

Democracy in Virulent Times: Symbols and the Future of National Populism

Written by Alexandros Koutsoukis

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ALEXANDROS KOUTSOUKIS, MAR 31 2020

One of the biggest challenges democracies face in 2020, even in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, is and will remain the rise of populism. A quick look at the USA and the UK, as well as countries across the world like Hungary, Brazil and India, is enough to help one appreciate the changing character of politics. Politics is becoming increasingly populist and, to varying degrees, illiberal and authoritarian. Even though we should avoid pontificating by blaming or stigmatising the voters themselves, we must rise up to the challenge to defeat populism, and reverse this authoritarian regression. This article puts forward the proposition that we can, should and must learn from the successes of populist leaders. It contends that, before we advance an alternative vision for society, we first have to discover what makes populists popular. Thus the article focuses not on the vision itself, but on how we can think strategically to advance such a vision effectively. In particular, it focuses on the power of symbols.

This article argues that when populists dominate politics they redefine the most influential political symbol of all; the idea of the nation. This article develops this argument by offering illustrative examples from ancient and Modern Greek history as well as contemporary politics in the US and the UK. The article makes the case that whoever succeeds in devising a political vision expressed through powerful symbols not only will they win the battle of symbols today, but the struggle for political legitimacy and the voters' trust tomorrow as well. This struggle needs to be won otherwise populism will take root. And this is bad news for the future of (liberal or post-liberal) democracy.

Symbols in Greek History

On its most general level, this article relies on a relatively common view of populism, which underpins the rest of the discussion. Populism here is assumed to be the juxtaposition of the 'people' to the 'elite' fuelled by grievances and distrust towards the government.

Populists, as the below examples demonstrate, are not all alike and their existence predates the current crisis of politics. Drawing inspiration from Thucydides, I will refer to Pericles, the archetypical ancient Greek democratic leader. Pericles was a great leader albeit with a populist streak. He specifically appealed to the ordinary folk, expanded democracy at the expense of the oligarchic elites, knew how to speak to the hearts of citizens, and dominated the political scene. He even allowed authoritarian tendencies, another trait often associated with populism, to develop. Thucydides highlights the point lucidly: Athens was in name a democracy but, in fact, governed by its first citizen, Pericles (2.65.9-10). Pericles, like populists today, was successful because he used contemporary symbols such as the symbols of the empire, of democracy and of the city to shape the idea of 'Athens' and control Athenian politics. His achievements transformed him into a perennial symbol of democracy. Indeed, just a few years ago, in his last visit to Greece as President of the United States, Barack Obama, referred to none other than Pericles, when extolling the virtue of democracy and the strong links between America and Greece. Powerful symbols, like Pericles, can actually transcend time.

Other symbols are even more influential today. In Greece, two statesmen of great symbolic value are Konstantinos Karamanlis and Andreas Papandreou. In 1976, in a tempestuous session of the Greek parliament regarding the accession of Greece to the European Communities, the following exchange (reminiscent of UK debates over Brexit)

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took place. Karamanlis, in a fiery speech, argued that 'Greece belongs to the West' only to quickly receive the retort of Papandreou: 'We prefer to belong to the Greeks'. Despite the apparent incompatibility of the two statements, they both hold merit at the same time. The argument's significance lies with its symbolic nature. It concerns the orientation of Greek domestic politics and the direction of Greek foreign policy. This historic debate has had such a legacy that it has been associated with the most important political leaders of Greece after the military junta (1967-74)—Karamanlis and Papandreou—who, much like Pericles, attained symbolic value. They represented rallying figures during their lifetime, and remain rallying symbols for party loyalty and legitimacy even after their death.

Such debates and the associated developments of symbolic value are not rare. They take centre stage in politics time after time. They are part of a political struggle that aims to establish a dominant political discourse. They thus help shape the meaning of symbols and draw meaningful connections between symbols. This political process is not a relic of the past or of yesteryear, when people were supposedly naïve or easily manipulated by leaders. Symbols help shape the self-image of people whether they are Athenians or Greeks, or whether they are Americans or British.

