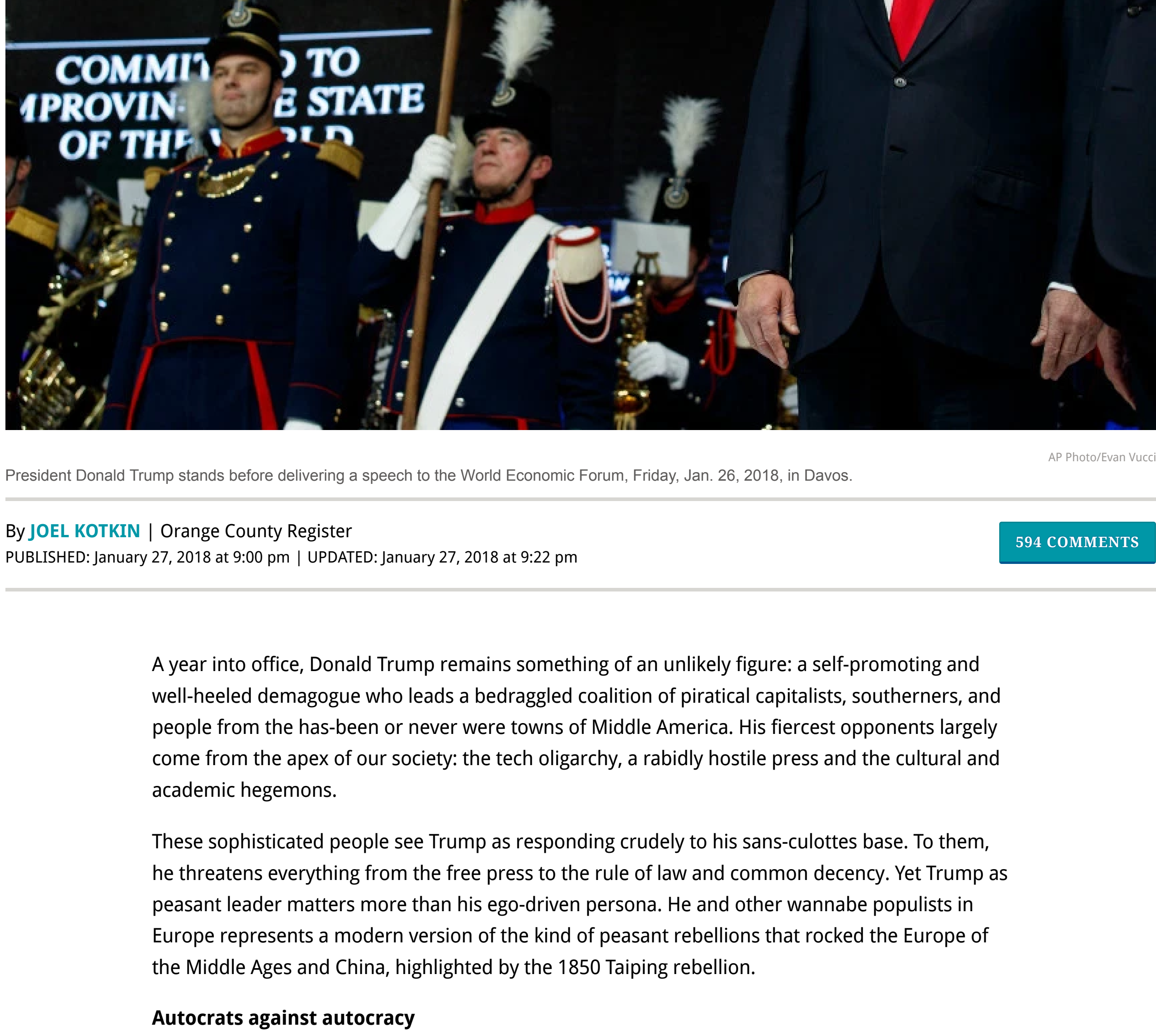


OPINION

A year into Trump's peasant rebellion



President Donald Trump stands before delivering a speech to the World Economic Forum, Friday, Jan. 26, 2018, in Davos. AP Photo/Evan Vucci

By JOEL KOTKIN | Orange County Register  
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A year into office, Donald Trump remains something of an unlikely figure: a self-promoting and well-heeled demagogue who leads a bedraggled coalition of piratical capitalists, southerners, and people from the has-been or never were towns of Middle America. His fiercest opponents largely come from the apex of our society: the tech oligarchy, a rabidly hostile press and the cultural and academic hegemony.

These sophisticated people see Trump as responding crudely to his sans-culottes base. To them, he threatens everything from the free press to the rule of law and common decency. Yet Trump as peasant leader matters more than his ego-driven persona. He and other wannabe populists in Europe represents a modern version of the kind of peasant rebellions that rocked the Europe of the Middle Ages and China, highlighted by the 1850 Taiping rebellion.

