18

RAPID SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE EMERGENCE OF POPULISM

Robin R. Vallacher and Eli Fennell

Rapid Social Change and the Emergence of Populism

Populist movements are said to arise when "ordinary" people feel that the elites in a society derive the majority of economic benefits from the status quo, suppress dissent, and hold values that violate conventional ways of thinking and behaving. Accordingly, one would expect populism to arise on a frequent basis in response to factors such as income inequality and restrictions on personal freedom. Populism, however, is neither frequent nor widespread (Kaltwasser, Taggart, Espejo, & Ostiguy, 2017), and it has a tenuous relationship to wealth gaps, social stratification, and political suppression (e.g., Wood, Daley, & Chivers, 2018).

To understand populism, it is necessary to go beyond ready-made principles of self-interest and social comparison. We argue that populism is a manifestation of basic dynamic processes that characterize the topical landscape of social psychology, from intrapersonal phenomena to interpersonal and inter-group relations (Boker & Wenger, 2007; Kenrick, Li, & Butner, 2003; Guastello, Koopmans, & Pincus, 2009; Vallacher, Read, & Nowak, 2002). This perspective suggests when populist movements are likely to arise and how their adverse consequences can be minimized through effective political messaging and governmental policies.

We begin by noting the factors that are commonly seen as triggers of populist sentiment. We point out the tenuous connection between these triggers and the occurrence of populist movements. We then reframe the emergence of populism in terms of basic principles of nonlinear dynamical systems (e.g., Holland, 1995; Strogatz, 1994; Waldrop, 1992), with emphasis on the dynamics responsible for both stability and change in patterns of thought and behavior. Against this backdrop, we discuss how and why populism is increasingly ascendant today in several nations. With this reframing in hand, we depict two scenarios for societal

well-being as the 21st century unfolds. The first is pessimistic, suggesting that adverse manifestations of populism will become increasingly frequent. But we conclude with the second scenario, which is decidedly more optimistic about social life in the years and decades to come.

The Obvious Suspects

From a simple hedonic perspective, populism would seem to be a natural and inevitable consequence of people's feeling that they have been unfairly treated, disrespected, or exploited (see also Cooper and Avery; Hogg & Gøtzsche-Astrup, this volume). However, if there were nothing more to it, populist uprisings would be commonplace, traceable to several conditions that routinely characterize social systems. Below we note the most obvious such conditions and consider their relevance to the emergence of populism.

Income Inequality

People's personal satisfaction is based in part on how they are faring in comparison with others (Festinger, 1954; Suls, Collins, &Wheeler, 2020). A person might be financially secure, for example, but nonetheless feel discontent if he or she feels that others are doing even better. There has never been a time when the resources and outcomes in a society were equally distributed among its members. Yet, revolt against the system responsible for inequality is a rare occurrence historically. Indeed, cultures in which inequality is the most extreme (e.g., monarchies, caste systems) tend to exist for long periods of time without manifest discontent among those on the losing end of inequality.

But people can live with inequality—in fact, they can prefer it—as long as the disparity in resources and outcomes conforms to a *norm of equity* (Adams, 1965; Lerner, 1980; Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973). By this standard, people accept inequality if they feel those at the top deserve their economic status. This idea is at the heart of system justification theory (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). Research has shown that even the most disadvantaged members of society tend to justify inequality, accepting their lot in life without rancor or jealousy (Jost, Pelham, Brett, & Carvallo, 2002). Indeed, people of lower socio-economic status have little hesitation in showing admiration for those who are astronomically wealthy, including movie stars, professional athletes, and members of royal families.

It is hard to see how people can justify economic disparity in terms of the usual inputs to the equity formulation, such as effort, skill, and contribution to society. True, a professional football player who is paid $9 million is more talented at this game, and perhaps far more athletic generally, than is a factory worker who makes $60,000, but is the former really worth 150 times more than the latter? And does playing football contribute to society 150 times more than

manufacturing products that are essential to everyday life? Yet, far from disparaging such seemingly undeserved inequality, people look up to others who are far wealthier, and they do not mount movements to reduce the inequality. It's noteworthy that the proponents of populism, if not the inspirational leaders, are often extremely wealthy and do not downplay this fact but rather emphasize it as a sign of their personal strength and worthiness.

Unequal Influence and Voice

Subjective well-being is higher in countries with democratic institutions, where citizens experience autonomy and personal freedom (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Fischer & Boer, 2011; Inglehart, Foa, Peterson, & Welzel, 2008). Even when resources and outcomes are not distributed in an equitable manner, individuals can accommodate to this disparity if they feel they had "voice" in determining how the distribution was determined (Thibaut & Walker, 1975).

