

Right Wing Populism in the West: Social Media Discourse and Echo Chambers

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ABSTRACT *The commentary examines the roots of electoral shifts towards right wing populist parties and groups in the West. It shows how legitimate economic grievances of lower classes have been strategically appropriated by political elites to project xenophobic discourses and how globalist-capitalist parties capitalize on such sentiments. It discusses the British Brexit vote as a quintessential example of strategic misplacement of migration issue as the main problem to disguise the democratic deficit of a hyper-normalized neoliberal economic order. The commentary also examines the links between technological design of Social Media technologies and the notion of post-politics era.*

Introduction

Nativist/nationalist discourses have been on the rise in the European sphere in recent decades. Wodak and colleagues in their large scale edited volume bring together a variety of Western/European case studies of right wing populist parties/movements and discourses and warn against the rising trends of such views in Europe.¹ These studies range from discussing the theoretical foundations and conceptualization of the nature of populist rhetoric to explaining the unprecedented changes in the working class electorates and their economic grievances in several European countries. In the years following the pub-

lication of the book, a new wave of right wing populist parties and groups across Europe have made significant inroads in popular support, be it in the form of entering the structure of governments or making significant gains in their vote shares. Most of these populist discourses are characterized in terms of their vociferous claims to being anti-establishment, anti-elitist and anti-globalization. These calls are made within a Western context where economic globalization and global capitalist movement have been the order of the day in politics within the last decades.

The right wing populism discourses are characterized in a set of common

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and recurring discursive strategies, albeit in varying degrees of intensity and scale. Firstly, there is the call for a swift and radical shift from a globalization rationale towards a national and nativist politics. This discursive strategy criticizes the normalized economic politics in the West i.e. economic liberalism, free movement of capital and labor, and deregulation of financial markets –even though, all these are reduced to an anti-immigration rhetoric in populist discourse. In doing so, the right wing populist discourse deliberately collates the economic globalization –that is neo-liberalism at the global level, with socio-cultural globalization that is comprised of supra-national regulatory practices on environmental laws, judiciary and human rights regulation, standardization of labor conditions etc., as well as trade laws. It is within this very amalgamation that right wing populism can take on an overtly anti-global, anti-diversity and simply xenophobic overtone. In many ways, the populist discourse equates the per-

ceived disastrous economic realities with the perceived encouragement of more immigration and diversity. This is most acutely realized in areas of the country where economic globalization and financialization of politics have hit the hardest. Extreme economization of politics views poorer sections of society as unimportant layers of social order and hence it is bound to leave them behind in its obsession with economic growth indexes rather than distribution of wealth and opportunities. The profiles of the Brexit vote in Britain and the U.S. presidential election in 2016 show that sizable sections of working class have casted their protest vote in favor of a shakeup in an attempt to presumably reclaim lost power of the ‘ordinary,’ marginal, rural, poorer, local populations from the dominance of the elite, central, urban, cosmopolitan, richer populations. During the course of the Brexit campaign, the leading figures in the Leave camp –themselves rich establishment figures– quickly figured out that it is by capitalizing on this misguided understanding of immigration and globalization that they can win the Brexit vote hence they deliberately concentrated on reducing/simplifying the referendum vote to a question of immigration. The deliberate alignment of economic grievances of certain disenfranchised electorates culminated in a Brexit vote platform which had already turned into a xenophobic platform. Within a populist frame, the Leave campaign managed to reduce the British EU referendum debates into predominately a matter of social and cultural changes and perceptions of immigration albeit

within an intentional truncated manner. The gist of the matter is that the erosion of real distinctions between mainstream parties in British/European politics i.e. neoliberalism as an uncontested assumption, has heightened fears of immigration.² This has paved the ground for the rise of right wing populist discourses which effectively appeal to what has been a traditional support camp for the 'left'.³

