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POPULOCRACY
-the fightback
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NO 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO POPULOCRACY

Catherine Fieschi
Director, Counterpoint

Catherine Fieschi explores the paradoxes of populism – “the worst form of democracy” – and how to fight back.
For the past few years, those of us whose job it is to observe and interpret politics have had a heck of a ride. When I first started working on populist politics 25 years ago, I had an inkling that something was unravelling, that new demands would reshape the political world, but I had no idea that my special subject would become a growth industry. Today, people's eyes practically glaze over when I tell them that I work on populism — ah, they say, well you can't be short of work. I'm not. I've spent 25 years warning about such politics, and now watching them transform our public and our private spheres. Watching Brexit, Trump's attempt to gut American institutions, Salvini and all the others (Orban, Mélenchon etc.) bring out the worst in fundamentally good citizens takes its toll. All of them appeal to the worst angels of our nature.

I use the word “populocracy” because I think populism has become a system. Populism is a form of politics that stigmatises all elites as self-serving, untrustworthy, and incompetent — be they academics, politicians, journalists, experts, or bankers. It puts everyone in the same bag. While putting everyone else (The People) on a pedestal — the people are above reproach, naturally good, and naturally right. The expression of their will and common sense is the only compass. The only truth. We run into trouble of course when we start to disagree about what counts as The People. Is it about a simple majority? Is it about those who have been here longest? Is it about those who pay the most taxes? Or are most useful? No one really knows, except we do know that in the hands of those politicians who appeal relentlessly to The People against the elite (the judges, the citizens of nowhere, the immigrants, the experts, to name a few), The People broker no nuance, no diversity, no compromise. This is, above all else, a politics of exclusion — of fragmentation and of polarisation.

In diverse societies, in which most persons feel a number of cross-cutting allegiances, this is a form of politics that can only lead to the exclusion of a significant minority, whose rights get trampled because their preferences may not be clear cut, because they may feel they belong to many different communities, and because they are willing, therefore, to recognise that politics is not what the populists tell them it is: it is not simple, solutions are not obvious, and it does not “just get done”. We know it well. It is all around us.

And because, to add insult to injury, it is those people that support it, those who are manipulated into choosing it (out of despair, out of frustration, out of misinformation, out of lack of choice), it treats them worst of all.

But, for our collective endeavours, the most worrisome aspect of populocracy, is that, at a time when the problems we face (climate change, new security threats, the mass mobility issues both create, etc.) require the highest possible levels of collaboration, of give-and-take, of solidarity and collective strength, populocracy trades in the very opposite: pulling up the draw-bridges and battening down the hatches.

This is a huge paradox because populocracy is the result of globalisation and the digital revolution; it results from ease of connection at an unprecedented speed and on an unprecedented scale. But so far what has been delivered on a political level, is a sort of political recoil. Part of what got us here is, not just social media, but a much bigger and transformative experience of digital that has changed us fundamentally: it has given us more access to more goods and more people, but also made us more impatient and more demanding; more connected but also more lonely and more vulnerable; more autonomous, but also more dependent. It has reshaped our expectations in every sphere — including the political and public sphere in which we demand more accountability, but also more convenience, more speed, more personalisation.

So how do we reclaim the ground stolen from under us? This is what I call Jiu-Jitsu politics: populism, and our current state populocracy, have stolen democracy’s best moves: they claim to give the people a voice, they claim to understand them deeply and intuitively, their politicians claim to be one of them and to have a direct understanding of the needs of The People. How do the real democrats — those who care about diversity, about representation, about pluralism, about compromise in the face of difficulty, and protection for the most vulnerable — how do they reclaim that ground? How do we steal back what populism took — the claims to authenticity, to genuine understanding, to fairness?

The recipe is mixed, but it has to involve new political relationships (and that means new institutions). This is about taxation and open algorithms and the rethinking of higher education, as much as it is about voting; it has to involve data and tech and the use of both in far wiser, far more creative and far more collaborative ways; it has to involve forms of collaborative and inclusive expertise rather than useful but exclusionary expertise from the top down; it has to involve a redefinition of what counts as fair distribution and redistribution — not only of goods and money, but of access and relevance. To achieve this, policy-makers and business, private and public institutions, need not just be joined up (yawn) but to be permeable to one another.

"It gives rise to the worst form of democracy - the one that everyone worried about, the opprressive, exclusive kind"

So, when I get asked, why Populocracy is so bad? (after all, isn't rule by the people what everyone wants? Isn't that what democracy means?), my answer is that it is so bad because it leaves too many people out because it gives rise to the worst form of democracy – the one that everyone worried about, the oppressive, exclusive kind.
Catherine Fieschi is the Director of Counterpoint. In 2011, when she founded the company, her first objective was to draw attention to the social and cultural dynamics that underpin political risk but seldom receive the attention they deserve. Prior to founding Counterpoint, Catherine was Director of Research at The British Council, and before that the Director of the London-based think tank Demos. A political scientist by training, Catherine advises business and political leaders around the world. She is a Senior Fellow of the Civil Service College in Singapore, and the new Director of Global Policy Institute at Queen Mary University of London.

catherine.fieschi@counterpoint.uk.com
As purpose-led businesses take centre-stage, Robert Phillips and Charles Wookey ask to whom should business leaders be accountable – and for what?
Just as politicians must, business urgently needs to address the global challenges we face, including the climate crisis and growth of populism. The original warning of the Occupy movement “we are the 99%” was as applicable to CEOs as Prime Ministers and Presidents. The future of a better, healthier market economy is as much the responsibility of business as it is of those enforcing policies and regulations. No-one in power listened properly to Occupy a decade ago, just as there are those who too quickly decry the relevance and impact of Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion now.