A lack of personal freedom and voice may undermine people's subjective well-being, but even if widespread in a society, these conditions do not inevitably promote the rise of populist movements. Oligarchies, monarchies, and authoritarian regimes have been the rule throughout human history, with democratic institutions such as voting and free speech the exception. And in today's world, the rise of populism is most pronounced in the United States and certain European countries—nations with traditions of voting rights, free press, free speech, and freedom of choice in everyday life (but see Forgas & Lantos; and Krekó, this volume, for some exceptions).

Immoral Values and Lifestyles

People who are deemed immoral by virtue of violating societal norms and sacred values are judged harshly and are often subject to discriminatory action. In many if not most cultures, for example, there is discrimination toward homosexuals, drug users, and people who hold non-mainstream religious views. However, every society throughout history has been characterized by some degree of diversity with respect to sacred values and lifestyles (Shweder, 1991), but the prejudicial attitudes and hostile actions associated with such diversity are typically confined to the offending parties and do not propel people to revolt against government leaders and other elites in society.

The Obvious Suspects in Perspective

Populism is clearly rooted in anger and discontent, and one should not dismiss the potential sources of anger noted above as triggers for populist sentiment and movements (see also Marcus, this volume). Once populism is manifest, moreover, the rallying cries commonly revolve around inequality in wealth, lack

of democratic participation, and concerns about fundamental values and life-styles. But by themselves, these factors do not light the spark. To understand when and why anger and discontent bubble to the surface and generate populist movements, we consider the issue in terms of basic dynamical processes that have proven useful in capturing the essence of other domains of human experience.

Dynamics and the Emergence of Societal Structure

In the dynamical perspective, a domain of psychological functioning is viewed as a complex system in which the system's basic elements influence each other over time to promote higher-order coherence in the system. Such influence is possible because of the *interpretative elasticity* of lower-level elements that allows them to take on different meanings and values. Because a higher-order state results from the iterative interaction of the system's lower-level elements, the process is referred to as *self-organization*. A system's intrinsic dynamics also promote changes in a system's higher-order property. An external force can promote change as well, but it does so through its interaction with the intrinsic dynamics of the person or group.

Society as a Dynamical System

It is easy to conceptualize a social system in dynamical terms. The elements are individuals who are connected to each other, whether through face-to-face contact (the primary mode throughout human history) or electronic communication (increasingly prevalent in the modern era). Through these connections, individuals adjust their mental state—which may be at odds initially—to converge on common thoughts, feelings, and action tendencies. This promotes the emergence of a shared reality in the form of social roles, norms, values, public opinion, conspiracy theories, fads, and entertainment preferences. This dynamic tendency is manifest in such well-documented social processes as conformity, groupthink, group polarization, emotional contagion, and deindividuation (Nowak, Vallacher, Rychwalska, Praszkier, & Zochowski, 2020a; see also Hogg & Gøtzsche-Astrup; Krekó, this volume). Because these processes occur organically without the top-down direction of an outside agent (e.g., a leader), they capture the essence of self-organization dynamics.

In large social systems, however, convergence on a single shared reality is difficult to attain because complete connection among all members is unlikely. Even with social media, which greatly expands the number of potential connections a person can develop, people tend to share their opinions and preferences with a relatively small proportion of possible contacts. So, despite the press for consensus and conformity in social interaction, societies develop *clusters* of interconnected people who converge on shared attitudes and norms, with the potential for conflicting shared realities in different clusters.

Computer simulations of *dynamic social impact theory* (Nowak, Szamrej, & Latané, 1990) have demonstrated the tendency for such clusters to form, even when there is an event or new information that influences most people to embrace a new way of thinking and behaving.

Being connected to others in a cluster enables people to defend against information and social influence that threaten their attitudes and values. Although the majority of society members adopt the *new*, the *old* will survive because of the mutual influence among like-minded others in a cluster that provides local coherence. So rather than abandoning the *old* and adopting the *new* when confronted with threatening events and information, people with social support can actively discount the threat (e.g., "fake news"), get support from like-minded others with whom they are already connected, or seek out other sources of information and opinions that support their existing beliefs, values, and actions (e.g., social media, websites, news outlets).

The clustering of norms, attitudes, traditions, and the like creates a potential for a reversal of the majority attitude (see also Crano & Gaffney, this volume). The *new* that gained traction in society may prove disappointing, for example, enabling the *old* to mount a counterattack and regain its prior majority status (Nowak & Vallacher, 2019). Just such oscillation between majority and minority attitudes and support for government policies characterized the social transition in Eastern Europe with the collapse of communism in the late 1980s and early 1990s (see also Forgas & Lantos; and Krekó, this volume).

