

The rise of the technopopulists

The politics of the people and a new age of emptiness

By *Chris Bickerton*

A few days before it was announced there would be a nationwide UK lockdown from late March, Sky News political editor Beth Rigby remarked on an unexpected shift in the Prime Minister's behaviour. Struck by the importance Boris Johnson was attaching to scientific advice, Rigby mused that a populist politician seemed to be taking a non-populist approach to the crisis.

The embrace of science has persisted throughout the pandemic. As well as justifying government decisions in the language of scientific advice, the country's chief medical officers and scientific advisers – from Chris Whitty and Jenny Harries to the ill-fated epidemiologist Neil Ferguson – have been leading actors in the British coronavirus drama.

From the outset, arguments about rival scientific models dominated political discussion. The “herd immunity” approach was popular early on but lost out to the suppression strategy promoted by Ferguson at Imperial College London. With the

exception of Johnson's chief aide, Dominic Cummings, Downing Street has come down hard on anyone breaching Covid-19 restrictions. Johnson's determination to follow the advice of his scientists has created an opportunity for the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, to present himself as less risk-averse and more attuned to the dangers that the pandemic poses for Britain's economy.

Experienced observers of British politics are right to be confused. After becoming Prime Minister in July last year, Johnson reaffirmed his status as the country's leading populist. He attached “the people” as a prefix to almost every dimension of his premiership. After pitting “the people against parliament” in his general election campaign, he created “a people's government”. Having packed the House of Commons with his own MPs, Johnson called it “the people's parliament”. The March 2020 Budget was “the people's Budget”.

This confusion stems from our expectation that promises to do what “the people” want will clash with appeals to expertise and competence. We think of populism and

technocracy as opposites, not as complements. There are good reasons to believe in this opposition. The conflict between technocracy and democracy takes us back to Plato, who argued that we should think of the *polis* or ideal city in the same way as we think of the individual household, the *oikos*. Running a household requires skills, *techne*, and we expect those with the skills to be in charge. Similarly, we should put the “philosopher kings” in charge of running the *polis*.

Technocracy is therefore skill (*techne*) plus power (*kratos*). The industrial age recast the meaning of technocracy in a way that tied it more closely to the liberating potential of modern technology. In the 18th century, the French social theorist Henri de Saint-Simon first proposed power be taken away from politicians and given to engineers. This idea exists today among tech enthusiasts in Silicon Valley. Empowering experts seems to imply the demobilisation of “the people”.

The opposition between populism and technocracy also makes sense because ►



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► it confirms those who put their faith in technocratic forms of decision-making. Johnson's critics often remark rather smugly that a former *Have I Got News For You* panellist was never going to be able to handle a global pandemic. The failures of Donald Trump, Johnson and Brazil's president Jair Bolsonaro in tackling Covid-19 have led to a crescendo of voices decrying the policy failures of populists.

By contrast, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel – who has a doctorate in quantum chemistry – is celebrated for her seriousness of purpose. Placing populism and technocracy in opposition like this is a way of attacking those voters who elected the populists in the first place.

We cannot understand the contemporary political moment if we stick to this opposition between populism and technocracy. Political competition in advanced democratic states today is increasingly ordered around appeals to both “the people” and to competence and expertise. Far from clashing with one another, these appeals are combined in multiple and complex ways. We cannot say that one party or leader is populist while another is more technocratic. Rather, political strategies involve various combinations of populism and technocracy. In short, we live in a technopopulist age.

The crucial difference with the traditional understanding of technocracy is that technopopulism does not describe a shift of decision-making power from political entities to independent bodies. This sort of depoliticisation still exists, of course, but technopopulism is something different. It is not an alternative to democracy; it is the form that democratic politics takes today. We have been accustomed to viewing political competition as a struggle between left and right. We should think about it instead as competition between rival ways of synthesising appeals to “the people” and appeals to expertise.