Hyper-normalized Economic Order

British nationalism has been in play throughout contemporary history⁴ from colonialism, World Wars, to EU formation and the Brexit vote. Yet, the recent rise/success of British xenophobic nationalism relates more directly to recent context of global geopolitics, economic concerns and broadly speaking a *democratic deficit of late-modern democracies in the global North*. Instead of finger pointing and demonizing certain electorates, e.g. lower classes, the issue should be looked into in terms of the processes which may have led to this vote among various electorates including the working class vote. The formation and meaningful resonance of parties and movements such as UKIP and Brexit campaign can be viewed as a failure in effective democratic process in empowering disgruntled economic classes through meaningful representation. When (neoliberal) economy is religiously taken as an all-encompassing rational basis of politics then it is only logical to consider political demonstrations

such as the Brexit vote as a product of such economic policies in return. What goes around comes around. Rather than doing that, the economic establishment tends to redirect the protest vote away from economic grievance and associate it to cultural and social trends within that particular community i.e. blaming the vote to racism of working classes and effectively perpetuating the classist discourse; two birds with one stone.

Despite the crucial differences in social fabrics and political practices in global contexts, the breeding ground, characteristics and discursive strategies of populist nationalist discourses have striking similarities. In essence, populist nationalist discourse pivots around a real or constructed problem in the social, economic and political *status quo*. It revolves around discursive construction of a homogenously perceived Self, e.g. Us (the British), vs. a homogenously perceived Other, e.g. Them (the immigrants, Muslims⁵ or by extension EU nationals). Nevertheless, the core message is nationalistic.⁶ Such discourses often 'fill the gap created by the public's disenchantment with [official] politics'⁷ while presenting themselves as the indigenous, socially relevant, and righteous alternative to world-views of the establishment. Nationalist rhetoric is overtly preoccupied with the notion of (re)gaining the (lost) power to actualize a romanticized perception of the past. The perception of powerlessness is central to nativist discourses not only in the structurally 'democratic' societies (e.g. Britain) but also in the extreme

Three far-right political figures (L to R: Geert Wilders, the Netherlands; Frauke Petry, Germany; Marine Le Pen, France) give a press conference in Koblenz, Germany, on January 21, 2017.

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identity politics at play in developing countries (e.g. Iran), which have gone through some forms of European colonization. While the democratic deficit in the late modern contexts may have arisen due to dominance of neoliberalism and its argued lack of relevance to certain electorates, many countries in the global South suffer from structural authoritarian politics leading to structural democratic deficit. While these contexts are admittedly different in terms of domestic mark up, in one way or another, in both cases nativist discourses are founded upon a form of outcry for a radical change by taking back control, bringing back the glories, and restoring a constructed perfect past.⁸

The leading argument here is that the global neoliberal North suffers from a degree of democratic deficit in its democratic practice. The main unresolved challenge is to operate within

an egalitarian model of development in which justice and fair distribution of wealth and power are equally important in the long term imaginary of a developed nation-state. The deficit comes about by obsession with typical indexes of economic growth and assigning a pivotal role to markets and any processes whereby growth can be achieved. From a neoliberal point of view, globalization is practically a facilitated flow of goods, services and labor within markets, dictated by market values/economic drive and for the benefit of the markets. The economic drive is the essence of identity of the parties on the right (e.g. Conservative Party in the UK) as it is the main tenant of their world imagery within the condition that everything else is ruthlessly deemed to be expendable. This, in the context of UK for example, has been the justification for austerity measures after the global economic crisis of 2008 –which by the

way was brought about not by people whose life quality is now being squeezed by austerity, but, by the economic players at the top of the food chain. Similarly, a neoliberal argument has been used for justifying the move away from welfare society in which public service is increasingly curtailed for the benefit of reviving a neoliberal notion of growth. The new austerity measures have been directly impacting lower classes who have always been more in need for these services in the first place. In other words, the adopted remedy for the crisis, i.e. austerity, has disenfranchised these classes even more than before. These groups of citizens gradually view themselves as left behind indigenous population while at the same time witnessing a rapid change of their immediate environment to the benefit of global migratory flows. While the perception of disempowerment grows among the lower classes, the new migrants, mainly from Europe in the case of UK, seem to be supported and encouraged by the establishment politics – a perception which is wrong at its core but it is deliberately reiterated. The capitalist politics, of course, is not essentially interested in diversity and/or migration in the first place. That is, it does not for example believe in a humanist argument of giving everybody a chance but it simply stands in favor of what is seen as a process which helps the market and economic growth indexes; migrants not as humans but as market labor. As such, the center right politics maintains a generally xenophobic and class based rhetoric regarding migration. It is in practice content with the economic