Rapid Social Change

Throughout human history, there have been long stretches in which things remained static. Even conditions that would seem to generate resentment and hostility toward the elites do not generate grassroots political movements to redress these grievances if these conditions are relatively stable over long periods of time. Under the extreme inequality and autocratic rule that characterized the Dark Ages in Europe between the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Italian Renaissance (approximately 500 to 1500 AD), for example, there is little evidence that the masses rose up against the elites (e.g., lords) who exploited them (Ker, 1904). When inequality represents a long-standing societal context, it may not be pleasant for those on the losing end of these conditions, but it does provide coherence and stability in their lives. Coherence in effect trumps self-interest (see also Gelfand & Lorente, this volume).

This does not mean that the evolution of a society's norms, values, and lifestyles is a one- way street, with the emergence of a shared reality rendering it immune to further change. Even the most stable societies undergo change, in part due to the dynamics of social relations that promote continual adjustments in alliances and social networks, and in part due to external forces (e.g., world events, the introduction of new technologies and lifestyles) that trigger adjustments in

societal norms and institutions. Many changes are accommodated without desta-bilizing the society's fundamental norms, values, and customs. The introduction of a new cuisine from a different part of the world, for example, is easily incorpo-rated into people's lives without threatening the society's assumptions about food consumption or dietary habits. The introduction of automobiles and telephones in the early 20th century represented substantial changes to everyone's lifestyle, but their incorporation into everyday life evolved over several decades without undermining societal norms and values.

The coherence of a social system can be threatened, however, if the system is overwhelmed by a rapid introduction of beliefs and lifestyles that conflict with long-standing patterns that provide equilibrium for the system. The rapidity of such influences does not allow the system sufficient time to counter the influx, so that they enter the system unimpeded as an alternative social reality. The coro-navirus (COVID-19) pandemic of 2020 clearly had this effect, with virtually every segment of society worldwide experiencing an overnight disruption to most aspects of their everyday life. Fear of becoming infected and of infecting others closed down businesses, restricted much of shopping to online exercises, transitioned education from physical classrooms to virtual online classrooms, and brought sporting events and concerts to a halt. And social distancing kept people from interacting with one another, disrupting what is arguably the most basic feature of social life.

Support for the destabilizing effect of rapid changes to a system is provided by computer simulations of self-structure dynamics (Nowak, Vallacher, Tesser, & Borkowski, 2000). Using a cellular automata model of self-structure that paral-leled an earlier model of societal structure (Nowak et al., 1990), Nowak et al. (2000) investigated the fate of a cluster of evaluatively consistent self-relevant information when confronted with inconsistent information introduced at differ-ent rates. As long as the contradictory elements were spaced in time, even a high volume of such information was unable to destabilize the existing cluster because the information was effectively nullified by the combined influence of the ele-ments in the cluster. When the same volume of information was introduced rap-idly (e.g., all at once), however, the existing cluster was overwhelmed because it did not have sufficient time to reintegrate between the arrivals of each element of information. As a result, the domain of self-structure changed (e.g., from positive to negative self-evaluation) to accommodate the new self-relevant information.

The accommodation of rapidly presented contradictory information was weaker, however, when there were strong connections among all the elements in the existing cluster. Extrapolating to societal structure, this suggests that clus-ters of minority opinion can withstand the onslaught of the majority opinion if individuals in the cluster provide consistent and strong support for one another and look for outside support to aid in the defense of their stance. Research on minority influence provides evidence that people who hold views that are out of the mainstream can withstand the influence of the majority view if they are

highly consistent in expressing their views and are effective in marshalling support for them (Crano, 2012; Moscovici, Lage, & Naffrechoux, 1969; see also Crano & Gaffney, this volume).

The Dynamic Foundations of Populism

All societies have conditions that are conducive to the emergence of populist sentiments, but such sentiments often lay dormant, without overt expression in uprisings or political movements. The foregoing account offers insight into when and why latent populism becomes overtly expressed in uprisings or political movements. Below we make explicit the ingredients for the emergence of populism suggested by this account. To these ingredients we add the role of demagogues, individuals who follow a standard script in channeling the anger and discontent that fuels populism.

