http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/2238-38752022v1214

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POPULISM VS COVID-19. CIVILIZING AND DECIVILIZING PROCESSES IN A TIME OF GLOBAL CATASTROPHE

What constitutes a "civilized society"? The Oxford Dictionary (2006) claims that it is one that has arrived at "an advanced stage of human development in which people [...] behave well towards each other and share a common culture." Yes, but there is more to "being civilized" than this. What can be understood as a civilized society is also one where science, rather than magic or folklore, is used to fight disease; one where "disturbing events", such as the slaughter of animals for eating, have been largely hidden from public view; one where citizens are strongly interdependent, relying on high levels of trust and cooperation; one where the state alone can control taxes and punish offenders, with no vigilantism or other such interventions by private citizens; one that has a free press; and one that is based on a functioning democracy, respecting the rule of law and the separation of powers. Indeed, this very structuring of governance encases and protects scientific achievement, displays of good manners, and shared values that inform everyday conduct.

However, in Norbert Elias' (1994) *The Civilizing Process*, "being civilized" has normative *and sociological* meanings. For him, the characteristics of a society claiming to be civilized represent the latest stage of individual and social development in a long-term process which began in Europe around 800 years ago. It initially involved forms of conduct and standards of etiquette from court circles that gradually permeated all classes. The convergence of the following independent vectors allowed this civilizing process and the characteristics that it started : (i) the increasing authority of the central state and its governmental organizations; (ii) increased sensibility to suffering and the development of more refined standards of behaviour; (iii) modes of

knowledge based around science and human expertise, making the world more predictable and calculable; (iv) the internalization of controls and restraints ("habitus") that have led to greater foresight and moderation in the conduct of everyday life.

This process does not work at the same speed across all societies; it is likely to take off at different tangents in individual societies depending on the presence of what Elias called their "local centrifugal forces" (population levels, geographical boundaries, predominant religious beliefs, etc.). Accordingly, particular impetus in any one of these vectors will likely reinforce the civilizing process of others, causing a "civilizing spurt." At the same time, this onward march of civilization does not guarantee civilized outcomes. Indeed, the values and characteristics of the civilized world itself – the emphasis on planning, scientific expertise, the habitus of restraint, and a reluctance to "get involved" in public disputes or controversies – are said to have made the Holocaust possible (Bauman, 1989). Furthermore, this process can be interrupted at any time by war, famine, or dramatic social change. Under these circumstances, a "decivilizing interruption" is likely to occur, in which "the armour of civilized conduct would crumble very rapidly" (Elias, 1994: 253). The author argued that such occurrences allow the re-emergence of conduct and values more appropriate to previous eras. Yet these apparent forward/backwards movements associated with the respective civilizing processes seem too mechanical and precise. Considering their uncertainties and contingencies, the collision of these processes will produce a strange *pas de deux*, neither forwards nor backwards, but with each of them escorting the other into tangential and contingent areas.

During this article's writing, another such *danse macabre* is being performed, with the civilizing process in conflict with forces that pose another decivilizing interruption to it. This conflict began with the contemporary rise of populism (especially in the Anglo-American world, on which this article is largely based). This politics has undermined many of the characteristics associated with civilized societies while also strengthening the authority of its anti-democratic "strong man" leaders. Indeed, to sustain their authority, these leaders must further weaken the precepts and understandings of life in the civilized world. The emergence of the COVID-19 virus then brought this clash between civilizing and decivilizing processes to a head. During this global catastrophe, most governments have aligned themselves with science to control the virus. Without a vaccine, they imposed lockdowns and, to varying degrees, urged the population to practice social distancing and wear masks. At the same time, governments have attempted to unify their populations in this struggle with catchphrases such as "we're all in it together" or, in the case of New Zealand, references to "a team of five million" (corresponding to the entire population of the country). They relieve the anxieties and pains caused by unemployment, one of the by-products of the

pandemic, by providing safety nets (government-financed work furloughs, for example). Along with leaders of the scientific community, government leaders or their representatives regularly hold press conferences to keep the public well-informed. However, fear of the virus and reactions to government attempts to control the pandemic has led citizens to uncontrolled emotional outbursts as they try to safeguard themselves and their immediate family, showing the fragility of the civilizing process. As an example, panic buying in supermarkets has even caused fights between customers over toilet rolls. In pandemic-related hate crimes, Asians suffered mental and physical abuse, for in the eyes of some, this group's ethnic backgrounds make them guilty of spreading the virus. Until vaccines become generally available, responses to the virus – isolation, lockdowns, etc. – revert to those that were used in the Middle Ages against the plague.

These decivilizing characteristics have, meanwhile, gained strength from the responses of populist politicians to the virus – especially of President Trump. They disregard, and sometimes slander, their scientific advisers. These leaders distrust the governmental organizations and seek to invest all authority in themselves, undermining the state's ability to approach the pandemic consistently and coherently. They deny the existence of the virus or insist that it will simply "disappear." According to Bolsonaro, President of Brazil, the virus is nothing more than "a little flu" and "we are all going to die one day", anyway. Some also put forward their own "snake oil" cures – "have you tried injecting yourself with disinfectant?", asks Trump. These politicians also encourage public outrage and disapproval of the state's insistence on lockdowns and other measures, claiming that these assault individual freedom and choice. In the US, refusing to wear a mask has become a gesture of defiance against the authority of the central state and scientific knowledge. Populist leaders further attempt to exploit the turmoil caused by the virus by sharing conspiracy theories about it on the internet.