Overwhelming individual marketing approach dismantles society as a collective and when it is applied to politics, it replaces the truths and facts with some kinds of validation of having your opinion as truth and facts

rationale of globalized immigration, work place deregulations, and outsourcing industries. It does not necessarily view the migrants as equal citizens in the country. In the meantime, the center right maintains an inherently class based politics in which the government/state is merely viewed as an apparatus to serve the market even at the expense of the poor. The right wing politics believes in the markets and market values as the overarching leading principle in governance, life and society. Such a view is at ease in classification of citizens into those they see as relevant players and those that they see as unproductive, be it those who may need state support, e.g. disabled citizens or lower classes in precarious job situations, or God forbid migrants with slightly less productivity than 100 percent. Economic globalization has also contributed to establishing market values and practices as the taken-for-granted norm in the global North. This is not about globalization in and by itself but about the way right center parties have ap-

In many countries in the North, public sphere is 'plagued by forces of commercialization and compromised corporate conglomerates' which in effect work to turn all public sphere platforms into 'a vehicle for capitalist hegemony and ideological reproduction'

propriated globalization to disguise their class based ideology and justify their anti-welfare policies. Through these two overlapping aspects, migration is semiotized as the evidence and source of policies which have harmed many lower classes in Western societies; a misguided grievance which is not only strategically cultivated by the establishment politics but also by the mainstream media apparatus of neo-liberal contexts.

The key question is to ask why the lower classes, which have been damaged by the global Western trends of right or center right capitalist policies, have in turn come out in support of more extreme right wing politics. This, in fact, is the key factor in the rise of populist politics in the West. This is evidence to recent failings of the established left in politics, and their elitism as well as the triumph of hegemony of capitalism which has changed it from an ideology to a natural order of governance in the global North and indeed around the globe.

This is where explanations should be provided in terms of the mechanisms through which the traditional left electorates e.g. Labour Party in UK or in Sweden have voted in favor of center right politicians or have completely swung to vote for fringe parties with very outspoken anti-immigration, racist, and anti-global slogans. This is the era of a new identity politics, which reaps the results of years of naturalization of a certain economic model, substantiated by a deliberately misplaced real grievance.

The fact is that within the last few decades the whole spectrum of mainstream official politics has moved increasingly to the right in a way that the opportunities of real social democratic politics have diminished significantly. As far as the economy is concerned there has been no radical difference between the so called right and left side of the political spectrum. In the case of UK, the new labor movement of the 90s was successful to re-launch the left into power but in essence it viewed itself as a non-socialist left. Yes, several progressive policies of the New Labour remained intact and initially it proved to be a fresh change away from a Tory politics of the time which had caused horrendous class conflicts and pursued a severe capitalist agenda, but nonetheless, New Labour became the antithesis of a real left politics and what it should stand for. The New Labour was successful in three consecutive general elections but towards the end it was evident that the party had nothing else to offer in the manner of difference. The global economic

crisis of 2008 worked as a catalyst for which Labour got the blame (it did not really do much to stop it anyway) whereas the global economic crisis was and still is a doomed outcome of hegemonic dominance of market forces and cut-throat competition to sell financial products. Similar trends could be seen in other parts of the West in different degrees. In the U.S for example, there has never really been a viable left politics and the whole political spectrum is to the right of most of European political scales. While the power would change hands to centrist aka increasingly right leading parties, the central thesis of a globalized, connected, market based capitalist politics is taken for granted in the structural politics of establishment. Trump's vote was partly due to a perception of difference, which, as mentioned before, harvested the outcome of *a deliberately misplaced real grievance*.