Resistance to Rapid Social Change

Examples of rapid social change are not hard to find in the modern world. Attitudes towards homosexual relations that had persisted unchanged for decades, for example, have shifted dramatically in recent years, with support for same-sex marriage nearly doubling from 1997 (35%) to 2017 (64%) (Gallup poll, 3–7 May 2017). A similarly dramatic shift has occurred regarding acceptance of inter-racial marriage, from only 4% in 1958 to 87% by 2013 (Gallup poll, 23–25 July 2013). Focusing on these shifts gives the impression that American society has undergone a dramatic change, with intolerance on these fronts becoming historical relics. In the midst of rapid change, however, a society is characterized by dual realities corresponding to the *new* and the *old*, so that focusing on only the central tendency (e.g., mean) of a the society's attitude provides a misleading account of how the society is responding to the *new* (Nowak & Vallacher, 2019).

Not surprisingly, those who resist the *new* are likely to feel that it is inconsistent with their prevailing perspective. But many such people succumb nonetheless to the *new*, following the example and influence of those who favor the change. To resist change, two other factors have been shown to be critical (Nowak et al., 1990). First, those who resist the change tend to be stronger in relevant respects than those who cannot. Strength can reflect expertise and knowledge, for example, that enable one to see the downsides of the *new*. When the change concerns basic values and lifestyles, strength is more likely to represent the confidence and commitment with which the *old* is held. Someone strongly wedded to traditional marriage, for example, is likely to resist the legalization of same-sex marriage.

The second critical resistance factor is the tendency for clusters of like-minded individuals to form. Clustering occurs over time because of the connections among individuals that develop in social systems, whether in a small group, an organization, or a society. People who are connected to one another have the

same perspective at the outset, or they may influence one another to adopt a common perspective. In this process, the stronger individuals play an asymmetric role, influencing weaker individuals to adopt their perspective. Once a cluster is formed (anchored by strong individuals), it can resist the *new*, even if this means becoming a minority, because of the social support that individuals provide for one another.

Resistance to rapid social change is a commonality to populist movements. In the United States, for example, the recent surge of populist sentiment reflects a backlash against demographic and cultural changes that are felt to undermine traditional foundations of American life. When people rally around "make American great again," for example, they are in effect reacting to the acceptance of same-sex marriage, inter-racial relations, and immigration. These changes have occurred within a narrow time frame, historically speaking, and thus represent a threat to those who wish to maintain (and protect) what they perceive as basic to American heritage and values.

Threats to Social Identity

But why are some people more resistant to rapid social change than others? What characteristics define the clusters that actively resist the cultural and demographic changes in contemporary society? Evidence suggests there are two primary factors at play, both of which reflect threats to people's *social identity* (e.g., Hogg & Abrams, 1988; see also Hogg & Gøtzsche-Astrup, this volume).

The first factor reflects geography and demography. Support for populist thinking in the United States, for example, is most prevalent in rural regions, especially those in Southern and Midwestern states. Such regions are characterized by relative homogeneity with respect to several factors that are central to social identity, including race, religion, traditional family structure, language, political orientation—and cuisine preference, for that matter. The homogeneity regarding these criteria in rural America stands in contrast to the diversity of lifestyle and values in urban regions, especially those along the east and west coast that are exposed to people from countries overseas. In large metropolitan areas, there is a high concentration of people of different races, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds living in close proximity and speaking several different languages. And people in urban areas interact with one another in work and in informal settings, and they rely on common resources—from grocery stores to police and fire departments—in their daily lives.

Because people in rural regions are relatively homogeneous in their values, customs, and lifestyles, their social identities are correspondingly narrow and specific. This specificity provides clear criteria for recognizing differences between themselves and those who represent different backgrounds. So, when they are exposed to a new idea or lifestyle, particularly if this potential change occurs rapidly, they are acutely sensitive to the threat it poses. People in urban regions

have more flexible and less specific social identities, so the same social change is less likely to be seen as a challenge to how they define themselves. This is not to suggest that urban residents are immune to in-group versus out-group biases (e.g., Brewer, 1979), but rather that the in-group of urban residents tends to be more inclusive than that of rural residents.

Immigration provides a particularly salient example of this divide. Immigration is nothing new historically, but it has usually taken place over relatively long periods of time (Manning, 2013). In recent years, however, the rate of immigration has accelerated due to famine and civil strife in certain regions of Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. Because people residing in urban areas are accustomed to diversity in national origin, language, belief systems, and customs, they can accommodate the rapid and voluminous influx of immigration without experiencing a threat to their lifestyle and other features of social identity. But for people in rural regions, the perceived and actual characteristics of immigrants—particularly those from Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa—cannot be incorporated into their shared reality of beliefs, customs, and lifestyles.