Powerlessness and exclusion are two of the most obvious drivers of political populism. Both senses manifest in the workplace, too—when workers lack voice, effective participation, or meaningful work. Jericho Chambers, and others, have warned elsewhere of the perils of creating a generation of “bad robot” humans at work, as the fourth industrial revolution takes hold and business leaders all-too-willingly cede responsibility to their tech fetishes and what author Margaret Heffernan has called “the propaganda of inevitability”.

Humanity, genuine participation and accountability are the essential antidotes to the encroachment of powerlessness and exclusion. These principles sit at the heart of purpose-led businesses, which strive to be healthy human systems serving the wider common good of society. They can help arrest the decline.

However, the evolution of “purpose-led” business depends on reimagining accountability. To whom should business leaders be accountable—and for what?

Too many leaders, while recognising the societal imperative and commercial advantage of being “purpose-led”, lack either the cultural or the operational framework to help make it happen. This is why “purpose peddling” is in danger of becoming the new “green washing”—accelerating any shifts towards further social discontent.

The immediate critical riposte from the Council of Institutional investors to the US Business Roundtable statement on purpose is revealing. They said “the statement undercuts notions of managerial accountability to shareholders—accountability to everyone means accountability to no-one.”

This may be a self-serving reaction, but the question is real. Key to a good answer is to recognise a purpose-led business as a series of enduring human relationships, a complex web of promises, commitments and expectations, with employees, customers, suppliers, communities, regulators, future generations and of course investors. At the core of any relationship of dignity and respect is openness to dialogue and acceptance of accountability for decisions and actions that affect others. Businesses seeking to become healthy human systems will want and need a range of accountability mechanisms as vital feedback loops to sustain and support all the relationships on which their enduring success depends.

But what does this mean in practice? How do businesses innovate in forms of accountability when regulatory requirements and measurement systems do not deliver what is needed? Measurement alone is certainly not enough: metrics are too easily created and/or skewed to support the prevailing narrative, purpose-driven or otherwise. Self-selected measurement scores may be conveniently illustrative but risk being neither authentic nor sufficient. Understanding, implementing and holding ourselves accountable for behaviours that drive purpose towards a better society provides the key to determining change for good.

Innovative and bespoke accountability models are required, as well as careful thought about how best to ensure that mechanisms are properly representative of the organisation’s stakeholders and the long-term interests of society. New, co-created, accountability models must reflect this and the Sustainable Development Goals—embracing activists as well as the corporate world; civil society alongside politicians and policy-makers; academics and experts together with institutions. This approach speaks to empowerment over powerlessness; inclusion over exclusion.

As the world faces huge challenges including climate change and populism, pressure on business’ License to Operate will intensify, with political and citizen activism on the rise. The message is clear from Thunberg and XR: there can be no turning back. As global businesses including Shell, Unilever and others now recognise, they must take responsibility not only for their own processes and supply chains but also for their customers’ usage, footprints and emissions: their responsibility is to society as a whole.

Accountability within this “societal many, not shareholder few” framework offers both a way of enriching the quality of dialogue necessary to becoming a better business and helps reset expectations, giving organisations nowhere to hide. The discrediting of the “purpose” agenda becomes near-inevitable if no accountability mechanisms are in place. What is needed is radical honesty and openness to support the legitimate purpose and meaningful change. Business has the opportunity to model what society needs, and to help provide an antidote to the sense of powerlessness and exclusion that affects us all.
Robert is the Founder of Jericho Chambers. He created Jericho in 2013 after a 25-year career at the top of the global communications industry. Robert co-founded legendary consumer brands agency Jackie Cooper PR and, having sold the business, went on to become UK and then EMEA Chief Executive of Edelman, the world’s largest public relations firm.

Robert is the author of Citizen Renaissance (2008) and Trust Me, PR is Dead (2015). He is a Visiting Professor at Cass Business School, University of London, and speaks around the world on issues of leadership, communications and trust. Robert leads Jericho’s work on Responsible Tax, Good Work, Social Justice in Tech., Housing and Transport.

robert.phillips@jerichochambers.com

Charles Wookey is CEO of A Blueprint for Better Business, an independent charity that acts as a catalyst for change in business. Blueprint helps businesses realise their true long term potential: to serve society, respect people, rediscover their purpose and thereby earn a fair and sustainable return for investors. Charles was one of the founders of Blueprint and a key contributor to the thinking behind the Blueprint approach which asserts that people are not solely self-interested and that business is not solely driven by profit. Under his leadership Blueprint has moved from being a small initiative launched in 2012 with a conference that looked at how corporate purpose and personal values could be united to serve society, to an independent charity that is engaged with a growing number of major global companies and whose ambition is to help corporates be truly purpose driven, acting to deliver clear benefits to society as well as delivering long term sustainable performance. From the outset Blueprint has sought to bring together all strands of society.

charles.wookey@blueprintforbusiness.org
NO 3

POPULISM: A BREXIT POLEMIC

Matthew Gwyther
Partner, Jericho Chambers

A searing opinion piece – from Plato to Robespierre, Schumpeter and beyond.
he New York Times thinks collectively that the Brits have suffered a nervous breakdown. (And Americans should know). “The United Kingdom Has Gone Mad,” wrote the paper’s lead contributor Thomas Friedman earlier this year. “The problem with holding out for a perfect Brexit plan is that you can’t fix stupid.” How have we come to be on the verge of committing such a stunning act of national self-harm?

