING TO BE
"THE PEOPLE". NOT
REPRESENTING
THEM, BUT BEING
THEM

The lack of trust in one's own competence causes a sense of dependence. Complete dependence and seeing no way out of the situation triggers terror-bonding, bonding between the victim and the aggressor. And that causes the dissolution of one's own individual perspective – and forces them to identify with the leader.

In their 2013 study¹¹, Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser point out that:

"...populism has two direct opposites: elitism and pluralism. Those who adhere to elitism share the Manichean distinction between 'the people' and 'the elite', but think that the former is a dangerous and unwise mob, while the latter is seen as an intellectually and morally superior group of actors, who should be in charge of the government – technocrats are a key example of this.

In contrast to populism and elitism, pluralism is based on the very idea that society is composed of different individuals and groups."

Nevertheless, saying that populism is anti-elitist assumes that incumbent leaders cannot be populists. A populist incumbent, however, is not unheard of. Viktor Orbán of Hungary has showed us that it is more than possible. Elites can be populist. All they need is claiming to be "the people". Not representing them, but being them. They can even beat up one segment of voters by claiming to represent the majority, i.e. "the people". They can set groups against each other. From this angle, democracy is just incomplete populism. Ruling for the people, by the people. As all the "people's republics" among former socialist countries can attest, ruling can come in the name of the people, but doesn't ensure any kind of freedom or concern with people's well-being. (Apart from identifying themselves with the people, populist and authoritarian elites prefer a homogenous view of societies. This helps them when they want to divide and conquer – or turn people against various minorities.)

My working definition of populism concern itself with *people*, not *elites*. I would therefore replace anti-elitism with a broader problem of the dissolution of individual perspectives – or, more visibly, identifying with leaders. It causes people to be receptive to the above rhetoric: they are willing to think from the viewpoint of their leader and enjoy "being" him.

Someone, who is capable of identifying with their leaders will always be susceptible to populism – and other vices. It is only that sometimes politicians choose not to use it for evil.

¹¹ Mudde, C. & Kaltwasser, C. R. (2013) "Populism", [In:] Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargent and Marc Stears (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 493-512.

The benefits of identifying with the strongman include empowering oneself – by proxy. This is also why people applaud the demolition of checks and balances. They fear the limitations on power more than power itself.

People receptive to populism will display an impatience with democratic checks on power. They feel helpless in creating safety in their own lives, so they want *the strongman* to be capable. Added benefit (for a populist) is that they regard themselves from above – and are unconcerned by their own oppression. They genuinely want *other people* to be kept under control (even at the cost of being controlled themselves) – they don't feel the need to keep power in check. Projecting one's own helplessness on others while identifying with the leader play a large role in letting power overgrow.

Populists like: Silvio Berlusconi, Jaroslaw Kaczyński, or Vladimír Mečiar tend to undermine the power of balances to their power, such as independent judges, prosecutors, and political opposition. Viktor Orbán and Hugo Chávez have introduced new constitutions that significantly undermine the system of checks and balances – reducing democracy to electoral majoritarianism. They put their loyalists into positions that are not supposed to be majoritarian, such as the courts, fiscal and monetary institutions, or the state prosecutor. The voters then applaud the dismissing of checks and balances.

When under the populist spell, people do not fear power, they fear the lack of power. Especially when they identify with their leader and want to empower themselves by proxy of empowering him. They are, after all, helpless. This is why it is tricky to expect people to rise against their governments first, before deserving outside help. It is naturally desirable that they want freedom

first and it does not just fall in their hands. This is, however somewhat equivalent to telling depressed people to just cheer up.