The second factor is a bit more speculative, though consistent with recent theory and research in political psychology. A primary aim in this field is to identify the basic characteristics that distinguish political liberals from political conservatives. Although the issue is approached empirically, there is controversy in the conclusions regarding the liberal–conservative fault lines. One prominent perspective emphasizes the differential reliance on fundamental values or moral mandates by those with different political orientations (e.g., Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; see also Cooper & Avery, this volume). Research has shown that conservatives' adherence to most values is stronger than that of liberals. Thus, conservatives are more likely to judge actions—and the people performing them—more extremely and consistently than are liberals.

The reliance on values in making social judgment, however, could be reframed as a tendency to judge people with little sensitivity to the situational constraints on their behavior. Consider, for example, a teenage boy who slaps his father in the face out of rage and another teenage boy who slaps his father in the face as part of a school play that includes this action. If a conservative uses *respect for authority* as a blanket basis for judgment, both actions would be considerable unacceptable and condemned. A liberal, on the other hand, might judge the first boy harshly but not view the second boy's behavior as worthy of condemnation.

In this light, it's interesting that the only value liberals emphasize more strongly than conservatives is *preventing harm to others and caring for those who are at risk*. This concern with harmful events is consistent with a sensitivity to the impact of external forces and circumstances on people's lives. Presumably, liberals recognize situational constraints and affordances more, so they take these contextual factors into account rather than judging action in accordance with abstract values. This reframing of the value perspective is speculative, but it is consistent with research

suggesting that conservatives tend to be more dogmatic and judgmental than liberals (e.g., Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003).

Both factors are associated with contemporary populism, which tends to be cultural rather than economic in nature. Thus, people in rural regions tend to resonate with populist movements, as do political conservatives regardless of where they reside. In both cases, there are clear and firm standards for judgment, with negative judgments lacking in empathy reserved for those who deviate in their beliefs and lifestyles.

Viewed from a dynamical perspective, both the regional and political bases for populist sentiment can be understood in terms of *basins of attraction* (Vallacher, Coleman, Nowak, & Bui-Wrzosinska, 2010). A basin of attraction is the range in the values of elements (e.g., ideas, information) that define a system's higher-order state (e.g., ideology). Information outside this range is difficult to accommodate and thus poses a threat to the coherence and stability of the system. Basin of attraction is reminiscent of *latitude of acceptance and rejection* in attitude formation and change (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). People who hold a literal interpretation of the Bible, for example, have a very narrow basin of attraction and cannot accept information regarding the age of the Earth (4 billion years) or the evolution of humans. Others may believe in Biblical doctrine but have a wider basin of attraction that can accept scientific evidence without undermining their belief. In the present context, those who resonate with populist sentiment, whether because of their narrowly defined social identity or their conservative political orientation, cannot assimilate new perspectives that are outside their basins of attraction for important beliefs and lifestyles.

We should note that threats to social identity apply primarily to cultural identity as opposed to economic status. There have been rapid increases in income inequality in recent decades, and this has fueled populist sentiment as well, but this has not generated sustained political movements to the same extent as has the cultural populism that is increasingly salient in the United States and elsewhere (Wood et al., 2018). Economic justice is certainly important to people, but it appears to be trumped by threats to cultural values. Indeed, a noteworthy feature of those averse to rapid cultural change is the tendency to vote against their own economic self-interest (Frank, 2004). Above a rather low level of economic security (i.e., a lower middle-class income), subjective well-being and happiness are independent of people's economic status (e.g., Diener et al., 1999; Myers & Diener, 1995). From a hierarchy of needs perspective (Maslow, 1954), once people have transcended basic safety and security concerns, their focus shifts to issues of social belongingness and identity.

The Demagogue's Script

Anger and resentment toward the elites can simmer for extended periods of time. The current surge in populism in the United States, for example, is in part a

resurgence of the so-called silent majority that expressed anger and resentment over the counterculture of the late 1960s and 1970s that expressed disdain for traditional lifestyles, showed little respect for the police, military, and other authorities, and advocated "free love" and the legalization of drugs. This resistance to new cultural values eventually dissipated for want of an effective leader. Richard Nixon attempted to assume that role, but he was discredited by the Watergate scandal and eventually resigned in 1974.

For populist sentiments to transition to a sustained political movement, leaders must emerge who know how to play to these sentiments. Those who become successful at doing so have a set of characteristics and strategies that set them apart from traditional leaders. Such leaders, known as *demagogues*, gain popularity by exploiting emotions, prejudice, and ignorance to arouse the common people against elites, whipping up the passions of the crowd, and shutting down reasoned deliberation (Larson, 1964; Luthin, 1954; Roberts-Miller, 2005; Signer, 2009). In so doing, demagogues overturn established norms of political conduct.