Last week our current Prime Minister Johnson was visiting flood-hit Doncaster and found himself on the receiving end of a typical populist rant from an unimpressed resident. “Everyone’s living in poverty,” yelled the man, as nervous minders moved closer to the PM and his squeegee mop, lest things got physical. “The whole country’s a joke. Kids are living on the streets. Nobody gives a fuck. Sort it out! Biggest thieves in the country, them [Tories].”

Now, whatever you think about Johnson or his principal opposer Jeremy Corbyn most of these five supposed facts simply aren’t true. (That UK PLC is a cruel joke is probably the closest to verity.) But it’s this sort of 2019 apocalyptic vision that demands No Nonsense answers. People are fed up. There can’t be any more pussy-footing. No tinkering around the policy edges. Something major has to change. But what, precisely? Are twenty thousand more police officers likely to cure our ills? A few score million more lobbed at the - sorry “Our” - NHS? Banning independent schools and confiscating all their assets?

No. Of course the one act that is going to return us to the sunlit uplands of warm beer, powdered egg, leather on willow and our rightful place on a globe where great swathes were coloured Brit imperial pink is Brexit. Just get it done and everything will be sorted as we “unleash our potential.” All will be well and all manner of things will be well.

Sometimes it’s actually very hard to work out how on earth we’ve got here. If you look at charts of what were the most important issues on the minds of the average Briton in the elections pre-2015 the EU hardly features. (Bill Cash with his decades-long unscratchable itch is not an average Brit.) Strip away the guff about trade, sovereignty, fish quotas, curved bananas and blue passports and all that’s left, all that’s ever left, is others or bloody foreigners. Our malaise is their fault. Populism must have a hate object - something at which to direct the spumes of bile. Something to blame. As our Jericho colleague Neal Lawson has written in The Guardian - “The true danger of this crisis is the rise of toxic populism. This is a dumbed-down politics that rests on two short planks: whom to follow and whom to hate.”

It’s true - populism is thick. Brexit populism especially so - it’s self-indulgent, childish, decadent. Wild emotion lashing out over reason. Like the bizarre, schmaltzy wave of unearned emotion that submerged us following Diana’s death times ten. It’s an unspoken thing - the elephant in the kitchen of polite society - that democracy and widely differing levels of education, intelligence, wisdom and judgement do not sit well together. We all know - thanks to Michael Gove - what we should now think of experts, those cocky know-alls with all the answers. Toss them onto the scrapheap of history.

But do you know what? If you’re going in to have your gall bladder removed you don’t leave it up to a citizens’s committee from Hartlepool or Hampstead to wield the scalpel. It’s an unforgivably snobbish, Metropolitan-Liberal-elitist thing to ask but given a complex problem on which the nation’s future rests would you have given more ear time to a Professor of Economics, the Daily Mail’s treacherous Lady Hale, a Permanent Secretary at The Treasury/ Foreign Office or the average bloke on the Boston, Lincs or Clapham omnibus.

The grave shortcomings of populism are precisely why we dare not have a UK referendum on the death penalty, prison sentence lengths for Islamic taxi-driving sex offenders or whether fuel tax should be reduced to zero. You cannot trust the mob, especially when its blood is up. The gilets jaunes in France first started burning tyres and flinging rocks at the riot police when the price of diesel went up. Robespierre knew all too well how much the average Frenchman loves cracking a few skulls to get things off his chest.

There is a profound problem with engaging/appeasing populism - giving the angry mob the bread and circuses it demands. It doesn’t always know its best interests. All power may be derived from the people but it’s probably better that the people are not trusted to wield that power unrestrained by the five-yearly electoral crap shoot of representative democracy. There are times when our elected representatives and our representative institutions are required to save us from ourselves.

This is why democracies end when they become too democratic. Why the referendum on our membership of the EU was one of the most supreme acts of complacent idiocy since Earl Haig sent tens of thousands over the top at The Battle of the Somme. At least that made ten kilometres.

Plato is an unfashionable thinker - far too authoritarian and neo-liberal for most 21st century minds. But for him the key problem was epistemological: most people – “the many” – had no knowledge of truth and no clear thinking about justice in their minds. Democracy did for even intelligent citizens by leading them to dumb down their policies in order to pander to ignorant crowds.

“If you’re going in to have your gall bladder removed you don’t leave it up to a citizens’s committee from Hartlepool or Hampstead to wield the scalpel.”
When they got together “in assemblies, courts, theatres, army camps, or any other common meeting of a multitude,” the Athenian demos, Plato reports, would “blame some of the things said or done, and praise others, both in excess, shouting and clapping; and besides, the rocks and the very place surrounding them echo and redouble the uproar of praise and blame.”

After the grim, murderous excesses of the French revolution Edmund Burke declared: “Of this I am certain, that in a democracy, the majority of the citizens is capable of exercising the most cruel oppressions upon the minority.”

Closer to our own era, in 1942, Joseph Schumpeter, a man who knew life-changing upheaval (he was born in Moravia and raised in Vienna before moving to the US in 1932 to teach at Harvard) accurately summed up the strange results of blending a liberal democratic faith in public opinion with marketing methods refined by behavioural scientists. “What we are confronted with in the analysis of political processes,” he wrote, “is largely not a genuine but a manufactured will.”

What Schumpeter would have made of targeted election ads on Facebook god only knows. They are certainly creative and destructive. But never mind. We’ve taken back control. Now what? Trump will be gone in - at the most - five years. The mango Caliban will be left to mildew and wither further in the moist air of Mar Al Lago. Brexit is almost certainly forever. It’s not a phase we’ll go through and get out of our system. It’s the wrong choice and we’re stuck with it because 52% of our number said so.