The conjuncture between the consequences of the pandemic and populism thus further shows the fragility of the civilizing process. However, we argue that the pandemic and populism are mutually antagonistic. The virus shows how populism's "strong men" leaders are nothing more than incompetent charlatans, and is invulnerable to their magical solutions or their denials of its existence. In societies that have effectively controlled the virus, at least, the population has a renewed trust in the central state and recognizes the importance of scientific achievement; interdependencies between citizens and, in some ways, between nations have also strengthened. On the other hand, public support for populist leaders has declined. Despite its attack on the civilizing process, the COVID-19 pandemic could effectively end the more deep-rooted populist assault.

This article traces the emergence of contemporary populism and its effects on the post-1945 trajectory of the civilizing process in the Anglo-A-

merican world. It then shows how the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic weakened populist attacks while also renewing the civilizing process, notwithstanding differences in the course this has taken between societies. Finally, the article discusses the implications of these developments for life in a post-pandemic society.

THE POST-1945 CIVILIZING SPURT

First, let us clarify what this term "populism" means. Populism exists where there is "an ideology of popular resentment [or what has come to be known as "grievance culture"] against the order imposed on society by a long established, differential ruling class which is believed to have a monopoly of power, breeding and fortune" (Shils, 1956: 100-101). Similarly, according to Canovan (1981: 9): "populism should be understood as a particular kind of political phenomenon where the tensions between the elite and the grass roots loom large." While these tensions gave power to populist demagogues in Europe and beyond in the 1930s, these populists were ultimately defeated during World War II. To end the possibility of any further populist resurgence, the authority and scope of the central state and its governmental organizations was greatly strengthened and enlarged in the post-war era in Western societies. This measure sought to put an end to the population's sense of betrayal by the government, which had fuelled pre-war populism. The extensive planning and coordination of the victory of the Allies over Nazi Germany were thus seen as essential characteristics of post-war governance. The celebrated British sociologist Barbara Wootton (1945: 48) wrote that planning would guarantee freedom, even though this required "people putting old individual liberties in trust for the common good."

Accordingly, rather than leaving economic and social development to the fluctuations and uncertainties of the market, planning expertise would provide certainty and stability in everyday life: "planning aims at providing better and healthier conditions of life for men, women and children... it involves the best possible decisions by the ablest personnel available" (McAllister, 1945: 13). Extensive welfare programmes were introduced to protect the well-being of citizens so they would not be left to the uncertain fate of market forces as in the pre-war era. To apply these plans, the infrastructure of the government had to be greatly enlarged: civil servants in the UK increased from 340,000 in 1931 to 720,000 in 1955. New levels of welfare assistance also helped end disturbing sights caused by the economic ravages of that time. In the UK, for example, "with the advent of social security and unemployment benefits and other advantages of the welfare state, it is clear that begging is now on a much smaller scale" (Great Britain, 1974: 19).

Governments were also committed to maintaining full employment as another way of providing stability and social cohesion. Typical of these pos-

t-war governments, Canada acknowledged that "when unemployment threatened, government would incur deficits and increases in the national debt resulting from its employment and income policy" (Howe, 1945: 548). These measures made everyday life more secure and calculable, strengthening the government's authority and increasing the public trust and confidence in it and in the democratic process, reaching a highpoint of 77% of trust in the federal government in 1964 in the US (Pew Research Center, 2019).

New towns were designed and constructed to repair wartime damage and strengthen the interdependencies between citizens (in the UK especially). Drawing on Le Corbusier's 1930s architectural vision of "the Radiant City" (Le Corbusier, 1935), the designs envisaged that all social classes would be able to mix freely together in this environment: "our aim must be to combine in the new town the friendly spirit of the former slum with the vastly improved health conditions of the new estate... we may well produce a new type of citizen – a healthy, self-respecting dignified person with a sense of beauty, culture and civic pride' (Silkin, 1946: 1091).

An insistence on post-war social and cultural uniformity further strengthened and solidified social cohesion (if it also meant that excesses and difference became suspect at this time). The first issue of the US periodical *National Review* in 1955 ventured that "there was never an age of conformity such as this" (Levin, 2016). Similarly, J.K. Galbraith (1958: 70) wrote that "the display of ostentatious outlays... is now passé... it was much wiser to take on the protective coloration of the useful citizen, the industrial statesman or the average guy." Scientific achievement, however, was venerated since it had helped win the war and improved health care, medicine, and technology, which would further advance the well-being of nations and individuals. The US National Science Fund, the National Institute of Health, and the provision of federal aid for education were all established in the 1950s.