Autocrats against autocracy

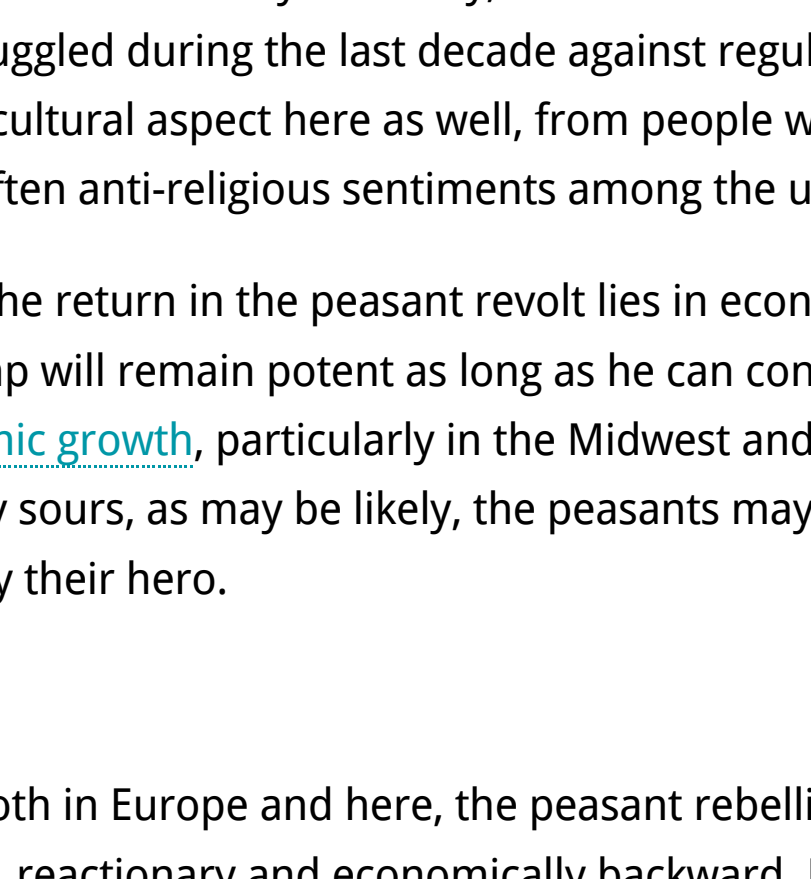
Such bottom up uprisings, usually elicit strong opposition from the established institutions. Today they span the gap from corporate liberals to establishment conservatives. For all their surface differences, these groups tend to share similar class experiences and perspectives; they both see Trump and his supporters as inveterate racists and fascist shock troops. Retiring GOP Arizona Sen. Jeff Flake even has denounced him as a new Stalin.

Similarly, across Europe, informed opinion almost universally denounces, the rise of anti-EU, anti-immigration parties, some with suspiciously fascist flavor. The Brexit movement has been widely characterized as the rude attempts of provincial rubes — “old, racist and stupid” — to undermine the cosmopolitan character of “cool Britannia.”

To be sure there is much to lament about Trump, and his European counterparts, but it's ironic that many of those who charge him with autocracy are often themselves not great fans of democratic control. For the most part the anti-populists favor not a more vibrant democracy but, in the words of Harvard's Yascha Mounk “rights without democracy,” dominated by bureaucracies like the EU or the EPA. Some are even open admirers of China's authoritarian dictatorship; others swoon at French President Emmanuel Macron's almost laughable yearning to reinvent himself as a modern day Louis XIV.

A conflict based in economics and culture

What is behind the peasant rebellions? The outbreak across most of eastern and central Europe reflects disappointment with the European Union. Rather than an expected resurgence of national fortunes, many of these countries have witnessed instead a mass movement of educated young people to “core European countries” such as Germany. Many nations — notably Bulgaria, Lithuania, Greece, Albania and Slovakia — face demographic decline on an unprecedented scale.



In their attempts to build their economy, many second-tier European countries feel vulnerable to regulatory efforts from the EU bureaucracy. Similarly, in the United States many southern and midwestern states have struggled during the last decade against regulatory edicts from Washington. There's also a cultural aspect here as well, from people who feel threatened by both strident multiculturalism, often anti-religious sentiments among the upper classes.

But the key motivation for the return in the peasant revolt lies in economics. Like European nationalists in Poland, Trump will remain potent as long as he can continue to deliver considerably higher economic growth, particularly in the Midwest and south. Until Trump is overthrown or the economy sours, as may be likely, the peasants may enjoy something of a recovery, and likely stand by their hero.

Who's to blame?

In the mainstream press, both in Europe and here, the peasant rebellions get poor reviews. They are painted largely as racist, reactionary and economically backward. Much of the tech oligarchy views Middle America (and its European counterparts) with open disdain. One Silicon Valley executive said “educated people” like themselves, great paragons of tolerance, would never move to rural areas that are “sh\*thole filled with stupid people.”

This kind of attitude flourishes in the political monoculture of Hollywood, the mainstream media, academia as well as Silicon Valley. It also explains precisely why Trump was elected, and why his mini-mes in Europe remain broadly ascendant. It's hard to cast stones proclaiming fascism while you are busily, at universities and companies like Facebook, Twitter, and Google, working to strangle debate.

The way to stop incipient fascism is not through social control from “the commanding heights,” as Lenin once described them. Instead it means seriously addressing the aspirations of working and middle-class populations. Respect for one's national culture is critical as well, even it means more outside the urban “glamor zone” than within it. Until they open their ears and change their tune, the establishment leadership can expect continual peasant revolts, with consequences that could prove catastrophic for the survival of democratic institutions.

Joel Kotkin is the R.C. Hobbs Presidential Fellow in Urban Futures at Chapman University in Orange and executive director of the Houston-based Center for Opportunity Urbanism (www.opportunityurbanism.org).

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