Matthew edited Management Today for 17 years and during that time won the coveted BSME Business Magazine Editor of the year on a record five occasions. During a fifteen-year career as a freelance he wrote for the Sunday Times magazine, The Independent, The Telegraph, The Observer, GQ and was a contributing editor to Business magazine. He was PPA Business Feature Writer of the Year in 2001. He has also worked on two drama serials one for Channel 4 and one for the BBC. Before becoming a journalist he had a brief and inauspicious spell as a civil servant working at the Medical Research Council in its London Secretariat. Matthew is the main presenter on BBC Radio 4’s In Business programme. Matthew is also the co-author of Exposure published by Penguin in London and New York in the Autumn of 2012. It is the story of whistleblower Michael Woodford, the “Southend samurai” who left school at 16 and worked his way up to the top post of the Japanese industrial conglomerate Olympus, only to discover that his board were involved in a two-billion-dollar fraud.

matthew.gwyther@jerichochambers.com
NO 4

FINGS AIN’T WHAT THEY USED TO BE

Ben Page
Chief Executive, Ipsos MORI

Why we might not be as divided as we think we are. Ben Page gives us reasons to be optimistic.
If the 1990s and early part of the 21st century seemed a happy time for social democracy and liberal values, the post-2008 Crash world seems very different. One of the biggest shifts in my 32 years at Ipsos MORI has been the loss of the future in Western Europe and North America. Whereas in 2003, only 12% of the British thought that their children would be worse off than them, now this has risen to 45%. This is a massive change, similar to the change in social attitudes towards LGBT people that has seen a position where from being illegal when I was born in 1965, now 66% say that it would be fine if Prince Harry had married a man rather than Meghan Markle. We are in a completely different place.

To what extent, if at all, do you feel that today’s youth will have had a better or worse life than their parents, or will it be about the same?

Survey on behalf of Deloitte LLP for State of the State 2019

When you look at how the public in Britain and across the West are reacting to a long freeze in real wages and disposable incomes, coupled with higher immigration post 2000, and austerity in public spending post the crash, you see widespread anger at the “elites” over the promised future that is failing to materialise. We see rising nostalgia for a remembered past, particularly among those feeling “left behind”.

The average global citizen feels left out of the “normal order” of life in his/her country:

- 70% agree the economy is rigged to favour the rich and powerful
- 66% agree that traditional politics ignores people “like me”
- 54% agree their country’s society is broken
- 64% want a strong leader to “take country the back” from the rich
- 62% agree that local experts don’t understand people “like me”
- 49% want a strong leader willing to break rules to fix the country

These feelings are widespread, and in fact, disaffection is most widespread in Latin America and Eastern Europe – hence massive violent recent protests in Chile.

In Britain we are not immune, but in fact tend to be quite mid table – so 70% say the system is rigged for the rich and powerful, but even in Sweden, a generally happy country and relatively less unequal than Britain or America, still has 56% say the “system is rigged”. The British are in fact less keen on “a strong leader” than France, or many other countries. In terms of our attitudes towards globalisation, we fare more positive than say the French or Italians – in Britain by two to one we say it benefits us as a country, with views similar to those of Canada and Australia.

Nevertheless, although we may be rather “moderate” globally on many issues, and not polarising to extremes, a huge 85% of Britons think the country is divided, nine points higher than the global average across 27 countries. Yet at a local level, the proportion who agree that people in their neighbourhood pull together to improve things has changed little in recent times. So too has the sense that people from different backgrounds get along well together. In fact, both Remain and Leave voters are equally attached to their “local area”, and to “Great Britain”. The language used by politicians over Brexit, talking of “traitors” and “saboteurs”, or “citizens of nowhere” seems dramatically misplaced.

But more populist politics means we feel we are becoming more divided. Seventy-three per cent think Britain is more divided than ten years ago; this time, 14 points higher than the global average. Britain is downbeat and critical. Some 78% per cent think the country is on the wrong track, the most pessimistic country we measured, and a record 81% were dissatisfied with the government this year – with frustrations over Brexit producing a record 37% who said our system of government “needs a great deal of improvement”.

Often the challenge seems to be how we think we are, rather than how we actually are. The gap between perceived and reported happiness in Britain, as elsewhere, is huge (we think we are gloomier than we actually are). Our studies at Ipsos MORI on the gap between perceptions and reality paint a picture of denial and self-delusion, combined with a dangerous focus on eye-catching scare stories. We all have an innate human tendency to think things are worse now than in the past, even when they are virtually unchanged. The past is attractive especially when the present looks uncertain but, for example, there was a serious concern in the 1970s about Britain being “ungovernable” and rife with division.

The challenge is that nightly debates about Brexit, and the cultural divides behind it, and inflamed debates on social media work to remind us daily of divisions.
A corrective is that Britons are, by a margin of six to one, more likely to think that mixing with people from other backgrounds, cultures or points of view has more positive impacts than negative ones.

More favour the country taking further steps to open itself up to today’s world, rather than a protectionist approach to close ourselves off. And 70% think that people across the world have more in common than things that divide them. Our challenge, when we are split over issues like Europe, is that mixing with people and finding commonalities despite differences is harder in a “more filtered” online world we spend a lot of time in.

We are deluded about this too: in Britain, 70% think other people live in their own internet bubble, but only 30% think that they themselves do.

Today, Brexit – years in the making – is media shorthand for the division. It can seem like it has held up a mirror to our malaise, making it even harder to avoid the cultural equivalent of a doom loop, where division breeds division and so on and so on, but sometimes, disconnecting from the media cycle, Twitter, Facebook and just talking to people can be a healthy corrective that Britain isn’t America. Ultimately there is more than unites us than divides us – even if that is not the overarching media narrative.

