Political populism and adult education

Although it is subject to considerable current media scrutiny, populism, the political movement which may best be characterised by an anti-establishment appeal to the masses, is actually nothing new, although the form it takes has varied over time and between national contexts. Previous examples include in the United States the People’s Party from the late nineteenth century, South American political movements around ‘charismatic’ leaders such as Peron in Argentina or Vargas in Brazil (both in the mid-twentieth century), and even the approach to harnessing political power of several Emperors in Ancient Rome, notably Caesar Augustus, nearly two millennia ago.

More recent political movements in a broad range of settings include the 2010-2011 Arab Spring uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, and, in Western Europe, right wing nationalist movements such as the French National Front and the Dutch Freedom Party, and left wing parties including Greece’s Syriza and Podemos in Spain. The recent US presidential election process witnessed an unexpectedly high level of support for the left wing Bernie Sanders for the Democratic Party nomination in addition to the outright victory for Donald Trump. Both of these men could be considered populists, albeit from very different ideological political positions. What both Trump and Sanders share is the notion of being from outside the traditional political establishment, although such a label would not necessarily bear close scrutiny. For journalist John Judis (2016), populism isn’t a political ideology as such, rather a political logic, that is, a way of thinking about politics.

Despite Judis’s suggestion that populism is a ‘political logic’ rather than an ideology we can characterise clear differences between its left and right wing versions, irrespective of their regional or historical context. There are generally distinctions in the role that education plays in their development, and the manner in which education movements may be manifested in their social, political, and economic agendas. In right wing versions there is generally support amongst populist politicians for existing systems of authority including the established religion, a strengthening of law and order including expanded military power, a social conservatism and often an antagonism to migrants and/or those of different nationality. In leftist forms of populism, the support is usually for social forms of ownership, often involving land, business or other forms of capital, and improved conditions for the impoverished classes. Importantly for readers of this journal this is frequently in the form of adult education and/or mass literacy schemes. The work of theorists such as Freire can often underpin such liberationist movements, as highlighted by a number of contributions to the forthcoming Palgrave International Handbook on Adult and Lifelong Education and Learning (Milana et al., in press). These focus on contemporary national contexts as diverse as Argentina (Mercedes Rodriguez, forthcoming), Ghana (Tagoe, forthcoming), Canada (Shan, forthcoming) and Timor-Leste (Boughton, forthcoming).

‘Populism’ has also been a topic regularly raised within wider academic discourse too, albeit in another context, that is, by reference to popular education movements. For instance, a quick trawl though the annals of this journal found 40 results, covering national settings as diverse as Botswana, Aotearoa/New Zealand and Turkey, and a wide breadth of issues including sustainable development, postmodernity and citizenship. The first reference to populism within the IJLE was thirty five years ago in 1982, and mentions of the term had gathered momentum by the mid-1990s. And the concept retains academic currency today. At the time of writing this editorial, the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) is shortly to host a roundtable session on ‘Populism, Education and Ethnography’, with contributions from a wide range of national contexts including South Africa, the US and several central and eastern European nations.
Political populism in part is attributable to a mistrust in expert systems, a phenomenon considered an inevitable outcome of ‘late modernity’ by British social theorist Anthony Giddens (see, in particular, his 1991 work) and counterparts including the German Ulrich Beck (1992) and the slightly later writings of Polish-British Zygmunt Bauman (2000), (although Bauman preferred the notion of ‘liquid modernity’ to ‘late modernity’). Whilst this mistrust of experts and other ‘elites’ is often core to the populist movement’s ideological manifestation, it has rarely been as explicitly stated by politicians as it was by leader of the UK’s ‘vote leave’ campaign, Michael Gove, during the build-up to the 2016 ‘Brexit’ referendum. Gove, perhaps ironically England’s ex-Secretary of State for Education, suggested that the people of Britain had ‘had enough of experts’, a sentiment that Donald Trump has also been promoting since last year’s US Presidential election campaign, effectively valorising the notion of ‘common sense knowledge’, a position Ruth Wodak (2015) likened to ‘the arrogance of ignorance’.

