



# The Enlightenment



A Mini-Journal of the Humanist Association of London and Area  
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Volume 15

Number 1

January 2019

## “Are Populism Politics Threatening Democracy?”

*By R. Michael Warren*

Brazil is the latest democracy to elect a right-wing populist leader. Jair Bolsonaro is a pro-torture, pro-gun, former paratrooper. He calls refugees “the scum of the earth,” degrades blacks, homosexuals and women and says democracy doesn’t work.

Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen, leader of France’s far right party, were quick to endorse Bolsonaro. However, French President Emanuel Macron said, “No democracy is safe.” And it appears he’s right.

Bolsonaro joins populist presidents in the Philippines, Hungary, Turkey, Poland, India, Chile, America, and Premier Ford of Ontario. The political dynamics in these jurisdictions are different. But there are underlying similarities.

The mood in the Western world and beyond is strained. Millions are angry and unhappy with their lives. They express their discontent at the polls by supporting populist candidates.

Who are these people?

They’re often financially stressed and having trouble finding meaning in consumerism. They’re deeply suspicious of the prevailing establishment. It doesn’t seem to represent them or their needs.

They tend to be suspicious of foreigners and sceptical of the facts and opinions in the mainstream media. And they don’t much like intellectuals or journalists.

To understand what’s contributed to the rise of populism, its important to objectively examine the underlying causes.

First, according to professor Michael Cox, there is no intellectual coherence to populism. It’s merely a political tactic used by politicians over the ages to gain power and then govern “their people” - often like demagogues.

Moises Naim, editor of Foreign Policy Populist magazine says populism "... has been used for centuries, recently appearing to resurface in full force." This time, "it's propelled by the digital revolution, precarious economics and the threatening insecurity of what lies ahead."

Populism is also an outgrowth of our age of anxiety. The people who voted for Brexit wanted their "Old England" back. Donald Trump was elected on a platform of "Making America Great Again". He promises to contain immigration, and hints at rolling back abortion laws and same sex marriage by stacking the Supreme Court.

Technology is exploding. It's bringing as much uncertainty and anxiety as it does convenience and opportunity. People don't like massive change. Populist politicians who promise to return us to the 'good old days' are playing to that fear.

Populism is also driven by "our collective identity crisis." Am I still living in a country surrounded by people of my own kind, who share my own values? Or, is the country I knew disappearing from under me? Populist politicians offer simple bromides to calm this common concern as well.

Then there is the way current day capitalism is working, or not working. Over the last few decades it has rewarded capital far more than it has labour.

Income and wealth disparity is growing across the world. Canada's own income gap is one of the 10 worst in the developed world. Our top 1% takes in nearly 15% of all the income in the country.

This skewed economic system is a major contributor to populism. It's brought lower productivity growth, lower investment rates, diminished job security and a hollowing of the middle class.

Instead of helping to reform the system, the 2008 financial meltdown has made matters worse. It's served to undermine public confidence in our economists, bankers and politicians. They missed the signs and are still trying to cope with its impact.

The feeling of powerlessness that characterized that period remains. Trump capitalizes on this feeling by stressing that the establishment cannot be trusted. He says as much about his own democratic institutions like the FBI, the US intelligence community, and the Federal Reserve. The mainstream media is "the enemy of the state."

Apparently, only Trump can be trusted to give power back to the people. And not coincidentally, that was Ontario Premier Doug Ford's campaign mantra.

The rise of populism has many mothers. It's a political technique that uses deep wells of genuine discontent, anger and fear to create division. Anti-establishment solutions are promised to elements of the electorate who feel they have nothing to lose by voting for dramatic change.

But the disenfranchised and discontented will soon sour if these populist leaders fail to deliver on their promises. In Ford's case "the little guy" is not turning out to be the unemployed or the underemployed.

The planned minimum wage increase has been stopped. Labour standards reforms and welfare payment increases have all been rolled back. A world-class basic income experiment has been cancelled.

Ford, like so many other right-wing populists, says he's in politics to make life better for the little guy. But already he's governing for the interests of his own elites. Bay Street has his ear and Main Street his rhetoric.

Populist politics will run its course like every other ism. It's a political strategy that lacks a cohesive ideology to help those who use it to deliver results.

The most pressing question is what happens to those democracies being occupied by populist leaders? Are the democratic institutions in these countries strong enough to survive the onslaught? Or when populism fails will their democracies strengthen or slide in the direction of fascism?

And in Ontario, will the little guy and his struggling family really be better off?