Ben Page is Chief Executive of Ipsos MORI. He joined MORI in 1987 after graduating from Oxford University in 1986, and was one of the leaders of its first management buy-out in 2000. A frequent writer and speaker on trends, leadership and performance management, he has directed thousands of surveys examining consumer trends and citizen behaviour. From 1987-1992 Ben worked in our private sector business on corporate reputation and consumer research, working for companies like Shell, BAE Systems, Sky TV and IBM. Since 1992 he has worked closely with both Conservative and Labour ministers and senior policy makers across government, leading on work for Downing Street, the Cabinet Office, the Home Office and the Department of Health, as well as a wide range of local authorities and NHS Trusts. He became Chief Executive of Ipsos in the UK and Ireland in 2009.

ben.page@ipsos.com
NO 5

LISTENING MATTERS - ESPECIALLY IN A SHORT-TEMPERED WORLD

Eithne O’Leary
President, Stifel Europe

Why the best leaders break out of their echo chambers.
One of the casualties of the politics of recent years has been the value of compromise. The formation of electoral messages designed to appeal to voters with a lot of demands on their attention has tended to favour simplicity over truth. Inevitably this trend has spilled over into society as a whole and corporate life has not proved immune. Whilst this may make for effective voter strategy, or indeed good television entertainment, this pitch towards the extremes is damaging to idea-generation, good quality debate and makes for poor business strategy.

Taking a step back, companies depend on employees, customers, providers of finance and suppliers as well as the wider social, legal and regulatory frameworks in which they operate. The interplay between these forces is complex with interests occasionally running counter to one another. Getting things done with big groups requires a clarity of purpose, inclusion and compromise. Isolation and appealing to the extremes will struggle to deliver the buy-in that businesses need in order to drive change. Businesses still rely on people co-operating with one another in order to complete projects. Only by developing an understanding of the positions held by other parties can we begin to find the common ground from which to go forward. Building that insight requires a willingness to step back and listen, sometimes to people with whom we don't agree. Taking time to hear the views of others is not just out of fashion, it is vanishingly rare.

In a world of increasingly noisy extremes, why does listening matter? In answering this question, it may help to focus in on one aspect of the argument in the first instance, employees. Hearing what staff have to say can be time-consuming and difficult but there are two clear advantages. First, encouraging a feeling of ownership of the outcome and a sense of belief in a common purpose. How many times have you heard a Chief Executive say that their company's greatest asset was its people? If that is a genuinely held belief it seems hard to reconcile with a refusal to take input from that key constituency on critical decisions regarding the strategy and execution of the business. An executive team that finds it difficult to listen to one another is likely to build a business where initiatives are not challenged and time and money are wasted.

Second, unless the leader of the business in an unalloyed genius, she or he is going to get things wrong now and then. Despite what can only be described as mixed evidence of success (Enron, Lehman Bros, RBS, WeWork, Wirecard, Woodford Patient Capital), we seem to retain a desire to see visionaries at the helm of companies. It seems that strong leaders are allowed to operate without any surrounding restraint or governance. Not only is this bad for business, but it is also occasionally lethal for individual companies. No one has a monopoly on wisdom. Yes, undoubtedly, leaders need the ego to help them make decisions. That said, the distance from healthy self-belief to fatal hubris is shorter than we might all like. Challenge is valuable and difficult to achieve if people don't see the value of listening to one another.

No one can reverse the rise in extremism single-handed. That said, everyone can do something. We can all afford to acknowledge that there is another side to the arguments we hold so dear. We all need to listen more, whether at work or out and about in society at large. Getting outside of our own echo chambers is crucial, you never know we might find someone else has a better solution. Creating a workplace where bright, energetic people believe their contribution is valued is likely to foster success. Staff are attracted by the prospect of making a difference to the companies by whom they are employed. We just might be able to create an environment that works for the many.
NO 6

NO LOCKS ON THE DOORS OF EUROPE

Erik Jones
Director of European and Eurasian Studies and Professor of European Studies and International Political Economy, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies

The view from Europe: Erik Jones explores why the EU is so vulnerable to populism.
The European Union (EU) started life as an elite project. Heads of state and government negotiated to create institutions they could share across countries. They ran competitions to staff those institutions with the best and the brightest. They nominated politicians to a common assembly to debate what those institutions should do. And they met together frequently both to drive the project forward and to celebrate their accomplishments.

Over time, these elites decided to make Europe more “democratic”. They did this in part by letting the people elect the politicians who debate European legislation to a European Parliament. More important, however, they made Europe democratic by ring-fencing national democracy. They made it hard for “Europe” to run roughshod over national interests by developing an elaborate pattern of international summity. They also made sure national leaders remained in the driver’s seat by giving the Council of the European Union and the European Council both a central role in the legislative process and the power to oversee what the European Commission and Europe’s other regulatory agencies are doing.

This combination of elite and democratic features explains both why Europe is so vulnerable to populism, and how. If we think of populism as a revolt of the masses against traditional elites, then it is easy to see why “Europe” might be unpopular with populists. There is no point rising up against the elites unless you are ready to overthrow the institutions that serve their interests or hold them in place. Indeed, the elite character of European institutions – and the people who work within them – serves as a kind of self-indictment in the eyes of any populist movement.

It is also easy to see where populists could have influence. There is a chance that they can disrupt debates about Europe if they can manage to win elections to the European Parliament. Indeed, to the extent to which national leaders ensured that Members of European Parliament would be adequately representative – and adequately compensated for the efforts they make in ensuring some kind of democratic representation – participating in European elections might be particularly attractive for populists who are otherwise shut out of national politics. That certainly worked for Marine Le Pen and Nigel Farage.

