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In the Superstate

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TECHNOPOPULISM: THE NEW LOGIC OF DEMOCRATIC POLITICS
by Christopher J. Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti.
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BY AND LARGE, we know what we mean by technocracy: the delegation of public authority to an elite cadre with some sort of scientific expertise, their legitimacy derived from their superior knowledge. In a technocracy, decisions can be challenged only by other experts. Everyone else must sit back and watch.

It's less clear what we mean by populism, since the term is used for so many different things. Most current definitions share the idea of a 'people' divided and short-changed by an 'elite', and who come to consciousness by pushing that elite aside, replacing it with a new leadership that has a relationship of something like mystical unity with 'the people'. Populism, on the left and the right, promises a social unity achieved through politics and the state, overcoming division by eliminating the enemies of the common people – the capitalists in left populism, non-nationals of various sorts in the populism of the right. While elite rule divides the people into self-seeking factions, populism unites them, in a struggle against those who claim to know better than the masses what the masses need.

In their attempt to understand today's post-democratic politics, Christopher Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti note overlooked commonalities between technocracy and populism which, they argue, allow for an unlikely synthesis between the two. Both involve the replacement of an old elite, one that is seen as technically incompetent or parasitic, with a new one that is more proficient or more responsive. Both see political legitimacy as rooted in unanimity, involving the indisputably best solutions to indisputably collective problems.

Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti suggest that technopopulism entails a claim to legitimacy on the part of new political actors who are seeking power after the long-drawn-out decay of postwar democracy – the state-managed capitalism of the class compromise that began to unravel in the late 1970s. It promises to do away with the deadlocked factionalism, ideological divisions and party political corruption that cause the failure of contemporary politics to resolve the crises affecting contemporary societies. Technopopulism advises us to turn governance over to independent experts

who are not corrupted by involvement in the politics of the past and have no personal or ideological commitment to old-style political parties. Policymaking is redefined as problem-solving, avoiding both the technical deficiencies and the social divisions associated with parliamentary democracy. As populist politics restores the unity of the people, that unity allows technocracy to serve the people by solving their problems.

Technopopulism, Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti claim, is an emerging reality in several European countries where the failings of traditional party democracy have eroded its legitimacy. They analyse five such cases. Three of them – the UK under New Labour, France under Macron, and the Italian Five Star Movement – are classified as 'pure': leaders present themselves as neither left nor right, but separate from the politics of the past. The other two cases, Podemos in Spain and the Lega in Italy, are described as 'hybrid': Podemos fashions itself as a far left party and the Lega as a far right one.

A detailed discussion of the five cases must be left to specialists. To explain whether and how the technopopulist tendencies described by Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti are present beyond France, the UK and Italy, it seems useful to consider the long rule of Angela Merkel, whose regime did have technopopulist traits, though what was presented as non-partisan problem-solving tended to be driven by quite traditional politics aimed at stabilising Merkel's electoral base. Ultimately this project failed. All her technopopulist rhetoric achieved was to establish a temporary and fragile period of quasi-presidential personal rule under a parliamentary constitution. There is, it seems, no technopopulist cure for the decline of political parties and social institutions as mechanisms enabling political and social integration in a neoliberal society. Post-democratic politics, in whatever form, cannot pacify conflict-ridden capitalist society.

MERKEL was always noted for her astonishing political flexibility – you could also call it a remarkable lack of principles or ideological commitment. It was often attributed to a deep-seated pragmatism. She never seemed to feel the need to explain herself, to rationalise decisions by fitting them into a coherent political project, and made no memorable speeches expressing her feelings or beliefs in her sixteen years in office. She didn't waver from the fundamentals of the (West) German politics she inherited: membership of Nato, the EU and the EMU, alliance with France and the United States, a pursuit of open world markets for German manufacturing. But when it came to keeping her social and political bloc together, she was willing and able to live with stark contradictions that might have torn other governments apart.

When she was elected leader of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in 2000, Merkel aspired to be the German Thatcher, arguing for the full neoliberal programme, including the abolishment of free collective bargaining and worker participation in management. But when she almost lost her first election in 2005, and had to govern through a grand coalition – a coalition with Germany's other major party, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) – she soon discovered that she could attract or, just as usefully, demobilise middle-class SPD voters by appropriating social democratic policies. Then, in 2011, the *Atomkanzlerin* – the 'nuclear energy chancellor' – who had invoked her authority as a physicist to tell voters that nuclear power plants were safe, reversed her position after the Fukushima disaster and decided to phase out nuclear energy, a policy of the SPD/Green government of Gerhard Schröder and Joschka Fischer that she had fought tooth and nail.