The trend towards unquestionable capitalist rationale as the only norm and viable option of governance is also infused and relegated to all the other aspects of life-worlds of citizens. This is where the style, dynamic and logics of competition, economic derive and extreme individualism are taken up in provisions of goods and services and even worse, it permeates into aspects of life-worlds which had not previously been viewed as a realm of neoliberal subjugation, e.g. education, health care and life experience. It goes without saying that the mainstream media have had a crucial hand in normalizing such practices while they themselves are being internally

impacted by similar trends, e.g. increasing reliance on advertising. This overwhelming individual marketing approach dismantles society as a collective and when it is applied to politics, it replaces the truths and facts with some kinds of validation of having your opinion as truth and facts.⁹

Post-politics

The hyper-normalization of a neo-liberal life order has translated itself into approaches in political science and cultural studies which have started to do away with radical critic and turned into approaches which claim to pay attention to micro-level analysis of political communication, e.g. the rise of personal politics, individualistically oriented studies on behavior and affect theory of connection. Despite the fact that there is also critical work within this paradigm, a lot of these approaches do not require engagement, or are content to turn away from engaging, with the macro structural issues. Macro structural considerations would consider questions such as: why people act the way they do, or why personality and media management of public faces are increasingly becoming more important than policy and rational deliberation, why the electorates are weary of big politics discussions and young generations are disillusioned with politics, why large populations see politics as irrelevant to their life and in turn the sensitivities and public knowledge around democratic structure, values, rights are falling, why university students do not show

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significant interest in understanding the basics of democracy or the need for structural critique?

This is where the notion of post-politics comes in to justify the shift by postulating that this is an era beyond politics and ideologies. It is argued that the contemporary moment of history is the new era when big 'P' politics is no longer relevant, mainly because nothing really changes in bringing this or that party to power. The process of normalization of post-political context is both a top-down macro and bottom-up micro process. The post-politics actively denies that the real politics is about policy, argumentation and overarching principles and happily reduces it to media appearance, likeability, psychological connection and relatability in the context that the media industry vigorously continues to make advances in colonizing the politics. One driving force and culmination of such post-ideological manipulation in practice is reflected and constituted in the logics

and dynamic of interaction on Social Media and participatory web.

Media Landscape and Politics

The two forces of traditional intrusive politics (coercive control of public domains e.g. censorship) and the capitalist colonization of public sphere are the main barriers to true democratization projects.¹⁰ They both pertain to the way public sphere is restricted in facilitating viable deliberation towards the general public's interest i.e. diversity, equal representation, access and influence. In many countries in the North, public sphere is 'plagued by forces of commercialization and compromised corporate conglomerates' which in effect work to turn all public sphere platforms into 'a vehicle for capitalist hegemony and ideological reproduction.'¹¹ In the meantime, a more traditional (visibly) coercive exercise of hegemony and control is witnessed in many developing parts of the world. For example, the debate about the role and function of media in the Middle East has always been a question of democracy and the quality of public sphere 'as space for political contestations, counter-hegemonic struggles, and/or performance of identity.'¹²

As such, issues of access to, quality, and viability of media use and technologies –as the main public sphere apparatus– are all political considerations. In as much as public sphere is viewed as 'a network for communicating information and points of view' or 'a realm of our social life'

where some forms of public opinion can be formed,¹³ it becomes a political matter. In other words, aspects pertaining to ‘symbolic of social relations ordering’¹⁴ are political as well as being inherently discursive. *Any force that curtails, negatively influences, and manipulates the public sphere is a force contributing to a democratic deficit.*

The above notions can be considered for both old/traditional mass media as well as new/participatory Social Media. Yet, the dynamic of discursive power and the interaction between the old and new media are radically different.¹⁵ In the meantime, the trajectory of such notional changes in Social Media has affected norms of political communication in general and political activism in particular. Now, ‘ordinary’ users can be part of production, consumption and distribution of content with few or no barriers in the form of traditional gate-keeping practices.¹⁶ With an oversimplified take on the democratization project, the perception of free access has come to be celebrated as a new frontier for democratic circulation of forms of media content; nevertheless, the potentials of the participatory web in civil, political and social mobilization cannot be categorically dismissed.¹⁷ It is a fact that various groups of ordinary to professional text producers, i.e. bloggers, followers, raters, sharers, likers, as well as traditional journalists, form nodes in an information environment with the potential to organize themselves for various aims. This is not only about transferring content and values per se, but it is about being a site for formation and substantiation of these values, in-

formation and worldviews that is discourse. New Media technologies and communicative affordances continue to impact social and political fabrics of societies in (sometimes radically) different ways. Specifically, in the context of the Middle East, with (largely) restricted public spheres,¹⁸ the communicative affordances of Social Media have provided opportunities for new forms of citizen activism, construction of alternative identities and deliberations despite the contentious relations of political regimes with the new technology. The new technologies have (arguably) empowered ordinary civilians to engage in political and cultural communications and to contribute to expression, formation and dissemination of discourses away from (usually closed) official channels.¹⁹