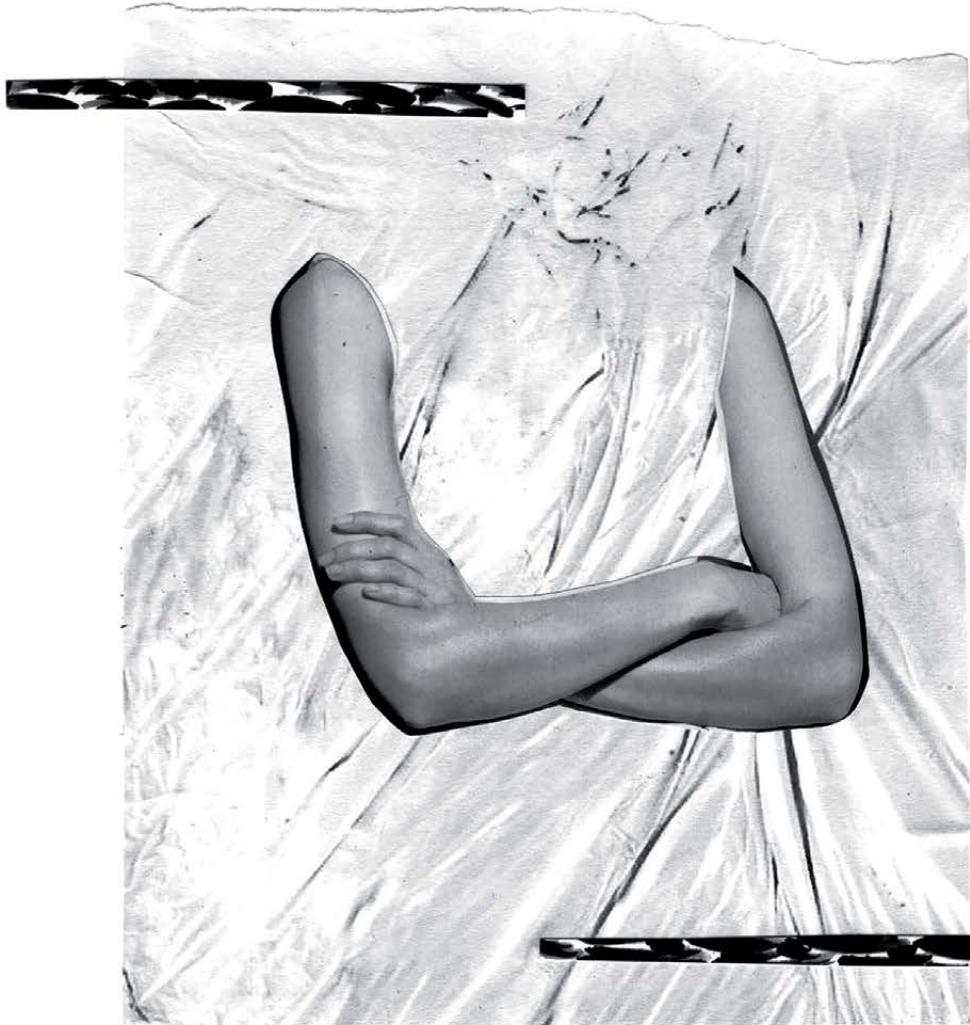
This is precisely why people do not revolt. Partly because they were born into such a reality, or gradually got used to it. When someone has internalized the self-explanatory style of helplessness, they do not need constant aggression to be kept in check. The regime can count on the dysfunctional beliefs of its citizens (resistance is futile and counterproductive) as well as their well-developed excuses (as to why they like the system and how it is inevitable anyway).

Populism in its (perhaps) most abstract sense is an appeal to the gravity of human nature (real or perceived) by a politician – and being receptive to this message by a voter. The question is thus why someone becomes receptive. And from then, how can it be undone. Helplessness (and receptiveness to populism) is a mental habit. And it should be made apparent and dislodged accordingly.

DARE TO SPEAK OUR MINDS AKA. FEARMONGERING AND OMISSION

Populism appeals to one's desire for safety – rather than the desire to be free. Proponents say that populism is useful inasmuch as it brings up the issues that large parts of the population care about, but that the political elites want to avoid discussing. It sounds fantastic, unless one understands the power of framing and omission. An unreflective diagnosis of the problems and quick-fix solutions are the opposite of being helpful. So is neglecting the power of bottom-up cooperation in favor of the top-down "strongman" approach.

Populism is the malicious framing of issues as well as the complete absence of mentioning the individual's power to deal



with them. In other words, implanting and appealing to the sense of helplessness. Promoting inaction and asking for power in exchange for taking care of certain things.

There is no such thing as bringing up issues neutrally. The way in which we address (frame) an issue pretty much determines what we think about it. It definitely decides what we give thoughts to and what we omit. We cannot focus on or fear from something that hasn't been brought to our attention. But when threats are highlighted to us, it is our deepest desire to get a solution too. And that is where populists excel.

Without conscious deliberation they jump straight to dangerously immoral and oversimplistic solutions. When the populist *speaks our minds*, we fail to do the following:

Defining the problem: For example, "immigrants" is not a problem. Employment options, fear for diminishing welfare perks, security issues, terrorism are – but they are all only tangentially related and conflating the issues doesn't help thinking. But an accurate definition of the problem would not evoke fear.