This "civilizing spurt" was also reflected in how, right across Western society, the state and its expert advisers were prepared to move ahead of public opinion (but in line with the advice of most criminal justice experts) and abolish the death penalty (Loader, 2006). It was thought that these trappings of Nazism and totalitarianism should have no place in the post-war civilized world. Similarly, the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 217A), which represented the renewed interdependencies between nations, was committed to ensuring no further abuses of state power at the expense of individual rights, which had been allowed in Nazi criminal courts. Punishments that were not fixed and certain came to be regarded as one such abuse. Furthermore, recognizing that criminological science could not predict future criminality (one of the justifications for such abusive measures) helped end the creation of indeterminate sentences. By the 1970s, most such provisions had been abolished or fallen into abeyance (Bottoms, 1977). Similarly, respect for human rights in the US Supreme Court ended the prosecution of vagrants, beggars, and the like – for they also had legal rights to be protected

and respected. Their status did not make them quasi-criminals who could then be brought under criminal justice control (see Pratt, 2020). Amongst governments and criminal justice experts, there was also growing disenchantment with imprisonment. By all rational criteria, it was too inefficient and expensive, as well as inhumane. Societies with the smallest prison populations were considered as exemplars of a civilized society. Government reports, commissions of inquiry, and the publications of research institutes, largely disseminated by the authoritative broadsheet press and public broadcasting organizations, structured public discourse around these issues.

NEO-LIBERAL RESTRUCTURING AND THE RETURN OF POPULISM

The election victories of Margaret Thatcher in the UK in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in the US in 1980 signalled an end to the economic and social arrangements that had allowed the post-war civilizing spurt. Subsequent neo-liberal programmes of economic restructuring, intended to restore "individual liberty" in these and similar societies, greatly undermined the authority of the central state. The restructuring shifted taxes from direct to indirect and opened borders to global trade and labour. Many government services were privatized and public employees were regularly demeaned as "time-serving bureaucrats." Financial and service industries – and not manufacturing – became the focus of economic development, which once again relied on market forces rather than on careful planning and its residual safeguards. Reagan's observation that the government was "the problem, not the solution" showed both growing distrust of the state and the development of a habitus based on individual risk-taking and self-reliance.[1] Individuals thus became used to managing their own risks, resulting in the growth of private insurance schemes, pensions, health education, etc. Moreover, the more successful someone's risk-taking was, the more likely they were to enter a world of fabulous wealth and fame – as seen by the emergence of entrepreneurs such as Richard Branson and Donald Trump in societies where cultural values now began to emphasise difference and celebrity status rather than solidarity and conformity.

The return to free market economics, however, did not necessarily guarantee an economic boom that all could enjoy. Some certainly won massive fortunes in the casino-style economies that emerged. As Bauman (2002: 62) wrote, "individuals who are untied to place, who can travel light and move fast, win all the competitions that matter and count." Indeed, it seemed better freeing yourself of ties and burdens – whether these be family, community or employment duties, and responsibilities – that could hinder this travel in the fast lane to success. Overall, social life and relations and economic life were being restructured: from that time, the decline of marriage and the growth of divorce, for example, (see Pratt, 2020: 124-125) ensured that interdependencies became much thinner, fleeting, and more guarded in the rush to individual success.

However, events such as the stock market crash of 1987 showed that many were destined to become losers all the same, with the state unable or unwilling to protect them from personal disasters. When asked about the crash at a press conference, President Reagan (1987) said "I think everyone is a bit puzzled... I have no more knowledge of why it took place than you have." The *New York Times* responded to him as follows:

> The noise you heard was not just the crash of the market. It was the crumbling of support for... Reagan. In a moment of frightening crisis, [the public] suspected that they were living in an economic fantasy... They were being told again and again that they and their country could have something for nothing, wealth without paying for it (Lewis, 1987: 35).

But despite the sense of certainty and security that careful state planning had previously aimed to provide, neo-liberalism evangelicals welcomed the ensuing uncertainty and insecurity caused by restructuring:

> We are not prisoners of an inevitable future. Uncertainty makes us free... where everything works according to the laws of probability, we are like primitive people... thank goodness, the world of pure probability does not exist except on paper... it has nothing to do with breathing, sweating, anxious and creative human beings struggling to find their way out of darkness (Bernstein, 1996: 229-230).

However, while individuals were urged to put themselves first, this also meant they had to adjust to the uncertainties of fate by themselves. The social distances that vastly increased from the 1980s showed the variability of relying on free market economics: while gated communities grew, homelessness resurged. And while the restructuring made some lives free to enjoy their economic rewards, it also caused others to lose attachments, without any familiar roadmaps to guide them as they travelled alone, living much more uncertainly and burdened by unwelcome risks and unnerving dangers at every corner.

What form did these risks and dangers take? They were articulated in new modes of knowledge provided by technological advancement and the deregulation of broadcasting, especially cable/satellite television and talkback radio. Usually, these new sections of the media depended on advertising revenue, which in turn required large audiences. The way to attract these was by common-sense concentration on what seemed to be the most immediate and direct threats to everyday well-being, which had mostly emerged from restructuring. They thus focused on fears that the return of the homeless, beggars, and suchlike was threatening the quality of life of those who had to see such people on a regular basis:

> many citizens are primarily frightened by crime... involving a sudden, violent attack... but we tend to overlook another source of fear – [that] of being bothered by disorderly people. Not violent people, not necessarily criminals but disrepu-

> table or unpredictable people: panhandlers, drunks, addicts, rowdy teenagers... loiterers, the mentally disturbed (Kelling & Wilson, 1982: 29-30).

And fears of "strangers" (Sennett, 1976) were worsened by what has become the "miniaturization of community life" (Fukuyama, 1999) amidst the spatial and social consequences of restructuring. This included the decline of informal controls and warning mechanisms that had previously served to inform local knowledge of such intrusions (Jacobs, 1992). Without these controls, strangers could be transformed into monsters capable of inflicting irreparable harm on all that had become important during restructuring. They could be considered paedophiles – frightening increasingly scarce and precious children – or sexual predators, likely to attack women, who at that time were much more vulnerable to them since their presence in public space increased in accordance with post-1970s economic and social changes. Neither paedophiles nor sexual predators had been significant in public discourse before the 1980s (Pratt & Anderson, 2016).

