

Democracy and Populism: Fear and Hatred

John Lukacs

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John Lukacs's new book, *Democracy and Populism: Fear and Hatred*, returns to themes and views well-known from his many previous works of history and historical reflection. He affirms that we have arrived at the end of an age, when "democracy" was rising fast but not yet dominant, and have embarked on a new one in which popular sovereignty, as "populism," increasingly rules the world.

This book of reflections is written in short bursts of chapters, 35 in all. The writing is taut; the observations are crisp, tart, often more suggestive than fully elaborated. There is not a dull moment in it. Lukacs has always made his own way in the writing of history, and in *Democracy and Populism*, while reworking themes well-established in other works, he displays the sharp style and independence of thought that has distinguished his career. Although a conservative, Lukacs is a hard critic of

George W. Bush and has little use for the brand of democracy that he believes to be ascendant.

Lukacs is not simply cranky, hurling barbs in all directions. He does not suffer fools gladly, and when he has run into them, he announces the discovery. Over the course of his work, he has proclaimed Frances Fukuyama, the well-recognized author of *The End of History*, to be a “fool,” and has denounced the celebrated political philosopher Hannah Arendt as “muddled and dishonest.” This bluntness is not a pose. Lukacs has thought for a long time, and hard, on the questions he writes about, and he reacts with instinctive disdain for those whose own work falls far short of his own high standards of scholarship and careful reflection.

The politics of our day does not sit well with him. He fears that we face “the prospect of a modern democratic society in which the corruption of words and speech . . . may be governed by the manipulators of popular majorities, in which opposition parties and papers are permitted to exist, but their impression and influence hardly matter since their voices are weak” (p. 223). The source of this problem, which he views as so dire that he raises the specter of a new barbarism, is the triumph of populist politics—governance in the name of “the people”—expressed in various combinations of nationalism and socialism. Democracy has run wild—popular majorities dictate the general direction of affairs, impassioned by visions of tribal supremacy and a vicious determination to monitor and protect against “outsiders.” Yet the people’s judgments—known as “public opinion”—are easily manipulated: the people govern only in name. What they seek and gain are state-funded and administered social welfare programs.

As an historian, Lukacs has insisted that this surging, misshapen populism marks the beginning of a new historical era. Democrats and Republicans both subscribe to the program, but with different emphases and tactics. The Democrats are more socialist than nationalist; the Republicans prefer things the other way around. Each party, however, caters to the principle of untrammelled popular sovereignty, bidding for mass public favor with government largesse. And each is anxious to assure the public that it fully identifies with the public’s nationalist aspirations, though Lukacs notes that the Democrats have fallen short of the mark on this measure, “this being perhaps the main cause of their relative decline during the last fifty years” (p. 42).

This kind of populist politics is angry and bellicose; it churns with hatred of imagined enemies within and abroad, and with fear of the same. The society governed through this politics is riven with disturbing “dualities,” accepted by both Left and Right:

Permissiveness together with the administration of crude power; a superficial propagation of privacy together with the widespread weakening of private moral standards and convictions, the celebration of legal ownership and of personal property at the same time when in reality people were not owners but renters; the disappearance of most of the former and privately known differences of class together with

the unceasing appetite for publicly demonstrable labels of “class” [pp. 152–53].

Lukacs goes on: Marriage is collapsing while its nondiscriminatory availability is being advocated. Respect for women is vanishing even though their legal rights are being expanded. Lukacs appears here to be sketching a sort of analogue to the “cultural contradiction” once famously ascribed to capitalism, but here to populism. He suggests that populist culture holds certain values high, but prizes gratifications utterly at odds with them. These “dualities” are strikingly presented, but their presentation is abbreviated and the argument for them is left undeveloped.

True liberalism has been chased from the stage, Lukacs argues. Its only remaining legacy is a panoply of “individual freedoms”—in matters of sexual gratification and the pursuit of pleasure. While once it stood for a more deliberative democracy, which Lukacs refers to as “parliamentarianism,” it has succumbed to the temper of the age and the ruthlessness of its opposition. The Right mastered the uses of hatred, questioning the patriotism and insidiously subversive “liberalism” of their opponents. The Left has responded with, but foundered by, deploying fear. Hatred, writes Lukacs, may be a “moral weakness,” but it is also, “in the age of democratic populism,” a “source of strength” in the acquisition and retention of power (p. 209). Liberals may wince at these words but will find them familiar: they have heard much in recent years about the ruthlessness of the Right and their failure, whether in fighting for the Presidency in 2000 or on other occasions, to respond in kind.

