February 2019 – vol 35 – no 1
every two months
print ISSN 0268-540X online ISSN 1467-8322
available online at
www.wileyonlinelibrary.com/journal/anth

at
anthropology
today

Editorial address: Please read Notes to Contributors before making submissions (http://www.therai.org.uk/at/). **Submissions:** http://at.edmgr.com. All articles are peer-reviewed. Editorial correspondence (except subscriptions, changes of address etc.) via anthropologytoday@gmail.com. **Online debate:** http://anthropologytoday.ning.com**. Postal address:** The Editor, ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY, Royal Anthropological Institute, 50 Fitzroy Street, London W1T 5BT, UK.

Copy dates: 15th of even months.

Publisher: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA.

Information for subscribers: Six issues of ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY are mailed free of charge per annum to Fellows and Members of the Royal Anthropological Institute (registered charity no. 246269).

Rates for 2019: Member: €30, £24 or US$45. Single copy: £9 UK, or $21 overseas plus VAT where applicable. Visit http://www.therai.org.uk/joining. Contact: admin@therai.org.uk.

Institutional subscriptions for 2019: Institutional print + online: £180 (UK), US$294 (N. America), €222 (Europe) and $313 (Rest of the World). Prices are exclusive of tax. Asia-Pacific GST, Canadian GST/HST and European VAT will be applied at the appropriate rates. Current tax rates: www.wileyonlinelibrary.com/tax-vat. Price includes online access to current and all online back files to 1 January 2011, where available. For other pricing options, access information and terms and conditions: www.wileyonlinelibrary.com/access.

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Periodical ID: ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY (0268-540X) is published bimonthly. US mailing agent: Mercury Media Processing, LLC, 1850 Elizabeth Avenue, Suite #C, Rahway, NJ 07065 USA. Periodical postage paid at Rahway NJ. Postmaster: send all address changes to ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY, John Wiley & Sons Inc., C/O The Sheridan Press, PO Box 465, Hanover, PA 17331, USA.

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Anthropology and populism

Guest Editorial by Chris Hann

Populism has become mainstream. A team of more than 30 political scientists has recently demonstrated (at least to the satisfaction of *The Guardian*) that one in four Europeans now support a populist party.[1] Britain's impending exit from the European Union (EU) is commonly perceived as the populists' major accomplishment to date. The reversal of a long-term trend towards the integration of fragmented polities in Europe coincides with a monumental initiative on the part of China to integrate the entire Eurasian landmass ('one belt one road'). Is populism a threat, not just to liberal democracies, but to geopolitical balance and the global political economy as we have known it hitherto?

Increasing support for the radical right is interpreted by most social scientists as a consequence of accelerating globalization (Cox 2017). Sociologists and social psychologists have investigated the micro-level emotional dynamics of anti-immigrant *ressentiments* with respect to fear and shame (Salmela & von Scheve 2017). At the macro level, economists have advanced theories to explain why, though most variants of populism have conservative affinities, some adopt the progressive language of the socialist left (Rodrik 2018). What can anthropologists contribute?

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We can start by questioning the inflationary use of the term. If Alexander Herzen in Tsarist Russia, William Jennings Bryan in the United States, Juan and Eva Perón in Argentina and Viktor Orbán in contemporary Hungary are all lumped together as populists, obviously the word lacks precision. The only common denominator is that populists invoke 'the people' as a moral authority against perceived oppressors. The oppressor might be an individual dictator (such as the Russian tsar) or a more nebulous category such as 'capitalist elites' or 'cosmopolitan liberals'.

Eastern Europe has long been considered a prime incubator of populism. Prior to socialism, 'the people' consisted mainly of peasants, many of them illiterate. Populist leaders, by contrast, usually came from the educated middle classes. It was easier to mobilize followers on the basis of national identity than social class. These pre-industrial tensions persist in post-industrial conditions. Neo-Marxist anthropologists explain populism as a long-term cyclical phenomenon whose causes lie in Kafkaesque processes of uneven capitalist development (Friedman 2015; see also Friedman 2018). Nationalist populism in the wake of socialism is interpreted by such critical scholars in terms of new forms of class conflict (Kalb 2011).

But sympathy with the downtrodden, exploited masses is not limited to Marxists. The very discipline of anthropology – known in many countries as ethnology – evolved as the science of *peoples*. In Eastern Europe, most specialists have focused on their own nation/people (some ethnologists were themselves active in populist movements). By and large, those who built up a comparative field of enquiry in various Euro-American schools were also concerned to document distinct peoples. Living among those in subaltern positions, anthropologists saw themselves as the subversive practitioners of a *populist* discipline. In the course of the 20th century, many took this commitment further by engaging in development work and advocacy.

But what happens when xenophobic forms of populism have a coarsening impact on democratic politics in the anthropologists' own countries? Whereas Bryan's populism in the USA before the First World War embraced diverse immi-

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grant communities, the 'rednecks' attracted to the politics of Donald Trump, like the 'little Englanders' who supported Brexit and the radical nationalists found almost everywhere in the EU, are emphatically anti-pluralist. Oblivious to the complex migration histories of their own societies, they argue for closure. Their rhetoric is often vile. It certainly runs against the cosmopolitan norms of the contemporary social sciences, and of anthropology in particular. Anthropological fieldwork depends on immersion and norms of empathy. But how can anthropologists empathize with racist activists and the increasingly large communities that vote for such causes?