Demagogues are highly attuned to social changes that undermine traditional values, customs, and lifestyles. The societal clusters of people who view rapid change in this fashion can support one another, but without a leader their feelings may be confined to their own personal echo chambers. A demagogue in essence enables the echo chamber to become a megaphone that broadcasts populist discontent to a wider audience and to those in the political establishment.

To be effective, a demagogue must sow distrust of other sources of information. They accuse news media of bias and spreading "fake news." Even societal institutions that are fundamental to democracy and societal stability are called into question. The legalization of gay marriage and the protection of immigrants' rights, for example, might be portrayed as evidence that the judicial and criminal justice systems are corrupt and in league with the elites. The government itself is portrayed as controlled by a "deep state" that makes decisions and enacts policies under the cover of anonymity and without accountability. Politicians who advance opposing views are not simply seen as opponents but as nasty, deceitful, and even criminal in their actions. Science is not exempt from the attacks of a demagogue (see also Fiedler, this volume). In the United States, for example, politicians who want to add fuel to the fire of populism discredit scientific evidence that would require change in people's lifestyle (e.g., climate change, response to a novel coronavirus) or values (e.g., recognizing the genetic basis for homosexuality).

With the abundance of information available to everyone in today's world, one might think that people would fact-check the things that a demagogue claims to be true. However, it is precisely the overabundance of information that makes people strive for ready-made answers (Nowak et al., 2020b). Everyone has a strong *need for closure* (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996), but this need is especially strong when people feel threatened and there is too much relevant information for them to process on their own (see also Kruglanski et al., this volume). The

threat associated with rapid social change enhances reliance on a strong leader who can speak unequivocally and in simple terms to satisfy the need for higher-order coherence.

There is a positive feedback loop between trust in a source of information and belief in the information he or she provides (Nowak et al., 2020b). The greater the trust in a demagogue, the more readily people believe what he or she says. And the more they believe the information the demagogue provides, the more they trust him or her. This feedback loop can give rise to ideas that would otherwise be easy to debunk by attending to other sources of information or by fact-checking on one's own. But the reliance on a trusted demagogue saves followers the trouble of looking for the truth elsewhere. Even wild conspiracy theories (e.g., secret criminal activities by a political opponent) can thrive in such a social environment. Facts are not the focus; loyalty to the leader and fidelity to his or her views are.

What the Future Holds

Populist movements have arisen at various points in human history, but each time they have eventually dissipated. Is the populism we are witnessing today destined to follow this trajectory as well? Or are defining features of contemporary society—the increasing tempo and constant introduction of new technologies, advances in science, and changes in cultural norms and lifestyles—rewriting the script, so that we can expect sustained expressions of resistance to these continual changes? Two scenarios regarding populist discontent can be envisioned at this point—one pessimistic in its outlook, but the other considerably more optimistic about how the future may unfold.

The Pessimistic Scenario

Populism is based on dynamics, not on content. People can live with any state of affairs, and even justify its existence, if it is stable and provides coherence for one's life. It is when a stable context is disrupted by rapid changes threatening to undermine societal stability that people who are most affected by these changes become disaffected and resist them.

From this perspective, we are in for a long haul. The modern world is experiencing change at an accelerating rate. Until the Industrial Revolution, the introduction of new technologies and advances in science took place over decades, even centuries, but by today's standards, the Industrial Revolution was downright static. In a little over a century, we have gone from horses to automobiles, from ships and trains to jet airplanes and rockets, from candles to electric lighting, from fans to central air conditioning, from radios to television and movies, and from newspapers and magazines to the internet. Since the turn of the 21st century, we have witnessed the widespread popular introduction of GPS, smart phones, social media, and artificial intelligence.

Culture is changing at a rapid clip as well. For centuries, families centered on a man and woman who pledged a lifetime of fidelity, with the man working and the woman taking on household duties and primary responsibility for child-rearing. Homosexuality was considered immoral or a sign of personal dysfunction. Sex before marriage was grounds for shame, mostly for women. The use of drugs for recreational purposes was forbidden and subject to severe criminal penalties. Religious teachings were accepted at face value, with little evidence to cast doubt on their credibility and little reason to suspect their cultural relativity. All these institutions and expectations have undergone dramatic change, if not abandonment, in just a matter of years.