Rather than merely reflecting government opinion on such matters, the new modes of knowledge usually attacked the government and their bureaucratic organizations, insisting that the influence of liberal criminal justice elites on policy-making had left ordinary citizens defenceless against such risks. These new modes instead looked to and were informed by victims' rights groups, law and order activists, business organizations, right-wing journalists, and media personalities. These sources, in turn, claimed to speak on behalf of those who had been abandoned by the government while also apparently favouring the unworthy – lawbreakers, prisoners, and those whose presence on the streets threatened public well-being. These claims were usually based on anecdote, sensational one-off cases, distortions, or outright fabrications – but very attractive all the same to the new media outlets. Similarly, the "public opinion" these campaigners said they represented was likely based on headlines in the tabloid press or angry voices on talk radio than on any social scientific survey.

However, governments were increasingly prepared to align themselves with these extra-government forces to reduce the influence of criminal justice elites on policy. In societies where this realignment occurred, the state's monopolistic control over the punishment of offenders weakened, as seen by the simultaneous rise of vigilante activities (particularly against supposed sex offenders) (Johnston, 1996). This also meant that emotion rather than reason began guiding much policy development in the penal system (Garland, 2001). Moreover, the realignment marked the renaissance of populism in such societies – or at least of a form of *penal* populism at this juncture. Its impact has since influenced the creation of more severe penalties such as the "three--strikes law" – reflective of the "incarceration mania" (Harcourt, 2001) that affected the US especially. Indeterminate sentencing also had a resurgence in some of these societies. Previous concerns about the effectiveness and cost

of imprisonment or the difficulty in predicting future criminality were downgraded. The politicians who had aligned themselves with these new voices then claimed that a high prison population indicate government success instead of failure (see Cavadino & Dignan, 2002; Pratt, 2007).

This penal populism has also been reflected in the development of a new kind of utilitarian criminal justice, which seeks to control the risk of crime – rather than reacting to crime already committed – by restricting movement in public space which may pose risk and danger, including UK anti-social behaviour legislation and public space protection orders. All of England and Wales currently have warning notices telling everyone what they cannot do in that area ("no loitering", "no urinating", "no camping", "no begging", etc.), subject to prosecution and punishment that can lead to imprisonment even if no crime is committed. Meanwhile, those already imprisoned for sex crimes can be further indefinitely detained at the end of their term if they are considered at "high risk" of committing further offenses. According to US sexual offender laws and New Zealand public protection order legislation, no new offence will have been committed before this *de facto* additional sentence is imposed.

The enabling mechanisms for this range of measures – a variety of retrospective and hybrid laws, lowered burdens of proof, and changes in rules of evidence when these seemed to affect efficient risk control – all undermine the rule of law and its due process protections. Furthermore, these changes to criminal law and penal policy have also effectively redefined human rights. Now, rather ensuring protection of individuals from excess state power, utilitarian justice uses this excess to give the public a right to protection from individuals who seemingly put their well-being at intolerable risk.

The realignment has especially attracted both left and right governments in Anglo-American societies because it allows them to claim that they are still fulfilling the democratic obligations expected from them in a civilized society. That is, in this area at least, they are committed to protecting citizens from what seem to be the gravest risks to their well-being and security, especially since citizens could not face these risks alone. Indeed, the more spectacular governments can make their rescue measures, the more it seems that they side with the public and are prepared to go to almost any lengths to give them the level of protection their advocates in the media demand; but by doing so, they undermine some of the pillars of the civilizing process. They would no longer be held back, though, by the liberal criminal justice establishment from pursuing such rescues.

THE RISE OF POPULIST POLITICS

This realignment effectively allowed the use of criminal law and punishment to maintain social cohesion amidst the divisions caused by restructuring. Yet this form of populism proved unable to sustain this function. The effects of

the global financial crisis of 2008 and the mass movement of people around the globe (escaping civil war or the effects of global warming or simply trying to claim their own place in what is considered a civilized world) further challenged and undermined the sustainability of the civilizing process. Interdependencies, for example, became even weaker and thinner. The 2008 financial crash both intensified existing divisions and created new ones between those who remained secure and still prospered amongst its ruins and those for who could not recover, and likely never would. Indeed, the crash created a new social class– the "precariat":

> Taing a temporary job after a spell of unemployment... can result in lower earnings for years ahead. Once a person enters a lower rung job, the probability of upward social mobility or of gaining a "decent" income is permanently reduced. Taking a casual job may be a necessity for many, but it is unlikely to promote social mobility (Standing, 2011: 25).