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*My thanks to Michael Warren for permission to print this timely article that appeared in the Saturday December 1<sup>st</sup> edition of the London Free Press. – Editor.*

## **Humanism and Democracy**

Why is populism on the increase at this point in the history of humanity? Actually, it's not hard to pinpoint the causes. Just look around. Big money has gained undue influence in governments, particularly in the U.S., which is really no longer a democracy with a deadlocked Congress and a demagogue as president. The middle class is shrinking as the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. With the Digital Revolution upon us, the job market is shrinking, as artificial intelligence and robotics eliminate many of the old jobs. No wonder many people are uneasy and looking toward populism for solutions. Yes, democracy is being threatened, as Michael Warren's article above suggests. Why has this come about and what has humanism got to do with it? Not a lot one would think, but I recently have become aware of a new kind of humanism that involves democracy in a really big way. Read on!

What is the traditional definition of humanism? The definition on the back of the Humanist Association of London and Area membership card is as follows:

*Humanism is a proactive life stance guided by the principles of rational thought, scientific inquiry, ethics, responsibility, compassion, fairness, and equality, without belief in supernatural phenomena.*

Thus, by this definition, humanists are people who live according to these guidelines, reject belief in a supernatural God, and are usually not associated with any organized religion.

All good stuff, but the reality is that since the time humanist ideas first appeared in ancient Greece, the humanist movement has not garnered a lot of attention. If you tell the average person you are a humanist, you will often get a blank stare, or they will ask, what is that? The number of card-carrying humanists,

whether they be in national or local associations, is not large. For example, Humanist Canada membership is less than 500.

In the big scheme of things, the number of card-carrying humanists in the world is relatively small. Certainly less than 500,000 in a world of 7 billion plus. Why have humanists and humanist associations failed to make any kind of significant impression on the world when a stated aim of humanism is to try and make the world a better place? It seems humanists are good at preaching to the converted, but don't know how to reach out to the masses with a stated purpose to do some good in the world with results that are visibly evident.

On the other hand, however, if you change the definition of humanism and are not overly concerned about whether or not God exists, humanism has been exceedingly successful in secular liberal democratic societies with firm separation of Church and State. Countries where the welfare of each individual **human** is a prime concern of governments, and people are free to be believers or non-believers. As has been shown in Scandinavia, and other small-L liberal democratic countries including Canada and Australia, secularism can prevail while concerns about God tend to fade away. This is what has happened in most liberal democratic countries after WW II where prosperity prevailed, the middle class expanded, and attendance at mainline churches began to dwindle. But after 1980, top bracket tax rates began to be reduced, banking regulations became more relaxed, eventually resulting in the financial crash of 2008. (Canada, with more rigid banking regulations, escaped the worst of this set back).

The point to be taken here is this: It is in well functioning democratic societies with a large employed middle class, and where the wealthy are paying their fair share of taxes, that humans are best able to live a satisfying life. Does it not then follow that it is of prime importance to ensure that democracies continue to thrive and, in the process, protect the rights and freedoms of each individual?

This leads to a new variation of humanism, as defined by two well-known authors, Yuval Noah Harari and Steven Pinker. Harari describes liberal humanism as:

*Humanity is a conglomeration of **individual humans**, and the liberty of each individual human is sacrosanct.*

Pinker describes humanism as:

*The goal of maximizing **human flourishing** - life, health, happiness, freedom, knowledge, love, richness of experience – may be called humanism.*

Thus, according to these alternative definitions of humanism, a prime responsibility of a democratic government is to help businesses provide the prosperous economic conditions that enables each individual human to live a flourishing life. This is in addition to other governmental responsibilities such as maintaining justice along with law and order, collecting taxes, providing necessary infrastructure, protecting the environment, protecting human rights, utilizing natural resources wisely, etc.

But there is now a problem. This kind of humanism, at least in the Western world, is based on each human individual being able to live a satisfying life. This happens mainly in prosperous small-L liberal democratic societies with a large middle class. A society that can afford to provide social safety nets without increasing the level of debt. So, with the present trend toward populism in a number of countries, and a shrinking

middle class, can liberal democratic societies survive, as we have known them, in the challenging times of the future?