Broadly speaking, the developments in communication technologies – what have come to be called as technologies of the participatory web²⁰ – have essentially altered the linear, one-to-many dynamic of mass communication and posed various challenges for, in traditional assumptions, critical media studies such as media power, representation, dynamic of text production/consumption, audience, etc.²¹ In effect, Social Media communicative model has brought together the distinct communicative paradigms of Interpersonal communication – into the realm of linguistic analysis, and Mass communication – into the realm of Media Studies.²² As such Social Media communication is referred to as ‘any electronically mediated communicative practice across platforms, spaces, sites, and technologies

A protestor holds a placard during an anti-EU demonstration outside the Houses of Parliament in London, on November 23, 2016.

AFP PHOTO / BEN STANSALL



in which users can: (i) work together in producing and compiling content; (ii) perform interpersonal communication and mass communication simultaneously or separately and; (iii) have access to see and respond to institutionally (e.g. newspaper articles) or user-generated content/texts.²³ This would then include obvious Social Networking Sites (SNSs) such as *Facebook* and *Instagram*; websites which are focused on crowd sourcing content e.g. *Wikipedia*, electronic forums etc.; micro/blogging sites e.g. *Tumblr* and *Twitter*; and Instant Messaging Apps with the possibility of creating group communication such as *WhatsApp* and *Telegram*.

Social Media and Echo Chambers

The new surge in right wing populism is not characterized by 'a strong

structure, and organized movement, or a dense party organization,'²⁴ e.g. a form of ethno-nationalist identity. Populism is the realm of media savvy political performers who make colorful claims to grass root mobilization among formerly voiceless ordinary members of the society. Despite being anti-(democratic) establishment, the new far right argues from a (truncated form of) popular democratic perspective devoid of philosophical complications of foundations of democratic principles. Incidentally, media performance, the claim to empowerment of ordinary citizens, re-connection with politics, grass-root mobilization also constitutes the core characteristics of new digital media technologies which work with the logic of *regimes of popularity building* through 'likes,' 'shares' and 'followers,' etc. Personality politics on Social Media not only feed into a highly simplified equation

of popularity and legitimacy but at the same time act as a revolt against the perceived monolithic nature of traditional mass media. In contrast to the rigidity of mass media in terms of their monopoly over discursive power, the nature, location and dynamic of discursive power in Social Media or broadly speaking participatory web is fluid, changeable, and circular²⁵ in a way that users are at the same time, producers, consumers and distributors of the content. Although, the utopian hopes for enhancement of the real public deliberation via the Social Media and democratization of public sphere has not materialized, these platforms can still play a significant role for niche politics and non-mainstream representations including exclusionary nationalist discourses and inherently undemocratic rhetoric.²⁶ The fact remains that given the nature of populist nationalist discourse and strategies, the new digital participatory technology is an apt space for construction, promotion and dissemination of exclusionary nationalist discourses across geopolitical contexts.

The main argument here is to note that the new communication technologies of participatory web and their new affordances of interactivity and potential for direct democratic vs. representational democratic participation *have not caused the current shift to right wing populist trend in Europe* for that matter. As explained above, the shift has its own roots in structural democratic deficit, i.e. socio-political contexts of relevant societies. Nonetheless, the values

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and processes at work in Social Media spaces, the political economy of platforms, and their assumption of post-ideological era and obsolescence of critical politics are completely in line for promoting affective-driven, anti-establishment, and fringe politics. Such politics is not built upon argumentation, i.e. rational deliberation in the Habermasian sense, but it is largely based on affective communication which foregrounds what individuals feel, believe and like over facts, arguments and logics. The technology has eroded the practice of rational debate and turned it into a popularity contest. This technology encourages filter bubbles and echo chambers which work to form groups of like-minded members and keeps these groups away from meaningful interactions even among themselves.