That said, populists are far more potent when they ascend to the government in one or more of the EU’s member states. European institutions are designed to let national political leaders in and not keep them out. They are also constrained from interfering in national politics. So, when populists succeed in overturning their domestic elites, they quickly find that the doors to European institutions have no locks.

Of course, most critics of European elitism will find this assertion hard to accept. The standard trope is that “Europe” is nothing if not undemocratic. The European Parliament is the exception that proves the rule in this line of argument. Moreover, it is no secret — or so the argument runs — that EU institutions dictate legislation to national parliaments.

Such criticism ignores the influence of the French President, Charles De Gaulle, at the start of the European project. De Gaulle was not a “populist” in the modern sense of the term, but he was a revolutionary who overturned the Fourth Republic and replaced it with the Fifth. He is also the political leader who did the most to ensure that national interests were respected and that national political leaders played a central role in European decision-making.

Fast forward to Italian prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi and you can quickly see the legacy of the Gaullist influence. Berlusconi started his political life as a true populist, and he brought with him to power a range of other anti-elite movements like the National Alliance and the Northern Leagues. Many Europeans were shocked by Berlusconi’s political rhetoric and his many conflicts of interest; they were even more disturbed by the company he kept. Nevertheless, they had to learn to accept Berlusconi until, over time, Berlusconi evolved from being a populist into a fully-fledged member of the European elite. Now Berlusconi holds a seat in the European Parliament.

The right-wing Austrian Freedom Party is another illustration. When that party entered the governing coalition in 2000, the European institutions remained wide open to them. Other EU member states tried to put pressure on the Austrian government by cutting them out of diplomatic receptions, but they could not prevent the Austrians from participating in European legislation. Indeed, the Austrian government used its influence over European legislative processes to bring the diplomatic shunning to an end.

Of course, European elites eventually woke up to the threat of populism and they created mechanisms to discipline errant national governments. Such mechanisms only apply, however, when populists threaten democratic institutions. Even then, moreover, they are fiendishly hard to implement. Most recently, the European People’s Party protects the Hungarian government and the Hungarian government protects the government of Poland.

None of Europe’s elites has proved willing to create an instrument that might be used against themselves and so none has agreed to create a sanction that cannot be ignored or avoided. In that sense, Europe remains an elite project, albeit with strong democratic inclinations. European populists will no doubt continue to take advantage of that combination.

“European institutions are designed to let national political leaders in and not keep them out”
Erik Jones is Professor of European Politics and International Political Economy and Director of European and Eurasian Studies at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. Professor Jones writes on issues related to democratic politics and macroeconomic governance – mostly for academic audiences, but also for the policy community – and he has published commentary in the Financial Times, The New York Times, and other newspapers and magazines across Europe and North America.

erik.jones@jhu.edu
NO 7

TRUST IN EXPERTS: WHY AND WHY NOT?

Maria Baghramian
Professor of American Philosophy, School of Philosophy, University College Dublin, Ireland

Have we really had enough of experts? Maria Baghramian explores who we can really trust.
We are faced with a profound crisis of social trust, or so we hear on a daily basis from all those with a public megaphone. We don't trust our politicians because they repeatedly fail to keep their promises or act in good faith, the media, we think, do not give honest and unbiased reports, and as to the experts, we don't trust them because they are on the side of the elites and are motivated by sectional interests. Not the same level or variety of trust is at stake in all these cases, but their common denominator is the experience that those who expect trust from the public do not act in the public's interest and therefore are not worthy of our trust.

Declining levels of trust in experts, while not at a similar rate as those of trust in the media or in politicians, have been a cause for concern in some areas of public policy – vaccination in particular. Donald Trump's 2016 message to his approving followers “I've always wanted to say this... The experts are terrible” and Michael Gove's famous retort to a reporter that “people in this country have had enough of experts” were blatant attempts to capitalise on the already nascent mood of scepticism about the role of experts in policy decisions. But the rightful indignation that many have experienced in the face of such blatant use of a populist “anti-elite” rhetoric can distract us from a measured assessment of the role of experts in modern democracies and their trustworthiness.

“The demagogue asks, “who needs experts?”, the simple answer is: we all do!”

The demagogue asks, “who needs experts?”, the simple answer is: we all do! We rely on them each time we set foot in a hospital, take a flight, or take our laptops for repair. Epistemic trust, the sort of trust involved in learning from others, is also ubiquitous and essential for the smooth functioning of complex communities who necessarily rely on a division of cognitive labour. We cannot all be equally knowledgeable about a given subject nor know the same things. The division of cognitive labour, with its attendant specialisation, creates expertise but it also ensures the rich variety and complexity of societies and cultures. Such division is contingent on epistemic trust, that is, on our willingness to accept others as a source of authority on matters they are presumed to know more than we do. Furthermore, increasingly, key policy decisions, ranging from food safety to climate change, from patterns of consumption to healthcare, from economic planning to education, are guided by data and advice from “experts”. In democratic systems of government, where consent by citizens is a requirement of good governance, trust in experts and their policy advice becomes essential.

In trusting experts, we believe the information they provide and rely on their advice, and we often do so because of their track record of competent performance and training. But we trust experts not only because we expect them to be knowledgeable and accurate, but also because we think they are honest and have integrity. A feature of that integrity is a willingness to act in our interest or to show goodwill, in other words, we expect the experts’ benevolence. It is this nebulous but essential element that mitigates the risk we take in trusting and justifies the hope and confidence we place in those we trust.