The increasingly high patterns of immigration after the crash appeared to further undermine basic levels of certainty and security for local citizens, especially those left behind. Immigration seemingly worsened their employment prospects and even risked affecting their national identity – which was all that many of them had left to cling to. The restructuring had lowered the levels of trust in the authority of the state, which continued to decline with growing immigration. The coincidence of the crash and mass immigration then became an opportunity for "anti-politics" politicians, posturing as being outside of Establishment circles, and proclaiming themselves as saviours for those seemingly abandoned by the state. They sided with "the people" and against central government and its elite circles of administration, foreseeing a glorious future based largely on a mythical past – in 2016, in the US, Donald Trump's motto was "Make America Great Again" and, in the UK, the Brexit campaign stated "Take Back Control". According to these politicians, however, this glorious future could only be achieved by "draining the swamp" of government corruption and nepotism. In effect, governments no longer used populism in penal manifestations to maintain their status quo; instead, a recharged populism emerged, seeking to overturn the existing democratic order altogether: rather than decadent democracy, "strong man" leadership was needed to clean and purify procedures to avoid further deteriorating national values and related characteristics.

The menace of crime and crime risks remains part of populism's repertoire, nonetheless. In the UK, Johnson's Conservative government has signalled predictable initiatives such as "'life to mean life' for child murderers, together with more prison places ... and less early release" (Jenkins, 2019). What justifies these policies? The government is guided by the empty phrase "Most people think" (or its variations – "people tell me that" and so on) rather than by expert knowledge. Thus, a Prime Minister's source claims that

"most people think all [political] parties and the courts have lost the plot on sentencing" (ibid.). In the US presidential election of 2020, Trump regularly claimed that he was "the president of law and order" (despite regularly trying to undermine the rule of law), usually trying to convince "peace-loving citizens" they would be protected from rioting sparked by racial injustices and protesters that his own policies and statements had stirred. He claimed that "the stated goal [of the Black Lives Matter movement] is to achieve the destruction of the nuclear family, abolish the police, abolish prisons, abolish border security, abolish capitalism and abolish school choice" (Massie, 2020). Regarding police racism, the former president said, "wealthy liberal hypocrites want to defund the police in our inner cities while living behind walled compounds, you have got to see how some of these people live, they live pretty well" (ibid.).

Furthermore, these politicians used the same tactics that propelled penal populism to success – anecdotes, lies, distortions, and conspiracy theories – but on a much broader canvas and at the expense of science and reason, which are merely considered as matters that can be discarded or distorted to suit personal interests: "truth isn't truth", Rudi Giuliani, Trump's "personal lawyer", has exclaimed (Morin & Cohen, 2018). Indeed, all those who stand in the way of leaders such as Trump, in the US, and the Brexit campaigner – then Conservative Prime Minister – Boris Johnson, in the UK, and other rival politicians, judges, journalists, academics, scientists, economists, and so on could be slandered, sometimes physically threatened, as out of touch Establishment figures and "enemies of the people" themselves. In 2016, Conservative Cabinet Minister Michael Gove, another leading Brexit campaigner, proclaimed that "the British people have had enough of experts" after being challenged about Brexit's economic viability by economists (Mance, 2016).

And while penal populism tore up conventions, norms, and rules to allow for criminal justice initiatives previously thought unfitting in the civilized world, populist politicians have destroyed the characteristics of the civilizing process beyond this narrow enclave. They renounce agreements and covenants that had allowed stronger international cooperation and interdependencies between nations: the UK has left the EU, whereas the US, under Trump, pulled out of the 2015 Paris Climate Change Accord. Thus, the tactics of penal populism that neo-liberal governments had set in motion to sustain themselves, populist politicians then exaggerate on a much broader canvas to affirm the legitimacy of their authoritarianism and isolationist nationalism. Their persistent attacks on what they claim to be elitist and corrupt institutions of government – a free press, an independent judiciary, and a politically neutral civil service – further lessens trust in foundations of democracy and the civilizing process. Richard Spencer, Secretary of the Navy under the Trump administration before he resigned over Trump's decision to pardon a Navy SEAL for war crimes, stated that "The rule of law is

what sets us apart from our adversaries" (Cummings, 2019). That is, societies without this characteristic are "uncivilized." But judges who safeguard this pillar of civilization would likely be publicly denounced if they contradicted populist politicians. Regarding a judge who removed Trump's travel ban to the US on seven Muslim-majority countries for ninety days, the former president (2017) reacted with the tweet: "The opinion of this so-called judge, which essentially takes law-enforcement away from our country, is ridiculous and will be overturned", as if the decision automatically made the judge another member of the 'deep state conspiracy' that Trump and his assistants believe they are uncovering and fighting.

Indeed, Trump has become a master of presenting himself as a victim of the corruption and conspiracy of "the Establishment and their media enablers [who] control this nation... Anyone who challenges their control is deemed a sexist, a racist, a xenophobe, morally deformed. They will attack you; they will slander you; they will seek to destroy everything about you, including your reputation" (Trump, 2016). And by loudly asserting his victimhood, Trump is seen as a longed-for saviour by those left behind and forgotten about in recent decades (those working in sunset industries such as coal mining, for example). The more swamps to drain, the more victims can be defended, the more powerful populist politicians become. Accordingly, the more threatened the nation's state seems to be in these conspiratorial machinations, the more strong man leadership is needed, as if these men alone can end such existential risks to the nation. Conjuring new clusters of enemies (real or imagined) sustains the sense of grievance and victimization that attracts supporters. Trump, for example, called out the National Guard in 2018 to defend the border against mythical "caravans" of foreign hordes and others approaching from Latin America – and then bypassed legal channels and human rights concerns altogether by declaring an "emergency" that allowed him to override such matters. In such instances, interdependencies change again, becoming much narrower and limited but also more intense and stronger in the form of blind loyalty to "the leader" and increasing intolerance of those who oppose them.