- What do we want to achieve?
- Can/should something be done?
- By whom?

What happens instead is someone shouting "*Immigrants!*" and making out a policy from our vague desire to make the problem go away. But again, it was just pointing a finger at a bogeyman, naming our fears – and thereby facilitating the kind of frozen terror that makes every individual feel individually helpless.

ACTIVE INACTION AKA. "SOMEONE. DO. SOMETHING."

The inaction and motivational deficit of victims of populism is not apparent either. We picture a depressed person lying on the couch and doing nothing – whereas such clinical episodes of depression are relatively rare compared to subthreshold depression, where the lack of motivation is concealed by layers of everyday buzz, loud opinions and round-the-clock activity. What is not seen though is that all the frenzied action of a depressed person is merely reactive and that self-explanatory style tends to be negative and distrustful of individual competence. There is also a notable absence of aspirational action.

People who are helpless prefer to err on the safe side – and come up with explanations why inaction is necessary, unavoidable, even rational. Populists appeal to helplessness by justifying inaction by being the strongman who offers to bring safety and take action. They appeal to one's inner inaction. Mentioning threats serves to emphasize the need for safety and to trigger helplessness – not to warn. And so burning down refugee shelters is not taking action, protesting something is not taking action - volunteering to help refugees is.

In order to see the contrast between the helplessness of a populist and a non-populistic individual one only needs to think about the volunteers' reaction in the face of the unspeakable emergency of "immigrants". Volunteers tackled the issues that have actually emerged. People affected by populist fearmongering were loud and angry – but have never even sent money. Their world view dictated that they are not to react and thus better do anything. Their strongmen will make the problems go away. They will build walls. They will send soldiers somewhere far away.

Protests and attacks on refugees are merely the surface of the underlying sense of helplessness. On the surface, helpless people are very active. They react to stimuli, make moves to avoid inconvenience or pain, they can be loud and demanding – but some aspects of a healthy mindset are still missing: notably aspirational values and a sense of personal empowerment.

CONCLUSIONS

The research on populism appears to be beset by several unfruitful questions. Firstly, it gives too much attention to surface issues – such as whether populism is exclusively right-wing or it could also be left-wing. Putting aside our disdain for such vague and useless terms, this is clearly just an examination of populist rhetoric – i.e. an overly generous amount of attention paid to the excuses and justifications of populists. It is also missing the curious similarity between the audiences of left- and right-wing politicians.

Attempts to define populism also tend to be vague and suffer from the “*What would Chavez do?*” syndrome, i.e. the effort to cover everything we want it to cover, but at the same time leaving out what we do not consider populism. In reality, populism is merely the extreme end of a scale of what we call political communication – and non-populistic politicians also indulge in its practices from time to time.

This is also the reason why populism research grapples with the fact that not all populists are non-elitists. An incumbent leader can use it just as well. The answer lies once again in the minds of the followers. With the dissolution of individual perspectives (triggered by fear and dependence) nothing stands between the follower and identifying with his leader. In other words, it has nothing to do with elitism or the lack thereof. It is a coping mechanism on the side of the victims – exploited by the politicians.

Learned helplessness and the resulting survival mode, and absence of aspirational values are hard to spot – because they are covered by frantic activity and loud protests on the surface. But in order for the disempowering effect of populism to gain foothold, aspirational values must go. And nothing makes them disappear as effectively as fearmongering. Fear (economic or security threats, including anxieties about income security, fear of old age, etc.) is the justification of the existence of government in general – but only populists use it in such excess. Populistic leaders revel in triggering fear – and providing and unreflective, hasty and overly intuitive courses of action to make the threats go away.

More emphasis should be put on the receptiveness for populism, and one particular aspect of it: learned helplessness. Populism appeals to people’s frozen inaction, their sense of helplessness in the face of perceived threats, and thus a desire for safety – rather than their desire to be free. The solution is therefore in the receptiveness to populism, not its supply. Shedding light on and tackling the underlying psychological factors are the only way to fortify a society against populism. Expecting moderation and self-restraint in politicians is simply another way of avoiding the key problem.

Counter-populism should thus focus on the demand for populism, never adopt the framing of populism (such as using emergencies as an excuse to cut back human rights and to trigger fear) and put more focus on the empowerment of individuals. ●



*

ESZTER
NOVA

.....
Fellow at the Financial Research Institute in Budapest.