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Demagoguery hurting higher education

Dr. Aldemaro
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Letters from Academia

In the last few years a ghost has been wandering the political landscapes of many countries. Whether it is Trumpism in the U.S., the Five Star Movement and the League Party in Italy, the Podemos and Catalan separatist parties in Spain, or the Venezuelan Chavism, they all have something in common: a mixture of populism and nationalism.

Populism is characterized by the rejection of the establishment, the so-called privileged elites. Nationalism is a movement that promotes the alleged interests of a tribe, whether it is a group tied by geography, culture, or ethnicity. They are both anti-historical in the sense that throughout time major progress has been made by civilizations that embrace an open world, well-organized societies, and deference to the intellectual elites.

But look at what is going on today. Scientific facts are being dismissed when they do not conveniently match the tenets of these ideologically driven groups, whether it is climate change, the value of vaccinations, or the unmasking of trickle-down economics.

And look at the consequences. Countries that have embraced such tendencies have done very badly. From fascist Italy, to Nazi Germany, to the Soviet Union, they all have ended in disaster.

But these movements have not just popped up without context. First, we need to blame the established political parties for either their incompetence managing government or bending to irrational popular sentiments out of cowardice and ineptitude. We should hold them accountable to tell – and explain – the truth to the public.

Then we have had the economic elites who are more interested in quarterly returns than in the long-run wellbeing of the societies of which they are a part.

Thus, they always advocate for more tax cuts that hurt basic social investments such as infrastructure, health, and education. These cuts make societies more fragile and less capable of being part of a productive world.

Also, we have the leadership of institutions of higher education who have not only failed in managing their organizations appropriately, but have also lacked the vision and the communication savviness to make society understand that their institutions are the pillars of progress. And, of course, they are not the only ones who are responsible for the bad cultural movements we are witnessing today.

There are also faculty members who promote a narrative that takes us back to the 1960s with conspiracy theories galore, pretentious jargon that seems illustrious but lacks real substance, and more interest in the “ideology-of-the-month” than in providing evidence-based explanations of what is going on in the world.

And finally, the fault also lies with all who vote without being informed, or who are simply too lazy to even go to the polls.

All of this has resulted in demagoguery based on fear of immigration, blank checks given in the form of unwise tax cuts, acceleration of the degradation of the global environment, education made more expensive than ever, and the lowering of vaccination rates, generating public health threats to the general population.

And what have these failures meant for the image of the world today? Just by looking at the news, both traditional and through social media, what we see is a portrayal of societies where mediocrity and vulgarity are commonplace. We are also seeing many countries becoming more authoritarian and their leaders assuming the role of assertive despots.

Some people may think that this is a very apocalyptic view of the world. Some even argue that actually things are better today. Take, for example, Harvard professor Steven Pinker’s recent book, “Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress,” in which he contends that if you believe that things are going badly, think again. “People are living longer, healthier, freer, and happier lives, and while our problems are formidable, the solutions lie in the Enlightenment ideal of using reason and science.”

Not only can one counter his statistics with many others that are really somber, but he also misses the larger point of not looking at historical examples when deep societal problems were being masked by apparent progress.

Take, for example, Nazi Germany. Hitler and his acolytes took advantage of the public’s hatred of the Versailles Treaty, designed to humiliate the Germans for being part of World War I, as well the economic chaos created by the Wall Street Crash of 1929 when American banks recalled their loans to Germany and plunged the country into further financial desperation. And, yes, under Hitler, Germany saw an economic recovery during the first years of Nazism, along with a resurgence of German pride. But it came at such a cost. The final result? World War II, the Holocaust, the Cold War, and totalitarianism in Eastern Europe.

The creation of the United Nations, the end of apartheid in South Africa, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the establishment of the European Union, the flourishing of democracy in many developing countries, the acceptance of human rights as universal values, and worldwide economic development, all worked to create confidence that we were moving in the right direction.

Now we know better.

Colleges and universities need to address these issues. We, alone, cannot change all things that are wrong in the world, but we certainly have the responsibility to do our part.

We need to prepare students not just “for a job,” but to build their characters so they can make effective social change. We need to talk directly to the general public not from an ivory tower, but by speaking plainly and convincingly about the world’s problems and proposing sensible solutions. And we need to convince everybody that there is nothing wrong with intellectual elites.

There is nothing wrong with merit while everything is wrong with mediocrity. If you want medical attention you deserve the best. There is nothing wrong in achieving a fair and just society, and the most important tool to that end is education. We must have a system that provides quality and affordable education.

The ball is in our court.

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