Meanwhile, the use of new social media outlets, largely unbound by any kind of ethical constraints (at least until 2020, when censoring protocols were introduced, or 2021, when Trump's Twitter account was forcedly closed), has facilitated these politicians' actions, along with broadcasting/newspaper outlets (such as Fox News in the US and the *Daily Mail* in the UK) that abandon any pretence of objectivity and peddle conspiracy theories that confirm and strengthen the leader's version of reality, however distant it may be from the real world. Any criticism of this populist trajectory in the mainstream media, meanwhile, can be dismissed as "fake news."

THE ARRIVAL OF COVID-19

The rise of populism has thus undermined or reversed important features of the civilizing process by: fostering a culture of anger and intolerance; attacking science and expert knowledge; creating a habitus based on distrust of the state which systematically undermines the state's authority; narrowing and sharpening interdependencies; and relying on modes of knowledge that promote these beliefs while regularly trying to delegitimize the mainstream media.

For a politics that thrives on identifying and attacking "enemies of the people", it might be thought that the emergence of the COVID-19 virus in early 2020 would be welcomed as another such enemy. But this is a real enemy, not an imaginary one, and it exists in microbe form. It cannot be blocked by a wall or scared away by the National Guard. It cannot be detained. It cannot be shamed out of existence by a Twitter outburst, but it limitlessly harms individuals and societies. Gated communities for the privileged cannot shut this microbial enemy out of their residents' lives. While individuals make their own choices to stay safe, they also need further levels of protection from the government (co-ordinated strategies, delivery of vaccines, etc). The virus has thus become another intolerable risk. Although Trump tried making his version of law and order the most significant issue in the 2020 US election, he evidently failed: the electorate ranked COVID-19 as the most important problem facing government.[2]

The virus has instead led to a huge public demand for more knowledge about it. But where could this knowledge be found? There are many widely read conspiracy theories on social media that the virus was deliberately unleashed on the rest of the world by China, for example, or that it does not exist at all but is a plot fashioned by Democrats/international bankers/George Soros/the mainstream media etc. to destabilize Trump's presidency. Social media therefore continues undermining science and the authority of the state. On the other hand, much greater numbers of citizens have looked to the mainstream media – particularly public broadcasting organizations – to understand the virus' extent, symptoms, and risks. In the UK, "the BBC was the most popular source of news and information about Covid-19 – used by 82% of adults during the first week of [March 2020] lockdown" (TV WATCHING..., 2020). For these citizens, it seems that truth is truth after all, and not something to be discredited or falsified if it happens to be inconvenient. Accordingly, people have no longer "had enough of experts." In fact, they eagerly await the opinions of epidemiologists, virologists, immunologists and the like, regularly given in press conferences or published in the mainstream media.

Most also trust science instead of the magical cures proffered by populist strong men or their outright denials of the existence of the virus. In March 2020, a Canadian opinion poll reported that 87% of the public cited the local health authority as the most trusted source of information (Angus Reid, 2020). In the US, in June 2020, a *New York Times* poll showed high levels of

trust in medical scientists (84%), in the Centre for Disease Control (77%), and in Anthony Fauci, the Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (67%), whereas only 26% cited Trump (Sanger-Katz, 2020). The willingness of most of the public to at least wear masks and practice social distancing also indicates widespread conformity to medical knowledge,[3] and the high number of people wanting to be vaccinated against the virus reflects their trust in science.[4] Indeed, opinion poll surveys indicate high levels of support for even stricter lockdowns than most governments have been prepared to introduce, including support for travel bans and other restrictions.[5] Many have been willing to sacrifice individual liberties imposed by lockdown restrictions to support the public good of virus control.

When the government worked with its experts, (rather than trying to undermine or ignore them) citizens expressed confidence in it and public trust in government increased – as seen in Australia and New Zealand, two of the most successful countries in containing the virus, with government approval rates of 85% and 86%, respectively (Brain, 2020; Deveaux, 2020). In short, many support strong but accountable central governments that provide clear, effective leadership and that are prepared to give good and bad news – but news that is true, accurate, and clear. Reversing the Reagan aphorism, it is as if, once again, governments can be the solution rather than the problem. On the other hand, trust in government is much lower in societies where the government ignored expert advice to maintain the economy by advocating "individual freedom" – including the right to become infected and then infect others – or where government policy is inconsistent, shifting according to news headlines and soundbites; a familiar populist strategy which however undermines trust in government while the public awaits consistency and clarity. In the UK, the response of the Johnson government was initially supported by the public (72% in March 2020) but slipped to 34% by November 2020 (Smith, 2020).

Most also recognize that the solution to the virus first requires developing national strategies that are part of a global response instead of racing to be the first to develop a vaccine and then celebrate in a form of jingoistic triumphalism. This includes developing and sharing vaccines with other nations, as advocated by the WHO – and seen in EU countries – rather populism's nationalistic emphasis. Moreover, citizens recognize that government policies must protect all so as not to increase levels of infection. In New Zealand, the seemingly uncontrollable problem of homelessness was resolved in a matter of days during a lockdown period from March to May 2020, when empty hotels, hostels, and camp sites were located for the homeless. At the same time, opinion poll surveys reflect how the population wishes for government to provide adequate health care instead of making them purchase it as another consumer product in the private sector: according to 60% of UK respondents, post-pandemic health care should be prioritized over economic growth (Har-

vey, 2020); 63% of US respondents state that the government is responsible for providing health care for all (Jones, 2020).