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We can, of course, maintain scholarly detachment by declaring that *their* beliefs and values are not congruent with *ours*. The challenge is no different in principle from studying other problematic communities, such as creationist Christian fundamentalists (Harding 1991). But is the otherness in our midst nowadays really of this kind? Do the populists of Clacton (Essex constituency formerly held by the UK Independence Party), Carinthia (Austrian stronghold of the late Jörg Haider, prototype of the neo-nationalist politician) or the ex-communist regions of northeastern France that now support Marine Le Pen, deserve to be pathologized through a lens of moral repugnance, as if they were akin to paedophiles or some similarly distasteful category of humanity? Perhaps we need to rethink liberal political correctness and stretch our horizons of tolerance.

To the extent that populists emphasize rooted collective identities, these loyalties and associated emotions should not be hastily dismissed by a discipline that specializes in the documentation and analysis of groups that define themselves on the basis of distinctive sociocultural features. It is not a question of preserving congealed identities as if they were botanical specimens. Social fields change continuously. They probably do so faster nowadays than before. There is no danger that we shall go out of business, for new groups will take shape and sociocultural diversity will persist. But the historical record – at least since the advent of intensive forms of cultivation – suggests that human flourishing depends on retaining a certain stability and integrity from past community life. Some constraints must be respected: the problems created by the global mobility of money will not be resolved by abolishing restrictions on the global mobility of human beings as labour power.

In addition to emotional identifications, questions of material interest are obviously crucial. Viktor Orbán argues that non-European immigrants threaten not only Christian civilization but also the living standards of ordinary Hungarians. By contrast, many German politicians insist that their country needs additional labour power, if only for demographic reasons. It is no accident that employers' organizations supported Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision to allow over a million immigrants to enter Germany in 2015. At least in some segments of the labour market, this was bad news for the native working class, since its wages were forced down by this competition. Elsewhere, too, European societies that have built up strong welfare states over generations depend upon maintaining controls at their borders to hold on to the hard-won gains of labour vis-à-vis capital.

Emotion and interest are tightly intertwined in practice, but the links are by no means straightforward. Some regions which voted enthusiastically for Brexit will now pay a high price for losing access to EU regional cohesion funds. My home town falls into this category. The reasons why a Welsh valley which has for generations sent a Labour Party representative to Westminster should vote 60 per cent Brexit are not immediately obvious. You do not see black faces or hear Polish accents in Cwmbrân. Schools and doctors' surgeries are not crowded with newcomers.

But post-industrial South Wales is riven by inequalities and poverty, which EU transfers do little to ameliorate (Strong 2017). The large factories I recall from my childhood closed down in the Thatcher decade, leaving a sense of pervasive deprivation (relative to other regions and countries) that made many receptive to the slogans propagated by *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* ahead of the 2016 referendum.

Similar populist sentiments are prevalent in rural Hungary. There is a striking contrast between the villagers and small town dwellers who support Viktor Orbán and my liberal friends in cosmopolitan cities. The latter (numerous anthropologists among them) deplore the ugly nationalism of their compatriots, which has earned their country pariah status in the EU. Orbán is a cynic, who will stop at nothing to secure his hold on power (and the wealth of his entourage in what has become a 'mafia state' – see Magyar 2016). But just as voters in South Wales have become susceptible to the fake news of the London tabloids, we need to recognize what makes so many Magyars (and many other Europeans) receptive to xenophobic messages.

Hungarian nationalism today is a product of neo-liberal EU institutions which have reduced the country to a new state of peripheral dependency – German capitalism has replaced Soviet Marxism-Leninism. When Hungarians voted at the first free elections in 1990 (and later in a referendum of 2003 when 84 per cent supported joining the EU), they expected the material gulf separating their country from the West to narrow rapidly. If those aspirations had been fulfilled, if fewer Eastern Europeans had felt compelled to migrate to Britain to earn a decent wage, then the populists in both East and West would not be able to manipulate *ressentiments* as they do.

* * *

Anthropologists can engage with contemporary populism on many levels. We can join historians and political economists in stretching this multi-stranded concept and probing causes in processes of global capitalist accumulation. More distinctively, through ethnographic methods, we can illuminate populist world views and the mechanisms through which elites of various kinds seek to shape them. In doing so, we can remain true to our own populist traditions.

I reflect on the challenges involved almost daily. Thanks to a satellite dish on my balcony in Halle, I can watch the evening news at 7.30pm on the main Hungarian state TV channel (M1). Since 2015, the first half hour of prime-time coverage has been dominated by migration issues. This includes reporting from Sweden and Germany, where Hungarian audiences are led to believe that white women can no longer walk the streets due to the danger of assault by illegal migrants. Sometimes an incident of this kind in Germany is the lead item on M1, but when I switch channels at 8.00pm to watch the German *Tagesschau*, I find that it is not even mentioned (though I can read about it the next day in the tabloid press).

For obvious historical reasons, the German political class and liberal controllers of the mass media are terrified of fomenting right-wing populism. But failing adequately to document antagonisms of acute public concern is hardly a solution for a liberal democracy. This censorship plays into the hands of the Alternative für Deutschland, currently the largest opposition party in the Bundestag.[2]

As for Hungary, until recently I worried that the extremism of the Orbán regime would poison the public sphere for a generation. But more and more Hungarians are tired of saturation propaganda. They are switching to other media to glean news and are taking to the streets to express their discontent. Budapest is again a city full of hope, and perhaps London will find ways to follow suit. But hopeful signs in a few capital cities do not obviate the need to grasp the causes and consequences of the populist syndrome among larger populations all over the world. ●

1. Lewis, P. et al. 2018. The new populism. *The Guardian*, 20 Nov. https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2018/nov/20/revealed-one-in-four-europeans-vote-populist?CMP=fb_gu.

2. Unlike the 'first past the post' Westminster system, the German electoral system assures the populists meaningful representation. Mainstream disdain and marginalization are no solution: I agree with those political scientists who hold that Brexit would never have come about if UK Independence Party had had a significant presence in parliament.

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