Liberals can take some comfort in the disillusionment, even disgust, that this conservative historian, once welcomed to the pages of publications like *National Review*, expresses about the contemporary Republican Party. The conservatism prized by Lukacs is not recognizable in today’s GOP. The modern Republican Party in Lukacs’s telling is nationalistic, not patriotic: the difference is defined as one between an aggressive stance against outsiders, grounded in tribal self-love, versus a love of a particular land supported by an appeal to tradition and defensive in character (p. 36).

Previously, Lukacs has written that, beginning in the 1950s, American conservatives developed a “narrow and ignorant ideological view of the world” (Lukacs 1990: 188). Their program was not just shallow but also negative: “They were just conservative enough to hate liberals but not enough to love liberty” (Lukacs 1990: 189). The Reagan Revolution did not, in his estimate, improve matters. He writes that conservatives remain less conservative than they are anti-liberal.

Lukacs is also unforgiving toward the acceptance, by both Democrats and Republicans, of the crude majoritarianism—the tyranny of the majority—at the heart of the populist politics critiqued in this book. He finds it alarming on two counts. One is the threat it presents of rash, vulgar popular demands, unmediated by rational deliberation and respect

for minority rights. Another is the certainty that in an age of publicity, when public opinion is molded to the specifications of the political class, it is a dishonest and meaningless measure of public judgment. He fears the power of a propaganda machinery constantly working on the minds of the public, producing “more and more images and abstractions [that] influence more and more people—abstractions and images that are presentations of prearranged realities rather than representations” (p. 196).

Lukacs saves some ammunition for a critique of the American political leadership’s role in the propagation of this unfortunate development. Americans, wedded to the notion of progress, came to wrongly associate it with rising democracy—and the latter, by populist standards, could never be democratic enough. Woodrow Wilson comes off poorly in this account. As the First World War ended, Wilson helped to define the new world order as nationalistic, democratic, and aggressive—at least in the sense that America was committed, as today, to the promotion throughout the world of self-determination and democratic governance. Wilson, writes Lukacs, was “the effective destroyer of an old order,” a man whose ideas were “less than mediocre and customarily superficial” and who laid the path followed by succeeding presidents, including the one now in office (pp. 104–5).

One need not agree with Lukacs’s view of modern American history to find value in the book’s analysis of contemporary political conflict. The decline of “parliamentarianism,” for example, deserves mournful attention. Lukacs rightly notes Congress’s surrender to the president of its power to declare war. He laments the absence of meaningful debate on the floor while the real work of Congress is conducted behind closed doors, in committee. He might have mentioned that even this work has become less “parliamentary” in real terms, and more the preserve of the party in power. Recently, for example, the Senate majority was prepared to change the rules to enhance majority control, ostensibly only for some limited purposes (judicial nominations) but with broad consequences for the deliberative culture, already in decline, of the “upper chamber.”

Finally, Lukacs treats the topic of political reform, such as the advent of presidential primaries. It does not emerge unscathed. “Primaries,” for example, “compromised and vulgarized the political process, making it worse than before, on many occasions aiding demagogues, and on virtually every occasion transforming already dubious contests of popularity into publicity contests” (p. 60). Lukacs holds the Progressives to account for this “flaw . . . enduring in its consequences” (p. 59).

In an essay written on another occasion, Lukacs has shown an understanding of the fundamental motivation behind Progressive reform—a motivation that he uses to distinguish Progressives from Populists. Populists pressed for reform in the belief that democracy was not democratic enough: “The Progressives seemed to agree—but what they really believed was that there ought to be more authority for the educators of the people” (Lukacs [1992] 2005: 111).

The current reform debate—on “527s”—might well engage Lukacs’s interest. For here we have Progressive reformers in league with Populist Republicans to hurry into law major restrictions on political activity. This strange alliance might come into clear focus under the Lukacs lens. It might appear that Progressives once again are striving to secure more authority for those who educate the people, not for the people themselves. The Populist aim seems different: to exact revenge, through the exploitation of state power, on those liberals who raised their voices against the conservative program in the last cycle.

Each of these programs, Progressive and Populist, is misguided, even dangerous; in combination, they are that much more so. Neither individually nor in combination do they seem very “democratic.” Lukacs counsels his readers to handle that term with care. He would have us view with skepticism, if not dread, politics waged in the name of “the people,” because it is likely that the interests served are more the rulers’ than the peoples’. Or that membership in the ranks of “the people” is selective and exclusion is painful and sometimes dangerous.

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