

## Book Review

*Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy* by William A. Galston, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. 158 pp.

Liberal democracy's strength lies in its doctrine of reasonable pluralism, a doctrine popularised by John Rawls, a post-war philosopher who died about 18 years ago. Analogous to free market competition, market ideas decide the best policy according to the principle of allocative efficiency and price equilibrium.

While it is true that the distribution of economic goods at best follows market logics, ideas and ideologies are not material things – fanatics are willing to die rather than to lose in haggling.

About a hundred years ago, international working-class movements collapsed in the face of tribal and national sentiments producing problems of fascism and totalitarianism. About a hundred years later, individual liberalism was challenged by neo-tribalism, better known as populism. *Anti-pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy* is a book written by William A. Galston who currently holds the Ezra K. Zilkha Chair in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution, US. The title of the book implies that some ideologies could potentially threaten the doctrine of reasonable pluralism, with populism being one of them.

Galston explains that the conflictual relationship between populism and liberal democracy is evident in binaries such as the people vs the elites, nationalism vs globalism, majoritarianism vs constitutionalism, ordinary common-sense vs experts' findings and rural vs urban outlooks. The stronger the binary conflict, the better it is for populism to manipulate it to its advantage.

Despite lacking in an elaborated theory and canonical text, populism, as explained by Galston is a product of frustration, fear and resentment. The rise of populism is evident, as is exemplified by the victory of the Republican candidate Donald Trump in the US, *En Marche* (a centrist political movement) candidate Emmanuel Macron in France, Podemos in Spain, the Five Star Movement in Italy, the anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany, as well as in other countries such as Hungary, Poland and Austria.

What could potentially produce such fear and disappointment? Galston borrows from game theory, explaining two types of games; the zero-sum and negative-sum game. Human experience tells us that the pain of losing exceeds the pleasure of gain.

People are upset when they cannot get what they want and feel bitter and angry when they lose what they had earned and enjoyed previously. In the US, according to Galston, free trade and immigration issues, as well as rural neglect causes the majority of the anger. The job market shrinks locally as big corporations migrate to developing countries and available jobs are being taken by immigrants, a group that offers cheaper labor relative to locals.

In such a situation, the market economy is prone to collapse. Instead of allocating resources, the market must now distribute its losses. He mentions Benjamin Friedman's remark about the moral consequences of market logic; we can expect compromise from the people when the market produces a surplus but conflict when the market is bound to be in deficit.

Such a negative-sum game makes it fertile for populism to grow, liberal democracy is hence challenged by populist movements. They can come from the radical right through native sentiments, the radical left through the sentiment of class exploitation, or even from a movement of the people against the cultural elite, who they deem are divided from their own people.

The presence of immigrants, especially in Europe, poses a cultural threat to a country's national identity, particularly when locals are unclear as to the idea that their nation or country suffers from a failed definition of nationhood.

Discussing four building blocks of liberal democracy, Galston delineates populism from liberal democracy by highlighting two important points. First, while liberal democracy and populism share similar characteristics over the concept of popular sovereignty and majority rule, they are in conflict on matters concerning constitutionalism and liberalism.

Second, while populism follows the spirit of majoritarianism and is not necessarily anti-democratic, it gives little respect to constitutions and most importantly, suppresses the rights of the minority. Liberal democracy supports the logic of the market economy without which individual rights are not respected and the society cannot grow.

As market economies move toward wider inequality, pressure on liberal democracy builds up as a result of economic inequality. Occasionally, the

political system must act to ensure that consequences of market activities are democratically addressed.

Galston highlighted nationalism versus globalism as one of the binary categories in the conflictual relationship between populism and liberal democracy. Nationalists may perceive international ideologies such as liberal-capitalism and socialism as potential threats to their national identity. In such a context, Galston stresses the problem of a failed definition of nationhood, together with his *Twelve Theses on Nationalism* (which he mentioned as well). A true nationalist must grapple with the conundrums of national identity politics' such as racism, gender politics and sectarianism, risking their own identity and even life for the long-term benefits of the country.

If nationalism is the way forward, it must be under the umbrella of reasonable pluralism, where leaders should persuade rather than employ force and emotion. In short, leaders should focus on the middle class or working class, as its stability translates to the stability of the country.

The author simplified political philosophy using everyday language in his arguments to make it readable to all people. He diagnosed and highlighted problems in free trade, immigration and the rural and urban divide. His prescription is also interestingly logical, which includes tightening the labor market, limiting favorable tax treatment for non-labor income and reforming the flow of immigrants.

Liberal democracy, with its four building blocks (sovereignty, majoritarianism, constitutionalism and liberalism with a market economy) treats the pathology of populism. However, it is also easy for democracy to fall into demagoguery.

To become a persuasive democratic leader with a liberal ethos, it is important that the art of listening, deliberation and openness of the heart to respect individuals with dignity is practiced in order to prevent tyranny.

Galston asserts that human beings have an ingrained impulse to repress what is disagreeable. Refusing to do so is one of the hardest-won victories in the formation of a liberal character. This means that becoming liberal does not mean becoming neutral as Rawls envisioned, but rather believing that it is a guiding principle to live in an ever evolving and growing community.

It also means to not assert liberalism as a hegemonic doctrine – forcing and expecting the world to become liberal. History does not end with the collapse of the Berlin Wall as the proponents of liberalism believe. It has

been challenged by militant Islam, replacing communism externally and populism internally. Reasonable nationalism seems to be the best way forward in response to populism, avoiding fascist or totalitarian tendencies that were present a hundred years ago.

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