

RESPONDING TO THE POPULIST SPECTACLE

Nicole Curato

There is never a dull moment living in populist times. A tantrum in a tweet, a tirade on the podium, a threat in a slogan - all these have become part of today's politics.

Many explanations have been put forward to make sense of how we got here. Communication scholars find that populist leaders are effective because they comfortably fit the logics of virality and spontaneity that govern the digital public sphere. Political scientists, on the other hand, find that populists are turbocharging the celebration of politics - a trend that has long been observed as politicians' personality traits gained more prominence in mediated democracies.

To break this trend, many observers make a case for rebuilding trust in democratic institutions. This can be done by strengthening mechanisms that scrutinise government deals, revamping campaign finance laws, and strengthening political parties through grassroots organising. There are appeals for democratic education and media literacy. Citizens, the argument goes, must be trained to discern fact from opinion, to learn the value of slow over fast thinking.

These prescriptions are important but they are not enough. Missing from the diagnosis is the recognition that political spectacles are here to stay. They are not mere distractions but are constitutive of political life.

One demonstration of political spectacles are populist performances that speak to and capitalize on the anxieties and misgivings of people who feel alienated from their own democracy. I witnessed this when I conducted research on Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's supporters. What I learned from listening to Duterte's speeches alongside his supporters is the rhetorical power of mobilizing deep-seated and often unspoken frustrations of ordinary citizens about the political elite. Duterte articulates these frustrations through coarse and offensive language, which, for some observers signal the deterioration of democratic discourse, but, for his supporters, are a necessary performance to

lay bare their grievances against a political system stacked against their favour. Viewed this way, political spectacles can expose muted outrage and weave a coherent story that claims to represent the voice of the people, for good or ill.

How then must democracies respond to the populist trope of political spectacles?

The challenge, I argue, is not to put an end to political spectacles, but to democratise it. The rhetorical power generated by colourful political performances must be snatched away from despots, and moved to the hands of committed democratic actors.

Thankfully we are not out of inspiration. US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has shown the power of Instagram and Twitter in engaging in meaningful communication with global audiences. Her use of emojis and passionate language challenge stereotypes about what counts as 'proper' political behaviour. Her acceptance of criticisms on social media shows that politicians don't have to be perfect, but they can be real and responsive when ordinary people call out their mistakes. Democratising political spectacles demands this kind of conversation. Citizens supporting populist leaders like Duterte and Trump have every right to be heard, but they also carry with them the responsibility to respond to criticisms of racism, illiberalism, and bigotry perpetuated by men they elected in power. Without the ethos of responsiveness on the part of citizens, supporters of populist leaders are complicit, if not active agents in the shrinking of democratic space for dialogue.

About the Author:

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