Certainly, the lockdowns have become part of the terrible price – economic, social, and psychological –COVID-19 has exacted, with the poorest and most vulnerable members of communities likely being the most affected. However, lockdowns and related restrictions have also strengthened interdependencies by providing the opportunity for stronger social cohesion while mobility declined. Volunteers have delivered food to those unable to do their own shopping, and local government and citizen groups have guided the population where the central government could not (Harris, 2020). Doctors and nurses have come out of retirement to help with medical services; as an example, in the US, "the Auntie Sewing Squad, which has sewn more than a hundred thousand cloth masks to distribute to frontline, vulnerable and devalued groups from farmworkers to former prisoners" (Solnit, 2020). In the UK, "hundreds of the nation's top restaurants... pledge their support to a charity focussed on feeding the most vulnerable after the pandemic left them in urgent need of support" (Roberts, 2020).

The restrictions on movement also meant that "threatening strangers" are much less likely to be seen since narrower horizons and frontiers can renovate informal mechanisms of surveillance, control, and support. Furthermore, evidence shows that many societies strongly desire post-pandemic personal and social change. An April 2020 opinion poll showed that only 9% of the British wanted to return to their pre-pandemic lives considering the lengthy commuting and endless striving to win all the prizes provided by the economic restructuring (Wood, 2020). Instead, citizens increased their recognition of the importance of environmental improvements (cleaner air, more wildlife) and appreciation of family and community belonging. Similarly, a global survey by the World Economic Forum and Ipsos found that 86% of respondents wanted the world to be more equitable and sustainable after the pandemic and 72% wanted their personal lives to change (Broom, 2020).

New role models have also emerged during the pandemic. They are not risk-taking entrepreneurs endlessly and publicly celebrating their wealth, but workers who provide medical or social care and those who work in supermarkets, pharmacies, retirement homes, public transport, and so on; essential occupations that not only heal but help bring communities together. Despite its own decivilizing potential, COVID-19 has strengthened many of the characteristics of the civilizing process that were undermined by populism: a strong, well-coordinated central state is the solution to the virus, not the cause of the problem; public broadcasting organizations are valuable sources of knowledge; the production of a COVID vaccine will likely bolster public confidence in science; stronger interdependencies can make everyday life more certain and calculable again; and, despite all the well-publicized exceptions, most of the population took precautions against the virus – such as wearing

masks and practicing social distancing –, usually without requiring the police to exercise enforcement powers: indeed, it became second nature for them to do so. Despite the impositions on individual freedom, public good became the priority. After revelations of horror stories of overcrowded hospitals, increasing deaths, and bodies stored in freezer trucks, cultural values have shown increased sensitivity to the sufferings of those affected by the virus or those bereaved, despising the lack of empathy shown by leaders such as Trump.

Indeed, the virus has fully exposed the failings of populist demagogues and their empty promises of a glorious future. Their expensive vanity projects – Trump's proposed wall across the southern border with Mexico or Johnson's dreams of a bridge between Scotland and Northern Ireland – become irrelevant fantasies. They have failed to protect their citizens from the intolerable risks posed by the virus and therefore failed to fulfil the most basic obligations and expectations of a democratic government. In the UK and the US – and in other societies that have succumbed to the lure of populism, such as Brazil and India – the response of their leaders caused some of the highest per capita death rates and levels of infection.

Recognizing the abject failure of populism against the pandemic is by no means universal. Many US citizens continue to support Trump and further threaten the characteristics of the civilizing process, including their hostility to science and Trump's attempts to overthrow the democratic order by endlessly disputing legitimate election results and even encouraging insurrection. In short, the fight against COVID-19 will not end populism alone. Nonetheless, populist leaders have lost public support because of their mismanagement of the pandemic (Rooduijn, 2020). Regarding Trump, for example, COVID enlarged "his faults so they became too frightening to miss. It showed him lacking even the most rudimentary empathy ... it showed him to be dishonest, insisting that the virus was likely to 'disappear'... and it showed him to have contempt for facts and science, regularly contradicting and undermining the US response" (Freedland, 2020). The result of the 2020 US election thus did much more than simply defeat Trump, ultimately leading to his pitiful, snivelling end (so much for the almost demonic powers of this supposed strong man!). Indeed, given that Trump had become populism's most potent standard bearer, his defeat could also act as a final blow against his admirers and other would-be autocrats – at least in Western societies where democracy, by the mechanics of the civilizing process, is seemingly well-embedded...

CONCLUSION

Where, then, does this confrontation between populism and COVID-19 leave the civilizing process and its post-pandemic trajectory? These twin threats have certainly shown the process's fragility and contingency, but they also showed its fortitude before them. The features of the civilizing process – science and expertise; a central government supported by the public; strong

interdependencies between citizens, with renewed interest in the performance of civic duties and responsibilities; and a habitus where citizens become used to wearing masks – will ultimately defeat the virus, though at different speed and extent in each society: in societies such as that of the US, the more deeply entrenched populism has become and the more citizens resist science, the authority of central government, and so on, then the longer and harder will be returning to what the civilizing process can offer.