Another volte face came in the summer of 2015. To repair several PR blunders over immigration policy, to woo the Greens, and perhaps to placate the Obama administration, which was annoyed by Germany's refusal to send ground troops to Syria or Libya, Merkel opened Germany's borders to roughly one million migrants, mostly from Syria. While this met with enthusiastic support among the middle class, it caused a profound split in her party and both saved and radicalised the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD), which had seemed about to decline into insignificance. Without a formal mandate from the other EU states, Merkel then negotiated a deal with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, under which Turkey would receive billions of euros for preventing Syrian and other migrants crossing into Europe. Towards the end of her chancellorship, she was applauded as at once a supporter of open borders and a defender of Europe against uncontrolled immigration. She was also widely regarded as a model of environmentalism, even though her turn away from nuclear energy prolonged Germany's need to burn coal by more than a decade.

What enabled this remarkable sequence of reversals? The answer lies in both character and social structure. For the first 35 years of her life, Merkel was a well-adjusted but not particularly enthusiastic citizen of the GDR, before rising to power after reunification in the CDU, the most West German political party, in hardly more than a decade. During the 1990s, centre right parties like the CDU/CSU (the Christian Social Union is the CDU's Bavarian sister party) went through an existential crisis which many of them, such as the Italian Democrazia Cristiana, did not survive – a crisis well described by Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti. Such parties tended effectively to be coalitions, with members supporting one of three political positions: capitalist modernism, anti-communism, or Catholic-patriarchal traditionalism, especially with respect to work and family. These coalitions fell apart under the pressure of the accelerated capitalist development that accompanied neoliberalism, as international competition made capitalist rationalisation spread beyond national markets and workplaces, as women took advantage of growing opportunities for paid work outside the family, and as communism finally collapsed. (A similar crisis befell most centre left parties, originally coalitions between a now shrinking working class and a growing white-collar middle class, but now placing their hopes in what they saw as an expanding non-manual and entrepreneurial labour market.) Conservative centrism became increasingly unable to project a coherent vision of a good life and a good society to which all its factions could subscribe, and conservative politics found it necessary to distance itself from old ideologies and identities, and to attempt to move to a new politics free from traditional precepts.

Merkel turned out to be a godsend to the ailing CDU. Helmut Kohl had resigned as leader after his defeat by Schröder in the 1998 federal election. Indebted to none of the CDU cliques, Merkel was profoundly indifferent to attempts to define a new programme for a party overrun by economic, social and cultural change. She realised more quickly than everyone else that the old politics had had its day and that the time had come to try something new, responding to particular events rather than taking an ideological position, oriented to the present instead of a hoped-for future, dealing with one crisis at a time, unencumbered by principle or precedent.

Eventist politics of this kind suit a society that has lost its sense of location in a historical movement from past to present, and present to future. There's 'no such thing' as society,

the much underrated social theorist Margaret Thatcher proclaimed. 'There are individual men and women and there are families.' Unlike Thatcher, Merkel never lectured her public. Rather than demanding that people change their lives – get on their bikes, as Thatcher's minister Norman Tebbit put it – she made the state seem like a service company, ready to fix people's problems so that they could continue to live as they pleased. This helped to counter a perception of the world as fundamentally incoherent. No large plan, no holistic approach can be of help in such a world, only fast and flexible responses to dangers as they arise, carried out by an experienced leader with a strong capacity for improvisation.

Can this be considered technopopulism? In a sense it can. For the new conservatism, crises arise from disorder, not from a wrong order, and their handling should be entrusted to technicians in command of special knowledge, whether scientific or magical, or both (they are hard to distinguish for the political consumer). Merkel never claimed to be an economist, or a lawyer, or an expert in foreign policy or military strategy. She did, however, have herself described by her communications team, and sometimes described herself, as privy to knowledge of a special kind: that of a scientist trained to solve problems by analysing them from the desired outcome backwards.