Despite their anti-elitist rhetoric, many high profile leaders of populist political movements are themselves university educated, and often from the most elite of institutions too – Donald Trump studied at the Ivy League University of Pennsylvania, whilst two of the leading Brexit campaigners, Michael Gove and Boris Johnson are alumni of the University of Oxford.

Whilst a higher than average level of education is itself no bulwark against people being drawn towards populist political movements, plenty of evidence exists to suggest that a better educated wider population means a swing to populist politics is less likely. The link between a voter’s level of education and their likelihood to vote in a particular manner in the UK’s 2016 EU referendum was clearer than any other demographic factor including social class, region, age, gender or ethnicity (Rossenbaum, 2016). We witnessed a significantly higher chance of voting ‘remain’ amongst graduates, and a similar trend was noted in the 2016 US presidential election where the number of graduates supporting Hillary Clinton was approaching twice that of those voting for Trump.

Educational institutions and universities in particular are challenged by the anti-pluralist, anti-expert and anti-elitist stance of populist movements, in particular those on the right. Universities, especially those in the global North, benefit significantly from the free movement of both staff and students, and are seen as promoters of the pluralist and liberal ideas that are the focus of ire from many right wing populist movements.

The academic Ruth Wodak was cited in John Morgan’s (2016) Times Higher Education article as suggesting that populists generally seek to speak for ‘the people’, but do so in a narrowly limited and often nationalistic manner, in terms of how they identify who ‘the people’ might be. This naming of people tends to mitigate against the interests of migrants, including what Wodak termed ‘knowledge migrants’, that is people coming from other nations to either study or teach at universities. For Wodak, the frequently anti-pluralist, anti-expert and anti-elitist stance of populist parties from the political right implies an inherent antipathy towards those institutions conveying knowledge, which are usually ‘open and international’, or as she suggests even ‘cosmopolitan’, in a pejorative manner. For Wodak, the core beliefs of populist movements challenge what she termed universities’ essentially ‘humanistic tradition’.

In the UK the wider social role of education and learning beyond simply preparing people for the work place was emphasised in the 1998 Green Paper – a discussion document intended to precede legislation – which was part of the central tenant of New Labour’s Education, Education, Education mantra, designed to emphasise their ‘top three priorities’ upon winning the election in 1997. It is worth quoting at length from the foreword to that policy document, written by the then Secretary of
State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett, who had himself been an adult educator prior to becoming a full-time politician:

‘As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship. Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation. It helps us fulfil our potential and opens doors to a love of music, art and literature. That is why we value learning for its own sake as well as for the equality of opportunity it brings’. (Blunkett, 1998).

Whilst readers of this journal will probably be aware that the direction of UK education policy soon shifted away from this more liberal ‘life-wide learning’ approach and its acknowledgment of the civilising and social cohesion-promoting aspect of education (Holford & Welikala, 2013; Tuckett, 2017). This document arguably remains a high watermark for a genuinely socially inclusive approach to lifelong education in the UK, and a position we can perhaps aspire to return to should the political direction of travel favour it. Blunkett’s foreword to the document outlined the coming of ‘The Learning Age’, which he saw as

‘...built on a renewed commitment to self-improvement and on a recognition of the enormous contribution learning makes to our society. Learning helps shape the values which we pass on to each succeeding generation. Learning supports active citizenship and democracy, giving men and women the capacity to provide leadership in their communities. As President John F Kennedy once put it: “Liberty without learning is always in peril and learning without liberty is always in vain”.’ (Blunkett, 1998).

In these troublesome and turbulent political times we suspect few readers of IJLE would prefer the current populist political leadership in the US, and its dismissal of the value of both public education and expert opinion, to that of Kennedy’s, over half a century before. And such political turbulence perhaps throws the importance of our work into sharper relief; as adult educators our purpose is far wider, and far more important, than simply equipping the workforce with the skills they need to increase industrial output.

References


By Richard Waller, Steven Hodge, John Holford, Marcella Milana and Susan Webb