We withdraw trust when experts, individually or as a group, are deemed to have made serious mistakes, or worse still when they are shown to be dishonest or ideologically biased; we also are less inclined to show trust when experts disagree, and we cannot decide which one is right. The reasons for scepticism about expert advice often only indirectly concern the scientific evidence they provide, but arise from ideological and psychological considerations based on the expectation of benevolence from the experts. These are all legitimate concerns, but they are not impossible to address. Training and vigilance, combined with good faith and intellectual humility, will help to make the experts more trustworthy. On the other side of the coin, the realisation and acceptance that the science, which is the basis of expert advice, is fallible may encourage those relying on experts to look only for the best explanation available at any given moment and the greatest convergence of opinion rather than proof and certainty beyond doubt. Citizen's fora, where experts and citizens representing the general population engage in dialogues about specific areas of expertise and their policy implications can help both sides to calibrate better their expectations around trustworthiness.

But there is a broader issue of trust in experts which has not always received the attention it deserves, an issue that may also explain the disquiet about expertise in a period where democracy itself is in crisis. Briefly put, the question to ask is not only whether we should trust the advice that experts give but rather whether we should accept, and in that sense also trust, the role given to experts in policy decisions. The worry is around a tension between the ideals of democracy, particularly in its deliberative forms, and reliance on expert advice for policy decisions. The point is not new. The problem was discussed by John Dewey, the American Pragmatist philosopher of the early 20th century, in his critic of the journalist Walter Lippmann's enthusiasm for the technocracy of a “bureau of experts”. The point was raised again, in an even sharper tone, by Hannah Arendt who, in the 1960s, announced that there are few more frightening things than the steadily increasing prestige of “scientifically minded brain-trusters” in the councils of governments.

The problem that Dewey and Arendt were highlighting is that trust in experts involves deference to their views while democracy thrives on debate and disagreement. A related worry is that experts can tell us only the bare facts of what to do, devoid of the much-needed advice on how to think about the ethics and value of what we are doing.
We are thus faced with a dilemma: reliance on experts, and indeed trusting them, is an inevitable requirement of life in complex technological societies, but the consequent deference to the very same experts, the inability to subject them to the norms of debate as equal citizens is deeply undemocratic. How are we to overcome this tension? One solution is to look at the normative and ethical dimensions of expertise and bring them in line with the values that are core to the ideal of democracy. But this is work for another day.
NO 8

POPULISM MUSN’T BECOME POPULAR

Neal Lawson
Partner at Jericho Chambers and Chair, Compass

Neal Lawson argues for a more humane and thoughtful national culture to start to heal the wounds of populism.
We live in an epochal moment. Climate change clashes with technological upheaval and leaves everything in its wake. The times are uncertain and anxious. Right up through the income scales people feel precarious.

People also remember a time when it wasn’t like this. When, if they worked hard and played by the rules, they did get on. But these weren’t really “good times” in the sense they contributed to both the destruction of the planet and social polarization we now live with. Those times were never sustainable. And yet people hark back and long for what they think they have lost, especially when the future is full of fear.

And in all the uncertainty many hanker for a simple solution. To be told who to follow. And because the problems can’t be their fault – who to blame. This is the fertile ground in which a new populism fester. It is the politics of the strong leader, malign outside forces, an elite within to despise and replace and a people whose majoritarian will must be obeyed. It is a politics of “rubber stamp” democracy.

It’s a gloomy picture, but at worst it is only half the picture. Flip the coin and we see another world. In the gaps and spaces where the remote state and the free market are creating havoc and humiliation, another world is emerging. Driven by a combination of the endlessly creative human spirit and new networked technology, more people than ever are busy in the creation of new places and spaces that are participatory and democratic. It bodes well for a future that is negotiated not imposed.

Here then is the battle line – between simplistic and brutish populism, and a new deeper democracy. The stakes have not been higher for 80 years.

But this tells us little about the human spirit – which can be bent by institutions and cultures to do the most amazing and the most horrible. So, the rise of populism tells us it’s not so much about new leaders – though they would be welcome – but new structures and behaviours in which the complexity of our instincts and the challenges we face can be fully explored.

This is a job for everyone. For political leaders and citizens but for business leaders too – who have a moral responsibility to foster a more humane and thoughtful national culture.

So, where do we start in making this new future? The only place we can – with ourselves. We must first change our attitude to others. It starts with a belief in the best in people, not the worst. Then we must take the time to understand others’ assumptions and so we know what drives them. It requires a willingness to be both humble and bold and embrace this complexity.

“Tyranny’, wrote Albert Maysles, ‘is the deliberate removal of nuance”
Neal is Chair of the good society pressure group Compass and was author of “All Consuming” (Penguin, 2009) and co-editor of “The Progressive Century” (Palgrave, 2001). He serves on the Advisory Board of the social democracy journal Renewal which he helped found. He writes on sites such as the Guardian, New Statesman and Open Democracy. He has worked as a trade union researcher, an advisor to Gordon Brown and ran a communications company. He is a partner at Jericho Chambers where he works on responsible tax and the Caring Society projects. Neal has been described by the late Zygmunt Bauman as “one of the most insightful and inventive minds on the British political stage”, elsewhere as “the most optimistic commentator in western Europe” and as the “Eyore of the left” by the Sunday Times.

neal.lawson@jerichochambers.com
NO 9

POPULOCRACY: THE BUSINESS EXPERIENCE

Paul Drechsler
Chairman, Bibby Line Group and Chairman, London First

Paul Drechsler on business as a force for good.
The memories and lessons of populism of the 20th century seem to be fading fast. Once again people are being led to anger and hate that risks our democracy and culture. How and why should any business leader be tempted to comment on, what on the surface may seem to be a political matter?