The Conservatives' election-winning slogan of 2019 – “Get Brexit Done” – was powerfully technopopulist. It was a promise to do “what the people want”, namely, leave the European Union – but it was also a promise to do it promptly and efficiently. The pledge to act entailed a claim about competence and expertise, which fed off a growing disillusionment with the stalemate in the House of Commons. The Labour Party's response to this slogan – “Get Brexit Right” – is itself firmly rooted in the technopopulist register. Keir Starmer pits his promise of precision against Johnson's promise of swiftness, but both entail claims to a form of political competence.



Flanked by experts: Anthony Fauci, Mike Pence and Donald Trump face the press, February 2020

The concept of technopopulism helps to unravel the mystery of Dominic Cummings's centrality to the Johnson government and the manner in which he became the object of public opprobrium in May this year, after revelations about his trips to the north-east during lockdown. Cummings ruminates obsessively about the potential of cutting-edge science and technology to improve government performance; he writes rambling blog posts on the 17th-century German polymath Leibniz and the Apollo space programme; he is waging a war against the civil service.

At the same time, Cummings is Britain's arch-populist agitator. In 2004, he was instrumental in the campaign against the Labour government's proposal for a North East Assembly. His winning slogans – “vote no to more politicians” and “politicians talk, we pay” – capitalised on public distrust of the political class and were precursors to the Leave campaign in 2016. In the early autumn of 2019, Cummings was a key figure in pushing the government towards its showdown with parliament, arguing that the Commons and the Lords had become obstacles to the exercise of popular sovereignty. Cummings thus in many ways embodies this new combination of populism and technocracy.

Technopopulism is not just a British story. In the United States, Donald Trump's coruscating attacks on expert opinion belie a more nuanced set of developments. When he ran against Hillary Clinton in 2016, it was common to view the contest as that of a

populist against a seasoned and highly competent politician. And yet, Trump's political persona made much of his practical ability to do deals and “get the job done”, in contrast to his Democratic predecessor.

Trump has, perhaps, most in common with Italy's Silvio Berlusconi. Derided by outside observers, Berlusconi successfully cultivated a personal and direct relationship with Italians via television and by politicising his entrepreneurial success. At the core of Italian politics under Berlusconi, as with Trump, has been this amalgamation of a personal bond with citizens and a managerial approach to politics. While much has been written about the dangers of this overlapping of money with politics, we should pay as much attention to the exact meanings of expertise and popular representation contained in Berlusconi or Trumpism.

Since the coronavirus pandemic began, Trump's strategy has not been to dismiss all expert opinion out of hand. Instead, he has deployed “his” experts. He has also made much of his ability to read data and provide his own interpretations. Political debate in the United States has been along the lines of “my expert versus yours”, not a simple clash between populism and technocracy.

Variations in technopopulism therefore come from different ways of mobilising “the people” and by focusing on different understandings of *techné*. Elected in 2017, French president Emmanuel Macron's attack on the political class and his unabashedly messianic political style had all the hallmarks of the populist politician. In a striking instance of the populist's personalised approach to exercising power, Macron

even gave his political movement the same initials as himself: En Marche!

But Macron was also a product of France's statist and elitist technocratic system. He used the language of competence to attack his opponents. A key turning point in the last presidential election was the second televised debate on 3 May 2017, when far-right National Front leader Marine Le Pen made a series of factual errors culminating in an incoherent account of how she would take France out of the euro. In his response, Macron chided Le Pen in the manner of a teacher disappointed at his student's poor performance. You could at least have prepared for this debate rather than trying to wing it, he scolded. Le Pen never recovered.

Macron's brand of technopopulism is unabashedly top-down. He thinks of himself as the people's problem-solver. His concept of *techné*, drawn from the upper echelons of the French meritocracy, is put to the service of "the people". As Macron argued in his memoir-cum-political programme, *Revolution*, "the French are less interested in representation than in action. They want politicians to be efficient, and that's all there is to it." In recent months, Macron has had to recalibrate the balance between his populist and technocratic components. His decision this summer to change his prime minister was a way of forging a more direct and "human" connection with voters. In place of the stiff and technocratic Édouard Philippe, Macron chose Jean Castex – a mayor of a small town in the south of France, who speaks with a southern accent and has the popular touch his predecessor lacked.