In this way, Merkel presented herself as the embodiment of the hard-to-translate German concept of *Sachlichkeit*. The closest English equivalents are objectivity and matter-of-factness, to the extent that they imply an emotional detachment from the problem at hand, and a concentration on its specific demands and internal logic. But, looking at Merkel's years in office, it's clear that her dominant concern wasn't with finding the optimal solutions to specific issues, but with the age-old basics of governance: the building and maintenance of a sustainable governing majority – a technical approach, yes, that addressed problems as they arose, but which saw them as problems of politics rather than policy. Post-ideological, but certainly not post-political.

When Merkel turned away from nuclear energy, for example, what she was looking for was not a safer method of energy generation but a stable government majority. It wasn't physics that carried the day in 2011, but Merkel's now favourite science, polling, which showed that the Germans had had it with nuclear energy. The end she had in mind was not public safety but political realignment: a durable coalition with the Greens. They would replace not just the liberal Free Democratic Party (FPD), which was too suspicious of Merkel's social democratic mimicry and too headstrong in foreign affairs, but also the SPD, which as a formerly socialist party must have seemed unreliable to this former citizen of the GDR – and in any case was too big to be a sufficiently compliant partner. It was for a similar reason that Merkel, eager to shed her 'ice queen' image in parts of the German press, allowed the refugees to enter Germany in 2015.

If we accept that this is a version of technocracy, was there also an element of populism? Passionate appeals to the German people were alien to Merkel, who seems always to have been keenly aware of the pitfalls of German history for German politics and the country's reputation abroad. Germany and the German people were hers only to the extent that they followed her; in an hour-long audience she gave to her favourite television journalist during the open border crisis she said: 'If we now have to apologise for showing a friendly face in an emergency, then this is not my country.' The *populus* in Merkel's

politics was not a German but a European one, though one governed and structured as much as possible along German lines, through the single market and, in particular, the EMU. Under Merkel, it was the Europe of the EU that was the 'imagined community' of German politics, a nation in the making, forging 'the peoples of Europe' into an 'ever closer union' – a community without conflict and contradictions governed expertly by a well-meaning elite.

In the German collective consciousness, Europe has long taken the place of Germany, which is seen as an outdated and outgrown political shell, an embarrassing historical legacy. Populist appeals to the 'German people' are rarely made in Germany, except of course by the AfD, while Europe is frequently invoked as both the ultimate objective and the legitimate location of (post-)German (post-)national policy. Merkel herself may have preferred Europe for more than just historical reasons. The kind of political decision-making she favours closely resembles that characteristic of the EU: decontextualized, event-driven, legitimised by expert opinion rather than agreed through public debate and negotiation, with deep structural problems treated as superficial political ones. The politics of *Sachlichkeit* allow potentially democratic nation-states to be replaced by a technocratic superstate, and class conflict to be replaced by international macroeconomic management.

Merkel's record, and that of her brand of technopopulism, was far from impressive when it mattered most to her. In three of the four elections in which she stood as party leader (2005, 2009 and 2017), the CDU/CSU did worse than it had at the previous election; its vote also declined in 2021. Only in 2013 did the CDU vote go up, from 33.8 per cent to 41.5 per cent. Four years later, it was down to 32.9 per cent, and four years after that to 24.1 per cent. If the hidden agenda of Merkel's technopopulism was to establish a new bourgeois centre, extending the CDU/CSU vote by adding recruits from the Greens, it failed spectacularly. In 2009 Merkel broke with her marriage of convenience with the SPD to form a government with the liberal FDP, which had had its best ever election result, winning 14.5 per cent of the vote. Marginalised and humiliated by Merkel and her finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble, who came to see the FDP as competing for rather than adding to their voter base, the FDP was voted out of the Bundestag four years later, winning less than 5 per cent of the vote. The Fukushima incident – which took place towards the middle of Merkel's second term, in March 2011 – then offered an ideal opportunity for reorganising the political centre. Merkel's *Energiewende* ('energy turn') paid off in the 2013 election. But while the SPD vote also increased (though only by 2.7 per cent), the Green vote dropped, from 10.7 to 8.4 per cent, with Merkel getting almost all the credit for a policy change that was high on the Green agenda. As a result of all this, Merkel found herself forced into another grand coalition.