Symbols in the United States and the United Kingdom

For example, in the USA today, President Trump tries to reinterpret what it means to be American with his motto 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA) and its recent incarnation as 'Keep America Great'. Commentators find it absurd and criticise the logic of the slogan, but they miss the point. Trump won the last elections. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Boris Johnson won the last election with the mottos "Take Back Control" and "Get Brexit Done". Pundits, again, criticise the argument, but they miss the point. Johnson won the elections. These catchphrases become symbols around which political campaigns cohere and define the outcome of elections.

Politicians are good at discerning the political consequences of these mottos. In the United States, former Vice President and presidential candidate with the Democratic party, Joe Biden, contends that his presidential bid is not just a fight against Trump. Instead, he adds, it is a larger battle for the soul of the American nation. All these leaders, Trump, Johnson, and Biden as well as Pericles, Karamanlis and Papandreou understood one thing. Symbols, like the aforementioned mottos, are battlegrounds. They mould the idea of being or becoming an American, British, Greek or Athenian in people's conscience.

Winning such symbolic battles helps develop electoral dominance because there is no symbol more powerful than the 'nation'; it defines who we are, how we relate with the rest of the world, and how we are supposed to act. In the era of nation-states, the idea of the nation is the most powerful symbol. What else could it be? Whoever controls this symbol wins elections and shapes the direction of domestic politics and foreign policy.

Brexit is a great illustrative example. The Conservative Party under Johnson reshaped the domestic political landscape by decisively penetrating the heartlands of the Labour Party in the north, forging domestic coalitions where there were few of any significance, and extricating Britain from the EU. The consequences are immense, and the risk of the decision has not been just about logical arguments, like the remainers' economic arguments, but ultimately about what it means to be British: respected, dignified, and independent.

Symbols and Political Strategy

Does this mean that to fight populism we just need better political slogans? No. This is not an argument simply about rhetoric. It is about generating power by redefining the game of politics tactically and the character of politics strategically. A good slogan can only take you so far. It helps tactically. But how can it be decisive strategically to win multiple elections? It can help strategically when it redefines the meaning of the idea of the nation.

Thus studying history and the successes of populists becomes key to help us learn something useful: how to develop strategies attuned to the power of symbols to develop electoral coalitions and win elections. All the politicians mentioned previously have been trying to shape the idea of their nations. They have not done so by relying on one motto or symbol of course. They have appreciated one thing though; what the stake is. It is the ultimate prize: the establishment of one's own view of the nation.

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MAGA and the 'Nation'

Even the idea of MAGA is not really about returning America to a 'golden age' but about redefining the national idea of what it means to be an American today. No one is actually preaching the return of slavery. By recalling a symbolically 'golden age', Trump operates at the symbolic and emotional level. This is the most powerful form of political communication. In one sense, the 'real meaning' or the 'essence' of the MAGA message is irrelevant because it does not pre-exist. MAGA actually symbolises whatever Trump wants it to symbolise. Building meaningful connections between a key symbol, like MAGA, and its meaning is the political challenge, and part of the broader strategic struggle for more lasting electoral dominance.

Covid-19 and the 'Nation'

The latest such example is Trump's symbolic branding of coronavirus (Covid-19) as the "Chinese virus". Pundits, journalists, and parts of civil society slammed Trump again as racist but missed his effortless strategic move to link the slogan "Make America Great Again" and himself as the protector of the US, by giving Covid-19 an adversarial national name. It all revolves around the idea of the 'nation' and whose political vision will be associated with it. If successful, Trump will not only re-write the history of Covid-19, by virtue of being the victor, but he will also showcase the "superiority" of his political vision and view of the 'nation'.

Trump is already moving in this direction generating meaningful associations between his political vision, nationalism and Covid-19. The story he tells us consists of rehashed anti-immigration and anti-Chinese rhetorical themes attuned this time to Covid-19. For instance, he does not shy away from claiming that his "infamous wall on the Mexican border would keep the virus out". He is also integrating his account of Covid-19 into broader nationalist narratives like the one according to which China "poses a danger to the world and cannot be trusted to behave responsibly."

In addition, he is using the war metaphor, as Cynthia Enloe and others have rightfully noted, to rally people against the virus. Yet, this metaphor should not be seen as his primary point of reference. His symbolic strategy long predates this metaphor. The way he is framing his attack on Covid-19 aims to redefine the notion of the 'nation' and is not just an effort to mobilise people more efficiently. Trump is already playing his hand by describing Covid-19 as the 'Chinese virus'. The war metaphor trumps this up. It is part of the broader Trump narrative of symbolic politics aiming to redefine American nationalism through his vision and himself as its protector, president, and leader.