Italy's Five Star Movement (M5S) is a bottom-up form of technopopulism. Currently in a coalition government with the centre-left Democratic Party, the M5S is usually associated with its charismatic founder, Beppe Grillo, a comedian-turned-politician who built a popular movement out of anger and frustration at Italian political life. Grillo's promise to do away with the political caste and replace it with a more direct form of democracy was enormously successful: founded in 2009 as a small online movement, in the 2013 general election the M5S received more votes than any other party.

Grillo's anti-establishment message galvanised a generation of political discontents, but the M5S is not a purely populist movement. The "five stars" refer to the movement's central goals of environmentalism, internet connectivity, and sustainable water, transport and development. These are concrete policy ambitions, not grand ideological principles. The philosophy behind the M5S, articulated by the web guru and co-founder Gianroberto

Casaleggio, was that the internet and digital connectivity were a means of harnessing the "collective intelligence" of humanity. Direct democracy through the web was the route to better policymaking. As Casaleggio once put it, "the web makes us equal in being smart."

The Five Star Movement thus combines populism and technocracy by arguing everyone is an expert. The internet and direct citizen participation help pool the knowledge and competence of the general population. Citizens are at the heart of the M5S, but as holders of knowledge rather than as bearers of rights. Dominic Cummings's demand on 2 January this year that "weirdos and misfits" apply for jobs in No

party of the left and of the right. As Hans Fallada put it in *Alone in Berlin* (1947), his celebrated novel about resistance to Nazi rule in wartime Berlin: "The party was everything, and the people nothing."

Ideologies were more than political rhetoric; they gave societies their substance and structure. Conservative and Labour traditions in the UK were a way of life, as were Christian democracy and social democracy in Germany or Italy. In the Netherlands, ideology divided society so much that the country's social structure was imagined as a series of independent pillars, existing side by side but never overlapping. Life in a pillar was all-encompassing, taking in your foot-

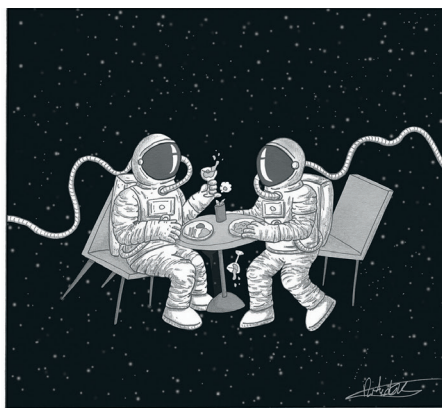
Emmanuel Macron's unabashedly messianic political style has all the hallmarks of the populist

10 had something of Grillo and Casaleggio to it. But British technopopulism relies on a traditional party structure and eschews Italian experiments with digital democracy.

The language of expertise and competence is almost as old as democracy itself. The same is true of "the people" and attempts to mobilise popular will. So what exactly has changed? From the middle of the 19th century until the final years of the 20th century, democratic politics was about a clash between rival ideologies: between the left and the right. These ideologies were not devices deployed by cynical politicians. They were the building blocks of society, taking precedence over general appeals to "the people" or to the competence of politicians and their advisers. The clash of ideologies was embodied in the most significant creation of the early 20th century, the mass

ball club, your school, your preferred newspaper and even the café at which you would drink and socialise.

As the structuring power of rival ideologies has declined, so the force of "the people" as a political slogan has grown. Individualism has eroded these distinctive social groups, leaving political parties without any roots. As free-floating politicians, they coin empty slogans in the hope of winning over as many voters as possible. The prominence of competence and expertise in our political vocabulary has its origins in the rise of meritocracy, what political scientists like to call "cognitive mobilisation". By investing intellectual ability with a moral superiority, many of those near the top of the meritocratic ladder feel justified in demanding that politicians should resemble themselves. Synthesising these appeals to "the people" and to expertise gives us technopopulism – the new political logic of our age.