Her next opportunity to rebuild Germany's political centre came in 2015, with the opening of Germany's borders, to the applause of German *Willkommenskultur*. This, too, backfired. Two years later, in 2017, the CDU/CSU and the SPD vote dropped dramatically, while the Greens stagnated. The FDP, which had kept silent in 2015, rebounded, and the AfD, fiercely opposed to immigration in any form, entered the Bundestag for the first time at 12.6 per cent. Merkel's overture to the Greens had caused her party to do badly enough that the coalition for the sake of which she had made this move was once again

impossible. When she tried to put together a three-party coalition by adding the FDP, its leaders remembered how she had treated them before and bowed out at the last minute. It was only after heavy pressure from the federal president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, an SPD foreign minister in an earlier grand coalition, that the SPD could be convinced to join a government under Merkel for the third time.

The 2017 election was the beginning of the end for Merkel. When the CDU lost heavily in a *Land* election in 2018, it allowed her to continue as chancellor until the 2021 election only if she resigned as party chair. In 2021 the CDU/CSU ended up on 24.1 per cent while the Greens won a record 14.8 per cent, but this, once again, wasn't enough to make up for the CDU/CSU's losses. The AfD vote remained stable, as did the FDP's. The SPD vote went up by 5.2 per cent, leaving it 1.6 percentage points ahead of the CDU/CSU, and enabling its candidate, Olaf Scholz, Merkel's sitting finance minister, to become chancellor in a three-party government with the Greens and the FDP.

Merkel's unhappy ending shows that technopopulism is not necessarily any more durable than old-fashioned centrist conservatism. Realising that the centrism of the postwar era was collapsing, Merkel had been grooming the Greens as a next-generation bourgeois centre party, but she couldn't overcome the logic of popular politics. There is no insurance in politics against bad luck, unanticipated side effects, or strategic miscalculation. Technopopulism seems to have a succession problem – and a smooth succession is essential to the stability of a regime. Armin Laschet, the candidate for chancellor on whom the CDU/CSU agreed after a long battle, had nothing in his favour other than his loyalty to her and his promise to be exactly the same kind of leader. Anything else would have drawn her ire, as her initial favourite, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, could confirm, and would also have caused still more divisions inside the party. Even if we ignore the possibility that some centrist voters may have wanted at least a degree of change, Laschet had no way of proving himself. Without being chancellor, he couldn't demonstrate the problem-solving pragmatism, the skills of technopopulist post-democratic leadership, that had been the hallmark of Merkel's rule, or at least its public façade. The only person who could do this at all was Scholz, who made a point during the campaign of presenting himself to the voters as Merkel's legitimate heir, even adopting some of her characteristic hand gestures.

Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti place their hope for a restoration of democracy on the rebuilding of political parties as intermediaries between particular and general social interests. Here, the book falls short in a number of respects, raising the question, rarely discussed among social scientists, of whether pointing out a problem necessarily creates the obligation to suggest a solution, however flimsy. Not every problem can be fixed.

Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti are remarkably selective about the institutions that need to be rebuilt to enable a return from technopopulism to democracy. Before the victory of neoliberalism, it was taken for granted that in order to resolve the differences between competing interests, capitalist democracy required not just a functioning party and parliamentary system but also a system that made room for negotiation between employers and workers. There was wide acceptance of the idea that, in a capitalist political economy, trade unions – in whatever form, varying from country to country –

could provide what the Norwegian political scientist Stein Rokkan called a 'second tier of government', one that recognised and dealt with the class conflict between capital and labour in a way party democracy could not.

Recently, democratic theory has focused almost exclusively on the state, neglecting industrial democracy. The assumption is that society-wide consensus will come about through 'rational discourse', as though class interests can be adjudicated by means of public debate and some notion of shared values. Trade unionism and collectivism are entirely excluded from the neoliberal understanding of the political economy. This, perversely, allows current democratic theory to do without a concept of capitalism, trivialising if not altogether excluding the fundamental conflict between those creating and those owning the capital on whose profitable deployment the fate of a capitalist society depends. The aim of state democracy, as contemporary theorists see it, is to achieve the normative unity of a classless society of equals. They imagine the formation through public debate of a consensus on the just distribution of something whose distribution cannot by its nature be just. Settlements between ultimately incompatible class interests under capitalism must come about through conflict, even if that conflict is institutionally contained – by bargaining between unequals, not reasoning among equals. Rescuing democracy from technopopulist distortion without conceiving it as democracy-in-opposition-to-capitalism looks like a fairly hopeless endeavour.

