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Populism: a human face of technological progress

Author: Jon Stilwell

Populism became one of the most widely used political terms in 2016 after Donald Trump was elected to the White House and the UK electorate voted 'GO' in the Brexit referendum. The concept however has far deeper roots both historically and in day to day life. Some of these suggest that most of the world may quite soon sympathize with the idea.

The term 'populism' was first linguistically associated with a political movement called the 'Populares' in the Roman Republic. It subsequently gained deeper ideological meaning when simultaneous, but apparently unconnected, political movements in the late 1800s in Russia and the USA sought to promote the rights of ordinary people. The Russian movement called themselves 'Narodniki', or 'folk' while the American movement called themselves 'Populists'. Prior to 2016 the movement again resurfaced several times including in 1930s America as a perceived response to the socioeconomic conditions both leading to and resulting from the great depression.

Although the specific definitions and precise origins of populism may vary, it is generally associated with the plight of ordinary people pitted against the interests of an oppressive elite. The causes are often described as being related to the spread of democracy and the political emancipation of ordinary, and historically disenfranchised, people. Why then has nationalist populism become a common future of politics in well-established democracies today - ranging from the UK, France, Italy, Germany, USA and India to the newer and often quite proud democracies in South America, Africa and other parts of Asia? Despite common references to populism being driven by democratization, in a recent book 'The Future of Capitalism' Paul Collier describes a far more further reaching and fundamental cause. Technological disruption. Although most millennials and many commercially-minded baby boomers love the idea, some have probably not considered that it may someday make them a populist.

In terms of Collier's framework, technology typically results in economic activity that needs more and more highly skilled workers, although in fewer and fewer numbers as these workers are systematically replaced by new and better technology. This is why technology is often associated with disruption which, although catchy in business talk, has far reaching social consequences. The process of technological disruption results in a growing gap between the skills and earnings of the most highly educated elite and the less educated ordinary people, with the latter increasingly finding themselves out of work. The ordinary people on the periphery of the workforce have less and less in common with the elite, who increasingly recognize themselves as upwardly mobile global citizens with stronger ties to the elite in other countries than the people living in middle-class areas in their own town or city. These ingredients provide fertile conditions for nationalist populism as a way of advocating for the rights and interest of the marginalized ordinary people, who see themselves as being still deeply invested in the wellbeing of their nations, rather than being preoccupied with their own wellbeing within a global network of the upwardly mobile.

One of the things that is interesting about Collier's framework in a historical context is a possible correlation between the technological developments of the time and the emergence of populism. The late 1800s saw the widespread adoption of steam locomotives and railways, with a commensurate increase in the need for newly skilled workers to service them, and of course a decrease in the need for more labor-intensive forms of transport and logistics. This was probably the first truly global instance of technology-induced labour market disruption. The early 1900s in turn saw similar labour market dynamics emerge when the use of electricity became common in businesses and households. Today the advent of Information and Bio-Technology is again doing the same thing.

So what makes this time special?

This time is special because the new technologies have more immediate potential to do just about every job on earth, from composing music and poetry to building rockets or performing brain surgery. In other words, the chances are that pretty

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soon many, or even most, of the upwardly mobile global elite could too be replaced by machines.

Here the case of artificial intelligence in the world of chess may be instructive. In '21 Lessons for the 21st Century' Yuval Noah Hariri describes the powerful movement in 1997 when IBM's chess programme Deep Blue beat then reigning world chess champion Garry Kasparov. Deep Blue had the benefit of decades of chess programming and refinement though practice games with the best human counterparts. Following the success of this model, the period after Kasparov's defeat led to the advent of half-human / half-machine chess teams known as centaurs. For a time centaurs were able to beat the best all-human and all-machine teams and for a few happy years centaurs dominated the world of competitive chess, providing a beacon of hope that machines would not replace people altogether. This period lasted until 7 December 2017 when Google's AlphaZero programme beat a Stockfish 8, the then reigning AI world chess champion. But this time was again special, instead of benefiting from decades of chess programming and thousands of hours in practice games, AlphaZero had taught itself chess in just 4 hours, and without any human help, using its machine learning (or self-teaching) programmes before it became an unbeatable world champion.

The lessons from AlphaZero's foray into the chess world certainly suggest that very soon few jobs will be safe from artificial intelligence, and by implication that many of today's white-collar elite will be replaced by machines, just as blue-collar workers have been replaced historically. This could increase the number of previously elite who may turn to populism as a way to make meaning of life in an economy that doesn't need or value them. Interestingly this could also, once again, bring more people closer together as we place value in the one thing that we all have in common, our shared humanity.