The only constant, it seems, is constant change. The future is becoming the present at an accelerating rate. As we proceed through the 21st century, sustained bursts of populist sentiment seem inevitable, as segments of society resist the changes that threaten stability generally and their shared social identities in particular. Untethered to a stable frame of reference, humankind seems destined to an existential walk in a constantly changing environment. The quality of life may improve, but that is not the point. All the wealth, vaccines, and robots imaginable will not quench the desire for stability and clarity about ourselves and the world in which we live.

The Optimistic Scenario

Rapid change, whether in science, technology, culture, or modes of social interaction, may be inevitable, but we may be able to adapt to these changes without feeling constantly destabilized. The critical factor is the width of people's basins of attraction. People who have relatively wide basins can accommodate new information and ways of thinking without losing their centers of gravity. There is reason to believe that people's basins are in fact getting wider, enabling them to tolerate or even embrace new ideas and different lifestyles without fear of losing their social identities or having their values threatened.

Today, as in the past, narrow basins of attraction—and hence intolerance born of threat—are more pronounced among certain segments of the population. But the geographical isolation and demographic homogeneity partly responsible for narrow basins are themselves undergoing fairly rapid change. Because of the internet, cable news, movies, social mobility, and social media—changes to which we have already become adjusted and that therefore have ceased to pose a threat—geography no longer insulates people from exposure to different values, customs, languages, religions, and lifestyles. Someone living in Mississippi may have a narrowly social identity at this point, but the internet, movies, and the like provide him or her with safe access to different cultures from around the world. The person can view these different value systems at a distance without worrying about these values intruding into everyday life.

Even when there is direct contact with different value systems and social norms, there is less threat potential today than in the past. This is because the nature of contact with different cultures has undergone an important change in recent decades. For much of human history, such contact was largely contentious. Inter-group contact was largely a matter of warfare, crusades, and attempts at subjugation. In the modern era, contact is increasingly an opportunity to learn what another culture has to offer and perhaps experience a different way of living. In taking advantage of these opportunities, people are looking to build bridges rather than walls. People's basins of attraction may still be anchored with a set of values and a preferred lifestyle, but they will able to accommodate a wide range of different perspectives without experiencing the disdain and challenge that has historically promoted populist sentiments and movements.

Note that this scenario does not depend on inequities being reduced or eliminated. In the dynamical account, coherence and stability trump personal gain and social comparison. In the future, society may become less prone to populist arisings, while adjusting to levels of inequality that are higher than those observed today. Such adaptation may not be in the best interests of some segments of society—just as adaptation to inequality and autocracy in the Dark Ages was the antithesis of enlightenment and justice—but it may restore stability and meaning for people who would otherwise express discontent upon experiencing sudden changes.

Nonetheless, the interconnectedness of nations and cultures in the modern era is likely to increase tolerance among people who heretofore have reacted negatively to cultural differences. With geography placing weaker constraints on how people view one another, people's social identities are destined to become decoupled from the tribalism and nationalism that has characterized inter-group relations for most of human history (see also Krekó, this volume). Perhaps we are in the midst of a transition between the last vestiges of narrow-minded populism and the emergence of true interdependence and respect among cultures. Time will tell.

References

Adams, J. S. (1965). Inequity in social exchange. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 267–299). New York: Academic Press.

Boker, S. M., & Wenger, M. J. (2007). *Data analytic techniques for dynamical systems in the social and behavioral sciences*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Brewer, M. B. (1979). In-group bias in the minimal intergroup situation: A cognitive-motivational analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, *86*, 307–324.

Crano, W. (2012). *The rules of influence: Winning when you're in the minority*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Diener, E., Suh, E. M., Lucas, R. E., & Smith, H. (1999). Subjective well-being: Three decades of progress. *Psychological Bulletin*, *125*, 276–302.

Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7, 117–140.

Fischer, R., & Boer, D. (2011). What is more important for national well-being: Money or autonomy? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *101*, 164–184.

Frank, T. (2004). *What's the matter with Kansas? How conservatives won the heart of America*. New York: Henry Holt & Company.

Graham, J., Haidt, J., & Nosek, B. A. (2009). Liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral foundations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *96*, 1029–1046.

Guastello, S., Koopmans, M., & Pincus, D. (Eds.). (2009). *Chaos and complexity in psychology: Theory of nonlinear dynamical systems*. Boston: Cambridge University Press.

Hogg, M. A., & Abrams, D. (1988). *Social identifications: A social psychology of intergroup relations and group processes*. London: Routledge.