This conception of a state democracy that produces normative unity is closer to populism, especially statist right-wing populism, than it may seem. Indeed, there are striking affinities between the Habermasian liberal image of politics – as a way of overcoming dissent through public argument – and the populist utopia of a people united in and by their belief in the collective values embodied in the constitution of the state. The desired result differs sharply – middle-class v. plebeian political rule – but what these conceptions have in common is that both fail to allow for the relentless obstruction and disruption of social and political integration that is rooted in the capitalist mode of production. Democratic theory without a theory of class conflict pretends that there can be normative unity despite material disunity – a normative unity that is more than the manufactured consent described by Noam Chomsky.

Quite apart from Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti's implicit separation of political science from political economy, there seems to be a good deal of wishful thinking behind their call for a return to party democracy. While the disintegration of postwar party systems in the 1990s may have contributed to the rise of technopopulism, it didn't happen out of the blue, but was caused by the rapid progress of capitalist modernisation, which blew apart the precarious coalitions both within and between the centre parties that kept postwar democratic capitalism together. Capitalism, indeed turbocapitalism, is still around, and if a new kind of party system is to take over the mediating functions of its predecessor, the least one would expect is that it would reflect the disruptions that capitalist progress is bound to inflict on the societies it revolutionises.

Capitalism produces winners and losers, and democracy under capitalism must offer the losers a chance to make up through politics something of what they have to yield to the market – to correct market justice through something like social justice. This requires a political space that provides a society not only with alternatives to argue about, but with a

real choice between them. If that space is too narrow or restrictive, politics is likely to be diverted to issues of moral rectitude about which one cannot disagree without bringing into question people's right to exist in society. This, too, is something that populism and left liberalism seem to have in common.

It is important to remember that almost no such political space exists for EU member states, which may be the most important reason that European politics, more than any national politics, tries to be populist and technocratic at the same time. Under the single market, debates on limits to the free movement of goods, services, labour and capital are pointless. The treaties between member states preclude any such limits and are enforced by a supranational court against whose rulings there is no recourse. If a country is also a member of the EMU, its fiscal policies have to observe strict guidelines and its yearly budgets must be inspected. Again, all this is excluded from public debate because it has already been decided by the treaties, which rule out any control of capital movements – even across the external borders of the EU itself.

In the politics of a rapidly modernising capitalist society, while progress may be sought through Schumpeterian creative destruction of modes of production and ways of life, tradition may call for paternalistic protection and socialistic solidarity. This may cause a recombination of the factions of the sunken party systems of the postwar era: capitalist modernisers and the former working class, who now make up a new, often 'green' middle class, on the one hand, and the old working class, the new precariat and cultural protectionists suspicious of modernisation, on the other. Bringing about this realignment may appear easier than it really is. Merkel's technopopulism was a front behind which she tried to build a political bloc in which a renewed conservative party would play a dominant role – a conservatism capable of getting a new bourgeois progressivism to join it around a policy of, as Merkel once put it, 'market-conforming democracy'. But this required credible ideological content, which didn't materialise, presumably because a marriage of conservatism, turbocapitalism and democracy is so difficult to conceive.

In a growing number of countries, the resulting political void is increasingly filled by a new left, which disguises its own problem of coalition-building – between economic globalism and national social protection – behind public soul-searching for moral deficiencies in a permanent cultural revolution. The public sphere of capitalist democracies today tends to be moralised in a way that obstructs the formation of collective interests, which are replaced by safe symbolic spaces for self-defined rights-bearing minorities. Radical politics becomes reduced to struggles, often adjudicated by the courts, by ever smaller groups for control over their symbolic representation. Instead of coalition-building and majority-formation, postmodern politics of this sort gives rise to social fragmentation.

Merkel's project of building a new conservative-progressive centre for German politics that would politically neutralise the class-conflicted core of capitalist society was always bound to fail. More than anything else, it failed because she was unable to keep the right – the reactionary answer to turbocapitalist modernisation – on her side, as she lost up to 10 per cent of the electorate to the AfD, a party she had to declare untouchable in order to keep her constituency together. But all her new political formula had to offer was

technical competence, the appearance of *Sachlichkeit* vested in her as a person. It wasn't enough.