Challenging times indeed, exacerbated by the uncertainties that lie ahead. Uncertainties as a result of the onset of the Digital Age, with increasing robotics and Artificial Intelligence, prompting the question; how do we keep wage-earners productively employed? If guaranteed income is required, how do we pay for it without increasing debt? Can national debt be controlled? Philosopher David Hume once said, "either a nation must destroy its debt, or debt will destroy the nation." Will the wealthy agree to shun tax shelters and pay their fair share of taxes as they have done in the past in times of war? As a graph in the October *Enlightenment* clearly shows, during WW II and in the prosperous times after WW II, top federal tax rates in the U.S. were pegged at 90%. At the present time, after continuing pressure on governments from big business and big money, these top rates have been reduced to 42% or lower, resulting in increasing levels of potentially crippling debt. Thus, in order to satisfy the wealthy, legislators are doing the opposite of what they should be doing, reducing top bracket taxes instead of raising them in order to reduce debt and be able to finance social safety nets. These actions on the part of governments are resulting in a shrinking middle class as more and more citizens are finding it harder to make ends meet. It seems perfectly obvious to me that unless the wealthy start to replace greed with compassion and pay their fair share of taxes, we will see more protests like the yellow vests in France. So, will greed be replaced with compassion or will it take a "Great Depression," or a revolution (hopefully not a war) to get things back on track?

But it is not only some democratic governments that have run amok. Capitalism has as well. In a recent article in the *New York Times* entitled "American Capitalism Is Not Working," journalist David Leonhardt states, "Corporate leaders once acted with responsibility as they cared about their workers, their customers and their communities." As Leonhardt points out, in the 1950s and 1960s, middle-class incomes rose faster than those of chief executives. Imagine that! There was actually declining income inequality as most citizens enjoyed a higher standard of living than their parents, who had lived through two world wars and a devastating depression. Yes indeed, Adam Smith's invisible hand that controls supply and demand in a free capitalist market was working.

However, things began to change in the 1970s. Facing higher energy costs and global competition, American executives decided their mission was to maximize shareholder value. They fought for deregulation, reduced taxes, union-free workplaces, lower wages, and much higher pay for themselves. The end result is that median weekly earnings have grown a miserly 0.1% a year since 1979. Understandably, many Americans are anxious and angry. Surely it is time corporate boards again take into account the interests of customers, employees, and communities as well as shareholders. The article goes on to state, as mentioned above, that the solution will need to involve a return to higher taxes on the wealthy. In other words, can greed be replaced with compassion without the occurrence of some kind of disastrous event? We can hope so, but I will not hold my breath.

Getting back to humanism in this different context, I notice that the words humanist and humanism are cropping up more and more often in articles in the press. For example, an article in the December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018, London Free Press tells about the University of Guelph setting up a Center for Advancing Responsible and Ethical Artificial Intelligence, that aims to bring together experts to study and teach **humanist** approaches to AI. They are not talking about the humanism of humanist associations, but about a humanism concerned with the welfare and life styles of human individuals in a functioning secular society, realizing that, like the fruits of science and technology that can be used for good or evil, the fruits of AI can also be used to benefit

humans, or alternatively, to cause them grief. In other words, steps need to be taken to prevent AI from causing harm to citizens.

So, in these uncertain times, is there anything national humanist organizations can do to help? Yes! They should be concerned with protecting liberal democratic societies, maintaining separation of Church and State, and defending human rights. And with populism on the rise, there must be concern with the preservation of democratic prosperous societies where each individual **human** is able to live a flourishing life in a free secular environment. This is what the new humanism is all about.

If national humanist organizations can find leaders who are well known, famous, and willing to get political and fight for the causes they believe in, they could be very helpful. The late Dr. Henry Morgentaler, famous for advocating the right for abortions and founder of the Humanist Association of Canada in 1968, was a perfect example. A fighter who went to jail for a cause he believed in; the right for a woman to choose. Until there are leaders like Morgentaler (hopefully they will not have to go to jail) and a critical mass of members, traditional national and provincial humanist organizations will likely remain in the background. Encouragingly, the British Columbia Humanist Association is getting political by highlighting important issues. These issues include: ending public funding of religious and private schools, ending blasphemy laws, and ending – or at least reducing – municipal tax exemptions for churches.

But, what should independent local humanist associations like HALA be doing? Up to now, HALA has successfully lived up to its purpose to educate members, and others, about secular world views through monthly meetings, a mini-journal, annual Wolf Hall events and a web site. But things have changed. The association is having trouble recruiting enough individuals to fill all seven positions on the Board, and there is also difficulty in finding suitable speakers for Wolf Hall events. As HALA members, we must give the new Board all the support we can, as the load formerly handled by seven, must now be handled by five.

Over the years, a major challenge has been finding qualified and interesting speakers for monthly meetings. I am sure the Board will welcome suggestions from members for future speakers who are able to talk on relevant topics. I take the liberty of suggesting that the preservation of democracy and the enabling of humans to live a flourishing life, are topics worth considering. After a successful run of eighteen years, it would be most disappointing to see HALA come to an end. Let's work to keep it going. DAH).

### **The Board of the Humanist Association of London and Area (HALA)**

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