Holland, J. H. (1995). *Emergence: From chaos to order*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Inglehart, R., Foa, R., Peterson, C., & Welzel, C. (2008). Development, freedom, and rising happiness: A global perspective (1981–2007). *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *3*, 264–285.

Jost, J. T., Banaji, M. R., & Nosek, B. A. (2004). A decade of system justification theory: Accumulated evidence of conscious and unconscious bolstering of the status quo. *Political Psychology*, *25*, 881–919.

Jost, J. T., Glaser, J., Kruglanski, A. W., & Sulloway, F. J. (2003). Political conservatism as motivated social cognition. *Psychological Bulletin*, *129*, 339–375.

Jost, J. T., Pelham, B. W., Brett, W., & Carvallo, M. R. (2002). Non-conscious forms of system justification: Implicit and behavioral preferences for higher status groups. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *38*, 586–602.

Kaltwasser, C. R., Taggart, P., Espejo, P. O., & Ostiguy, P. (Eds.). (2017). *The Oxford handbook of populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kenrick, D. T., Li, N. P., & Butner, J. (2003). Dynamical evolutionary psychology: Individual decision-rules and emergent social norms. *Psychological Review*, *110*, 3–28.

Ker, W. P. (1904). *The dark ages*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons.

Kruglanski, A. W., & Webster, D. M. (1996). Motivated closing of the mind: "Seizing" and "Freezing." *Psychological Review*, *103*, 263–283.

Larson, A. L. (1964). *Southern demagogues: A study in charismatic leadership*. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms.

Lerner, M. J. (1980). *The belief in a just world: A fundamental delusion*. New York: Plenum Press.

Luthin, R. H. (1954). *American demagogues: Twentieth century*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Manning, P. (2013). *Migration in world history* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Maslow, A. H. (1954). *Motivation and personality*. New York: Harper & Row.

Moscovici, S., Lage, E., & Naffrechoux, M. (1969). Influence of a consistent minority on responses of a majority in a color perception task. *Sociometry*, *32*, 365–379.

Myers, D. G., & Diener, E. (1995). Who is happy? *Psychological Science*, *6*, 10–19.

Nowak, A., Szamrej, J., & Latané, B. (1990). From private attitude to public opinion: A dynamic theory of social impact. *Psychological Review*, *97*, 362–376.

Nowak, A., & Vallacher, R. R. (2019). Nonlinear societal change: The perspective of dynamical systems. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *58*, 105–128.

Nowak, A., Vallacher, R. R., Rychwalska, A., Praszkier, R., & Zochowski, M. (2020a). *In sync: The emergence of function in minds, groups, and societies*. Berlin: Springer.

Nowak, A., Vallacher, R. R., Rychwalska, A., Roszczynska, A., Ziembowicz, K., Biesaga, M., & Kacpzyk-Murawska, M. (2020b). *Target in control: Social influence as distributed information processing*. Berlin: Springer.

Nowak, A., Vallacher, R. R., Tesser, A., & Borkowski, W. (2000). Society of self: The emergence of collective properties in self-structure. *Psychological Review*, *107*, 39–61.

Roberts-Miller, P. (2005). Democracy, demagoguery, and critical rhetoric. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, *8*(3). East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.

Sherif, M., & Hovland, C. I. (1961). *Social judgment: Assimilation and contrast effects in communication and attitude change*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Shweder, R. A. (1991). *Thinking through cultures: Expeditions in cultural psychology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Signer, M. (2009). *Demagogue: The fight to save democracy from its worst enemies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Strogatz, S. (1994). *Nonlinear dynamics and chaos*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books Group.

Suls, J., Collins, R. L., & Wheeler, L. (Eds.). (2020). *Social comparison, judgment, and behavior*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Thibaut, J., & Walker, L. (1975). *Procedural justice: A psychological analysis*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Vallacher, R. R., Coleman, P. T., Nowak, A., & Bui-Wrzosinska, L. (2010). Rethinking intractable conflict: The perspective of dynamical systems. *American Psychologist*, *65*, 262–278.

Vallacher, R. R., Read, S. J., & Nowak, A. (2002). The dynamical perspective in personality and social psychology. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *6*, 264–273.

Waldrop, M. M. (1992). *Complexity: The emerging science at the edge of order and chaos*. New York: Schuster.

Walster, E. B., Berscheid, E., & Walster, G. W. (1973). New directions in equity research. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *25*, 151–176.

Wood, D., Daley, J., & Chivers, C. (2018). Australia demonstrates the rise of populism is about more than economics. *The Australian Economic Review*, *51*(3), 399–410.