The following quote, at the end of one of his daily Covid-19 briefings, is indicative. After citing an array of data, he conveniently and cogently summarises his key themes in his concluding remarks. There we can see that he frames his remarks around the war metaphor but fills up the content in between with points about nationalism; that is, the American sense of belongingness, unity and empathy under the guidance of a strong leader, almost like a father figure, himself:

[W]e're at war, in a true sense, we're at war, and we're fighting an invisible enemy... For those of you feeling alone and isolated, I want you to know that we're all joined together as one people eternally linked by our shared national spirit, we love our country, the spirit of courage, love and patriotism. No American is alone as long as we are united, and we are united, we're very united. People are saying things now that three weeks ago, they did not talk in this way. We're very united. No force is equal to the strength of a unified America, united America, an America like we have it right now. For those of you who aren't afraid, as long as I am your president, you can feel confident that you have a leader who will always fight for you. And I will not stop until we win. This is going to be a great victory (19'50"-20'50").

Non-Traditional Symbolic Political Struggles and the 'Nation'

These power struggles are not limited to slogans and branding. They also concern the interaction between politicians and society in another way. In the United States, politicians and athletes, activists and the people at large engage in symbolic power struggles, that take place not only in settings traditionally associated with politics, but in public spaces as well. For instance, people have demonstrated for and against the removal of Confederate monuments and

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memorials of great symbolic value. This is a socio-political issue that has polarised and divided American voters profoundly. Correspondingly, in sports events, athletes, like Colin Kaepernick, kneel on one knee during the United States national anthem in protest against racial injustice only to receive the political ire of president Trump and others. Environmentalists too use Greta Thunberg, the young environmental activist from Sweden, as a symbol to rally people for their cause and against Trump.

On his last day as Member of the European Parliament (29/01/2020), Nigel Farage staged a masterful political stunt aimed at Brexiteer voters. He once again harnessed the power of symbols in a populist and seemingly unconventional, rude, and eccentric manner. He reminded everybody of the arrogance of European elites to draft a European Constitution in 2004, rejected by the French and the Dutch in national referenda, and their hubris to then sneak it into the European treaty of Lisbon. He then waved Britain's national flag and left. In just a moment, he created an association between "Take back control", what it means to be British, and the national symbol of the flag.

These symbolic struggles have often been satirised or misunderstood as minor, off-colour, inappropriate or even unacceptable acts. In reality though, populists excel at these exact symbolic battles—an issue of great political significance. Farage did not act in this way only at the very end of the Brexit 'saga'. Farage, Johnson, and the other Brexiteers have been strategising at the symbolic level for a long time. They were of course 'lucky' to live in an era in which people are not just unhappy, but indignant and resentful. The ground has been fertile for the rise of populism. However, winning the battle of symbols is as important as the rise of the era of resentment. Symbolic victories help give populism lasting power.

In conclusion, winning the battle of symbols is of strategic significance. It will most likely define the character of our nations, the future of our democracies, and the legacy of populism in the 21st century—long after 2020. This more holistic perspective on symbols is strategic and not merely tactical. Citizens are in this struggle for the long haul and this requires a heightened awareness of the power and impact of symbolic politics.. It is high time we appreciated the role of symbols lest we want populists to take root and shape our nations. This is not the time to avoid thinking about the power of symbols. Defeating populist parties will require nothing short of a renaissance in political and academic imagination.

Notes

NB 1: This essay was mainly prepared before the outbreak of Covid-19. However, its point for the need to rethink the future of politics still rings true. The need, for example, for the regrowth of civil society to respond to Covid-19 is part of the discussion we should be having about the future direction of liberal democracy. And this is much more imminent now than it was a few weeks ago.

NB 2: This is a revised and expanded version of an original essay in Greek, "The Power of Symbols: Learning from Populism, Fighting for Democracy". It was prepared for a series of analyses entitled "We and the World in 2020". It is available at the website of the University of Macedonia's Institute of International, Defence, European Analyses (IDEA): idea.uom.gr/populism/

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