Overall, a different political agenda for a post-pandemic society may emerge, likely reshaping the way in which human rights are understood. A "public good" that serves the well-being of the whole community by protecting them from health risks could overcome the way in which "public protection" from dangerous outsiders has redefined this concept, breaching conventions, rules and the like and undermining the rule of law. Furthermore, reordering public expenditure priorities under these circumstances could encourage reductions in the prison estate.[6] With the revitalization of the civilizing process, crime and punishment will likely affect social cohesion maintenance less. A renewed emphasis on civic duties and responsibilities – instead of social division and individual responsibilities – will likely emphasize the need for anti-homeless ordinances and anti-social behaviour legislation. So far, solutions to homelessness continue to have no recourse to punishment and control measures.[7] Finally, successful resistance to populism – seen by the outright defeat of its leading figure – will also likely reduce interventions on the criminal justice characteristics of the civilizing process.

Received on 10-feb-2021 | Approved on 01-feb-2022

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NOTAS

1 Trust in government and politicians began to decrease across the Anglo-American world from the mid-1960s. In the US, the best example, trust in the federal government decreased from 77% in 1964 to 30% in 1980, then down to 19% in 2019 (Pew Research Center, 2019).

2 A CNN (EXIT..., 2020) presidential election exit poll found that most of the electorate ranked containing the coronavirus (52%) over rebuilding the economy (42%) as the most important thing to do at that moment.

3 In the US, a National Geographic opinion poll found that "more than 6 in 10 Americans were questioned say they are more favorable toward people wearing a mask, and there have been steady increases in mask usage among people of all ages, demographic groups, and political leanings ... Despite noisy no-mask protests, 92 percent of 2,200 Americans polled say they wear a face mask when leaving their home, with 74 percent saying they 'always' do. That 'always' percentage is up nearly a quarter since July, according to the poll, which has a 2 percent margin of error" (Whang & Elliott, 2020).

4 76% in New Zealand in December 2020; 75% in Australia; 69% in the US; 77% in the UK; 71% in Canada (TVNZ, 2020; Ipsos, 2020).

5 For example, Australia (77%) and the UK (70%) strongly support mandatory vaccinations against COVID-19. In the UK, the public has supported longer lockdowns than the government had been prepared to impose. During the first lockdown period in that country, in April 2020, "We found that 87% believed the lockdown should continue for at least another three weeks (with 6% unsure and 7% disagreeing) ... when asked their opinion on whether the UK's plans over the next few weeks were 'not firm enough with restrictions on people' or were 'putting too many restrictions on people', ... 56% felt they were not firm enough" (Recchia, 2020).

6 Prison rates have declined in the Anglo-American countries during the pandemic: in New Zealand, from a rate of 214 per 100,000 of inhabitants in 2018 to 188 in June 2020; in Australia, from 172 inhabitants to 160; in the UK, from 140 inhabitants to 132 by November

2020. No corresponding figures available for Canada and the US (World Prison Brief, 2020).

7 The Portuguese government is trying to provide a long--term solution. The Lisbon City Council has used declining tourism to turn Airbnbs into affordable housing by offering to "rent" the properties from property owners for a fixed-term period. The council can thus rent the properties at a subsidised rate, capped at one third of the household's income.

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POPULISMO VS COVID-19: PROCESSOS CIVILIZATÓRIOS E DESCIVLIZADORES EM TEMPOS DE CATÁSTROFE GLOBAL

Resumo

O que constitui uma "sociedade civilizada"? O dicionário de Oxford a define como aquela que alcançou "um avançado estágio de desenvolvimento humano no qual as pessoas [...] se comportam bem umas com as outras e compartilham uma cultura comum". Sim – mas "ser civilizado" envolve mais do que isso. Baseando-se na obra *O processo civilizatório* de Norbert Elias, este ensaio examina de que maneira o crescimento do populismo nas principais sociedades anglo-americanas tem minado muito dos atributos essenciais das sociedades civilizadas. Embora o surgimento da covid-19 some-se ao processo descivilizador, covid-19 e populismo opõem-se. Aquele expõe as falsas promessas e fraude deste último, que só pode ser derrotado pela crença na ciência e uma autoridade estatal forte (porém responsável) e centralizada. Apesar dos prejuízos sociais e individuais, a covid-19 ironicamente auxilia a reforçar o processo civilizatório e a enfraquecer o populismo.

Palavras-chave

Elias;
covid-19;
populismo;
civilização;
descivilizar.

POPULISM VS COVID-19. CIVILIZING AND DECIVILIZING PROCESSES IN A TIME OF GLOBAL CATASTROPHE

Abstract

What constitutes a "civilized society"? The Oxford Dictionary defines it as one that has reached "an advanced stage of human development in which people [...] behave well towards each other and share a common culture." Yes, but there is more to "being civilized" than this. Based on Norbert Elias' *The Civilizing Process*, this paper examines how the rise of populism in leading Anglo-American societies has undermined many of the essential attributes of civilized societies. Although the emergence of COVID-19 further added to this decivilizing process, COVID-19 and populism oppose each other. The former shows the empty promises and fraud of the latter, which can only be defeated by belief in science and a strong (but accountable) central state authority. Despite damaging individuals and societies, COVID-19 ironically helps strengthen the civilising process and weaken populism.

Keywords

Elias;
COVID-19;
populism;
civilizing;
decivilizing.