

## Editorial

### Axel Föllner-Mancini

In the past few months certain political figures in the USA and in Europe have been expressing themselves in a way the media have been quick to describe as populist. For the term “populism” the dictionary (Duden) gives the following definition: “An opportunistic, often demagogic form of politics, dedicated to winning the favour of the masses (and hence the election) through over-dramatising the political situation.” Both the US presidential candidate, Donald Trump, and the UK “Brexit” supporter, Boris Johnson, have – in public performances very much in tune with this definition – been using turns of phrase that are disquieting, to say the least. Through blatant lies and sometimes through adopting the most outrageous standpoints, they have succeeded in affecting their following in ways even they seem to have found surprising. Trump’s confused and aggression-laden public appearances are built on emotional reflexes, and when he’s on such a roll he will stop at nothing, whether it is insulting opponents or marginalising minorities. While we are somewhat accustomed to the lack of coherent debate in US election campaigns and the media-controlled dumbing-down of the public they entail, such a flow of nonsense has never before been heard from the mouth of a serious presidential candidate. Even the republicans got the shock of their lives – and they have long been operating along the borders of political destructiveness. In the name of the US republican party Trump has let loose outbursts such as: “Torture works, okay folks? Believe me, it works. Waterboarding is your minor form. Some people say it’s not actually torture. Let’s assume it is. But they asked me the question. What do you think about waterboarding? Absolutely fine. But we should go much stronger than waterboarding. That’s the way I feel.” (CBS News, February 2016); or: “The other thing with terrorists is you have to take out their families, when you get these terrorists, you have to get out their families. They care about their lives, don’t kid yourself. When they say they don’t care about their lives, you have to take out their families.” (Fox News, Interview, December 2015). How is it that someone who says such things is still able to remain on the long path towards presidential candidacy, and can’t be stopped? The reason is that the USA has so far not been capable of facing up to its own violations of human rights through its torture and assassination strategies, and of bringing this out into the domain of open, civilised discussion. Responsible for this is very likely what Johan Galtung has called “structural violence”, a political poison that supplies this society with regular doses of shock – a spectacle which puts a rather pale complexion on its reputation as a “model” democracy.

But on the other side of the Atlantic things are also looking somewhat backward. It seems a fair assumption that even those who campaigned so passionately for it did not really want the result they got in the referendum. It could well be that the precarious position in favour of Great Britain’s exit from the EU was simply a way for the present government to hold on to power, and that this was the undeclared aim of operation “Brexit”. Like his transatlantic counterpart, Johnson also made speeches with no connection to reality, resorting to lies to keep the emotions of his supporters – already highly charged by the campaign – simmering. His message was: Exit from the EU will free us from all the difficulties the project entails, but at the same time will preserve the main advantages we enjoy as a leading player within the context of Europe. The fact that a few days after the referendum the Brexit spokespersons had all vanished into tongue-tied oblivion was something of a wake-up call for their captive audience, and especially so for its younger members, but the demagogues seem to have won. Or again there is the comment on Brexit made by John

Pollard, the Head of Cornwall County Council, the public apparently voted “without any clear idea of the consequences – for we don’t know what they are.” (Spiegel Online, 13.07.2016)

What sort of ground, we may ask, breeds communication processes which on sober reflection are clearly no longer based upon rational argument and sound evidence, and indeed have no need to be, because those on the receiving end are just as ready to abandon reason as are the agitators. Trump and Johnson both manage to resonate with large sections of the public. Although strikingly similar, it is not just their outer appearance and crude behaviour that do this; it is above all the fact that they both use the same pattern of communication, a pattern which is divorced from reality and relies upon an irresponsible use of language, in fact vulgar word-games. Perhaps what we are seeing here is the profound degree to which the sensibility of post-modern relativism, to which the American philosopher Paul Boghossian drew attention in his book, “Fear of Knowledge – against relativism and constructivism”, has sunk into every-day consciousness.

Boghossian portrays the humanities, especially sociology and anthropology, as being thoroughly in the grip of radical constructivist thinking, bolstered by current neuro-scientific assumptions (also based on constructivism). According to this view, human cognition is not an apprehension of the world as it is understood to be, but is merely a particular brain’s “individual” reaction to the stimuli the person concerned is momentarily subject to – with the proviso here that “stimuli” can refer to anything: sensory inputs of all kinds, personal and received opinions, expectations, received theories, social pressures etc. What someone thinks, what they might even feel they know about something is ultimately nothing more than the opportunism of the moment, a temporary product arising from the inter-relationships between whatever inputs are in play and the subject’s own biographically-formed processing patterns. The product (say, the classification of an object) is thus derived from a socially induced construction, and as such lies beyond the responsibility of the subject in whom the constructing occurs. People with such habits of thought are likely to feel: “The statement I’ve just made fits the moment. I’m simply feeding it as a perturbation into the process of social construction, and waiting to see what will happen. Any moral judgment here is out of the question, since it would also be a product of limited life-span, constructed out of the current social dynamics.”

In the light of such an epistemological perspective both small- and large-scale political manoeuvres appear, also on the part of the protagonists involved, as innocent expressions of an all-too-human subject (i.e. someone constructing their actions upon the social dictates of the moment), who is therefore beyond good and evil, since neither exist. Everything then is “no big deal”: the lie about Saddam Hussein’s (non-existent) weapons of mass destruction which led to the USA mounting a war of aggression, the so-called “enhanced” interrogation methods, which are actually torture and were co-designed by members of the American Psychological Association (APA), and the Guantánamo detention camp, which has been holding people uncharged and without trial for the past 14 years, because political decision-makers have recently established that persons engaging in illegal combat do not fall under the protection of the convention of human rights. Examples of such neo-liberal interpretations of international law are to be found, of course, in other countries. In the case of the USA, however, what we have is the self-declared, number one “super-power”, with its claim to be exporting its own supposedly ideal version of democracy into other regions of the world. In the name of human values the reality of this claim needs to be put to the test.

Post-modern relativism is currently undergoing comprehensive critical and philosophical analysis, to which numerous authors on both sides of the Atlantic have contributed. Paul Boghossian is one of them, and his book “Fear of Knowledge” is seen by a number of colleagues as the founding text of a “New Realism”, which addresses the philosophical task of giving new answers to the questions of objectivity and truth.

RoSE will join this discussion in one of its forthcoming editions.