In the meantime, the extreme individuation, and the central logic of equating visibility/popularity with legitimacy in Social Media, along with

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the corporate algorithmic manipulation of news feeds create a fertile ground for populist perception and communication. These characteristics of Social Media communication are responsible elements in creating echo chambers whereby the architecture of the media tends to favor and encourages like-mindedness and intensification of feelings and beliefs with little or no critical scrutiny. This is not necessarily the overarching aim that the Social Media platform owners directly pursue but a natural side effect of their operations. The leading core principle for Social Media operation is to increase media consumption. The more users consume, engage with, and contribute to the platform, the more there is added value for the platform. On the one hand, the users' use of media turns them into a member of the audience for various kinds of advertisements directed at them and as such increases the value of the platform. On the other hand, any form of engagement, use, interaction, contribution, sharing content/information, linking etc. is considered the trade currency. All these are used for commercial purposes e.g. for more

precision targeted advertising, distribution of advertising content, and various market research operations. As such, these platforms constantly seek solutions to enhance use and contributions from users. This is the guiding force for various kinds of algorithmic rearrangement of the content visible to individual users. For example, the *Facebook* news feed of every individual is catered around the 'knowledge' that the platform has already gathered on the user and the predictions it can make about their political views, interests, issues, vulnerabilities, belief system etc. As such, the platform works based on the principle of relevance rather than significance. That is, the platform shows the user what it predicts to be liked or interesting or relevant to the user rather than following a public service logic of delivering news to the public in terms of reflecting the world out there to the whole public. By taking into account the dominant affective mode of communication, likeminded users would predominantly see each other's reactions, news, links, commentaries; a process which would lead to echo chambers and intensification of the belief system. Echo chambers are natural consequences of the way Social Media are commercially designed. All forms of interactions on Social Media function as a form of promotion of that content. Whether it is 'liking,' 'commenting,' 'sharing,' or 'tagging,' they all help that content to become more important and get more exposure. It is natural if we avoid engaging with views that we do not like hence there is a technological design with a con-

sequence of echo chambers. This is also due to dominance of economic logic on digital spaces, otherwise, the participatory web could also be used as a public sphere for deliberation or expression of suppressed identities.

Echo chambers are not about new ideas or (critical) perspectives, they are about how well or effectively the group members reiterate the same idea/belief. Hence, the result is intensification of belief system at best. At the same time, critical speculations and other ways of seeing the situation and critical engagement are normally kept out via the natural operation of Social Media algorithms and the way these platforms nudge users to behave –unless of course, the user makes a conscious and constant effort to reshuffle their membership of networked publics. Social Media are unpredictable in terms of where and what something becomes a sensation. There is a strong dynamic of snowballing. Many Social Media platforms work based on user's behaviors and reactions and when something attracts certain numbers of 'likes,' 'comments,' 'interactions,' 'sharing,' etc. it becomes visible to large groups of users and then it may snowball to dominate the whole net for some time. Throughout this process, there is no gate keeping or fact checking mechanism. In other words, the news, which may have become the biggest sensation on the net, could easily be false or completely fabricated. Social Media are about visibility/popularity not facts. Yet many users and ordinary public automatically equate visibility/popularity of a piece of news to

its credibility. This is simply how Social Media could become a breeding ground for false news. The essence of Social Media is creditability gained by visibility/popularity as popularity equates commercial gain regardless of the consequences. This may work fine within commercial domains but when a similar logic is applied to the sphere of politics the results could be disastrous. In other words, *Social Media could actually function as spaces for democratic practice but the market logic and dominance of commercial rationality has diminished this potential and in many cases destroyed this capacity.* Obviously, these effects are different in different Social Media platforms, e.g. *Facebook* as compared to *Twitter* but nevertheless, the central logic of corporatized participatory web is the same. Once again this is about colonization of what could be assumed to be the public sphere by corporate forces and some form of market economy, which is plaguing the ideal potential of the New Media spaces. This is the same force, which is an increasing threat to traditional mass media as well.