I start on a premise and belief that business is a force for good and, in my experience, most senior business leaders engage genuinely and enthusiastically in social impact projects or causes.

One of my proudest moments as a Chief Executive was when Wates Group was being awarded Business in the Community’s “Responsible Business of the Year” recognising the company-wide focus on social impact including supporting long term unemployed into work.

Wates, like the vast majority of businesses, know that a key route to employee pride and high engagement is supporting local communities and charitable giving to causes that matter to employees.

As Chair of Teach First, I saw first-hand how corporate giving can be so critical to the charity’s successful growth & development, enabling over 1.2 million children to benefit from over 10,000 brilliant teachers.

In Bibby Line Group, a 210-year-old, 6th generation family business “Giving Something Back” to those most in need is a core value, alive and practiced by owners and colleagues alike. The programme continues to unearth the fantastic support and passion of colleagues and since inception in 2009, employees and businesses have donated £10 million to over 1,000 charitable causes.

It’s no wonder Edelman’s Trust Barometer shows a 72% level of trust in family businesses a full 27% more than business in general.

More recently during my 3 years as President of the UK’s biggest lobby group, the CBI I saw the issue of trust in business through three lenses.

Despite the disproportionate impact of the financial crisis on the poorer in society, some businesses ploughed on with egregious executive pay awards that were bound to cause great upset and more anger towards business in general. It was difficult to defend. However, it provided a lightning rod for a new Prime Minister to turn against business and promote a solution – workers on boards. This was not a bad idea, far from it, but it was not the solution to exorbitant executive pay.

Businesses wanted the CBI to “do something” about Trust in Business. My personal belief is that trust in business comes from track record and behaviour that warrants such trust. Over and over again I have seen the responsible business of the many undermined by the bad behaviour of the very few. Research by CBI and others yielded some interesting findings on the subject. While many people do not trust business leaders as a whole, they do trust their own CEOs! Second, they expect their Businesses/CEOs to speak up on the big issues impacting society, even political ones.

My tenure as President of the CBI coincided with the UK’s leap into its own unique version of populism. There were early signs that something was up, “CBI the voice of Brussels” while only 0.26% of CBI income derived from the EU for routine quarterly trade surveys. Not long after we were all told “Don’t trust experts” - this was no surprise given that every reputable report demonstrated a very significant cost and disadvantage to Brexit. Then there was the infamous £350 million bus and the outright racist posters depicting an invasion of immigrants.

As we all since learned, while the economic argument might have swung the independence vote in Scotland, it was far too narrow a platform to win the argument on EU membership.

“It was clear, probably too late, that the rules had changed; values of ‘honesty’, ‘integrity’ even ‘truth’ were cast aside”

It was clear, probably too late, that the rules had changed; values of “honesty”, “integrity” even “truth” were cast aside in favour of saying whatever was necessary to prey on the fears of the public or to persuade them without fact or evidence to vote to leave the EU.

When I read the FT review of Populocracy: The Tyranny of Authenticity and the Rise of Populism, I ordered a copy for my summer 2019 reading in the hope of better understanding what was really happening to democracy in the U.K. and beyond in the hope that I could better guide London First, the capital’s leading business campaign group, which I chair (which also helped to create Teach First).

I had never considered myself one of “the elite” but wondered how the most elite of all got away with portraying themselves as “of the people/for the people”. This is an upside-down world. As time has gone on, we have gone from exaggeration, to “white lies” to extreme untruths. Is it any wonder trust in leaders, especially political leaders has plumbed new depths.

What should business leaders do in the face of such a hostile environment and one where the available space for truth is so limited? I believe great leadership is authentic leadership and that most business leaders thrive on authenticity (though it may not always be obvious!).
Never has it been more challenging yet more important for Business Leaders; Chairs and CEOs to speak out on issues that are of such profound importance to the future of the country, its culture and economic wellbeing. Far too few spoke out in the run up to the referendum, even fewer since and more recently – silence from the majority.

Fortunately, business trade bodies and organisations continue to speak out though history may show that their “conditional support” at different stages was only heard as agreement. The conditions: frictionless trade, regulatory alignment, single market and fast access to talent will be lost conveniently in the ether. We are still playing to the old rules.

We are living in extraordinary times, populism as now practiced in the U.K. leaves no room for facts, evidence, truth or integrity. Should we park our values at the door or hope such values will win in the end? Has authentic leadership in society run its course? What should we tell our children about our role as business leaders when our voice was needed? What should we teach our children about how to win in the future?

There may be a clue in Fieschi’s conclusion in her book as captured by Ben Hall’s FT review, “Digital technology has made us receptive to populism by exalting immediacy, simplicity and transparency. Without complexity, delay and frustration we do not pause for reflection”.

I conclude that the sheer momentum behind populism requires leaders all across society, especially senior business leaders, to practice, promote and defend core values of integrity, truth and care for society as a whole.

Paul is Chairman of Bibby Line Group and Teach First. He is also a board member of the International Chamber of Commerce ICC (UK) and a member of the Advisory Council of Step up to Serve, a campaign to get young people involved in social action. Paul recently became the Chair of the Advisory Board for Mentore Consulting. Additionally, Paul is Chancellor of Teesside University and a member of the Global Advisory Board of Trinity College Dublin. In July 2018 Paul was appointed Chairman of London’s premier business organisation London First. He was previously CEO of the privately-owned construction firm Wates Group. He joined Wates in September 2004 and became Chairman and CEO in April 2006 until 2014.

paul.drechsler@bibbylinegroup.co.uk
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www.jerichochambers.com
robert.phillips@jerichochambers.com
matthew.gwyther@jerichochambers.com