The algorithmic surveillance of Social Media is not an ideological machine in the traditional sense, i.e. it is mainly automatic and machine controlled whereby human factor does not normally interfere with the regimentation. The New Media technology literature is full of undertones of claims to post-ideological era. In many trends of thoughts even notions like ideology, discourse and representations are cast aside as being irrelevant notions in the study

Social Media politics has created a fertile space of growth of populist politics or haphazard populism in every sense

of New Media technology. However, the claim to post-ideology is already a strictly ideological stance in its core. In most cases this is about assuming the triumph of market economy and neoliberalism over all aspects of social and personal life including media technologies. Post-ideology thesis, in the meantime, trivializes the democratic struggles and values in a way that the whole democratization project is deliberately and misleadingly reduced to some kind of opinion gathering mechanism. This is a super-simplified understanding of democracy, i.e. reducing down to a poll system, regardless of the core values which had informed the original thoughts of democracy and enlightenment. In many ways, Social Media sensations are inherently populist phenomenon. This is not a problem in and by itself but the permeation of the principle of visibility-equals-legitimacy and the claim that Social Media are empowering the voiceless can have counterparts in structural politics of populism in which the populists predominately make anti-establishment claims, disregard for norms and values inherent in democracies and usually make pledges to overthrow the system in the benefit of 'the real people.' The problem is not

in the practice, it is about the philosophical essence that Social Media implicitly push forward. You could argue that democracy is about gaining popularity which is right but the point which is always missed is that democracy is not JUST about gaining popularity, it is about having a viable apparatus for rational argumentation and expression of all ideas. It is about having systems of fact checking and accountability, division of powers, anchorage to central civil principles, etc. Social Media seem to have removed all requirements of democracy and dangerously reduced it to a game of gaining popularity at any cost. In that sense, Social Media politics has created a fertile space of growth of populist politics or haphazard populism in every sense. Trumps' performance in the U.S. is a prime example of this trend, not only in terms of his populist right wing views and the typical strategic misplacements of working class grievances, but also in terms of the obsession he displays with the use of Social Media and the fact that he has literally reduced the entirety of actual political practice into a form of Social Media use.

Conclusion

Social Media are characterized as the realm of affects, connections and personal sharing. In turn, it is argued that it is now the age of affective politics that is, the age of prioritizing feelings over facts. It is the age where rationality takes a back seat in favor of relationality. New digital media are not the cause of this turn. There are

sociological and cultural reasons for such a turn towards favoring populism in the West. There are wider ontological shifts in politics and the world imagery which has caused this turn. Social Media are both the product and at the same time perpetuator of such preference. That is why their guiding logic resonates with contemporary people. Social Media at the age of behavioral advertising are the epitome of preference of 'relevance' over 'significance.' Social Media are about YOUR life, what you like, what you feel and they cater towards what you prefer by constantly monitoring your online behavior. This is of course done to maximize profit through targeted advertising and promotions. Social Media do not show you the world out there, they construct a world to your liking and as such they are a breeding ground for echo chambers, and constructions of filter bubbles where all like-minded people get together and reinforce their own perception of the realities and priorities rather than engaging with other views. And, everybody assumes this is the world out there!

Having said all the above, this is not to argue that Social Media have had a causal effect on the shift to right wing populism in the West. The rise of right wing populism (i.e. the support from the underclass) is basically a protest against normalization of neoliberal economy, economic globalization, pursuit of growth, disregarding issues around distribution of wealth and the constant normalization of such practices in the West which has caused a democratic defi-

cit in the West. The hyper-normalization of neoliberal values along with deliberate misinformation, tapping into nationalism, anti-immigration rhetoric of the incumbent governments and the change in traditional class divisions have led into a sort of exodus of the traditional electorate from the traditional left camp to the extreme right of center parties. While the global neoliberal forces reap the benefits of labor based migration, outsourcing industries, etc. and in practice encourage it, at the rhetoric and discourse level, immigration and outsourcing gets the blame for the inequalities, and disenfranchisement of lower layers of social classes. This is why a twisted single issue (anti-immigration) party on the extreme right would pretty much appeal to many disgruntled communities. ■

Endnotes

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