"Good food, no atmosphere"

If technopopulism is the key to making sense of Johnsonism as a political philosophy, it is also the way we can grasp its weakness and superficiality. At the time of the electoral victory in late 2019, there was much talk of a fundamental ideological reordering of British politics, one where working-class voters of the north of England were willing – for the first time in their lives – to vote Conservative. Cummings and others around him in Downing Street spoke grandly of a new social contract. Less than a year later, it has all come apart, dramatically so. Johnson cuts a lonely figure and there is talk about him quitting in the New Year. The most discontented ▶

► on the Tory back benches include those from so-called Red Wall seats, where expectations about a “levelling up” agenda are highest.

The origins of technopopulism as a political logic lie in a separation of politics from society. Ideologies provided the glue that kept social groups and political representatives together. As this glue has disappeared, a gap has opened up between voters and governments. Technopopulism is more a consequence of this void than it is a way of filling it. As a result, politics is no longer a reflection of shifting class cleavages and social structures. It is far more superficial and disconnected than that. Technopopulism as a political logic means politicians can – simultaneously – appeal to all voters while promising them magical technocratic fixes that are “right” or “true”, and do not involve trading the interests of one group against the interests of another.

But we should not equate an individualised and atomised society with an equal society. Deep conflicts of interest persist even if they are not utilised in the old ways. Technopopulism is thus a product of the void between voters and their politicians, and its practitioners are constantly being undone

by this void. It is a persistent form of politics, but also a deeply unstable one.

One important source of instability is that politicising expertise erodes its authority, which stems precisely from being “outside” of politics. The trouble with politicising expertise is that we quickly realise there is no necessary or direct connection between what we know and what we ought to do. This has been one of the great lessons of the pandemic. Simply “following the science” cannot work because scientific evidence and models are themselves both open to question and fall far short of providing instructions about what to do in any given set of circumstances.

There is no truth in politics, only the balance of social forces

At the heart of politics is the need to make decisions based not only on facts but also on a set of beliefs that provide a framework for action. Stripped of an ideological outlook that contains within it some vision of future society, decision-making dissolves into problem-solving. This leads to the endless firefighting and U-turns that have characterised the British response to Covid-19.

The relative success of the German response to the pandemic is not because of a stronger technocratic commitment to “following the science”. It is simply because of the structure of the German state. Its federal model – with substantial powers given to the individual states or *Länder* – meant that the test and trace system developed early on in the pandemic came from the bottom-up, using private and public laboratories, and tracing capacity was built up by individual municipalities. At the same time, the country has continued to fund its welfare state, focusing on healthcare because of its ageing population. The decentralised structure of the German state and the quality of its health system are nothing to do with scientific expertise as such; they reflect the social settlements of the past and the present.

There is something self-defeating about trying to make truth the foundation of political action, whether it be the truth of “the people” or the truth provided by expert knowledge. The anti-Trump “truth campaigns” in the US led by the *New York Times* (“the truth isn’t red or blue... the truth is hard... the truth is under attack”), have failed because deploying truth as a political weapon strips it of the objectivity that made it politically valuable in the first place. There is no truth in politics. There is only the balance of social forces that dictates the way

in which we interpret our political and social world. What matters is the power that comes from being able to build coalitions and majorities strong enough to implement a political programme.

An appeal to “the people” is also an unstable and fragile source of political authority. Brexit is a useful lesson here. The demand that the government trigger Article 50 immediately after the June 2016 referendum was justified as being “what the people want”. The gap between this appeal to popular will and the lack of a defined plan for the UK’s exit from the EU was wide enough to shape events long after the vote had taken place. The difficulty of filling it ended Theresa May’s premiership and locked the UK into a negotiating process where the options were limited by the ticking clock started by triggering Article 50. Behind any appeal to “what the people want” lies the need to transform popular will into a political platform with actual social content. For over a century, political parties have done this while working within the rules of representative democracy. But parties can only do this if they are a bridge between society and politics.

The pandemic has demonstrated how wide the gap can be between what Rousseau called the will of all and the general will. The will of all refers to the will of everyone in the political community; the general will is more complex, usually going against the individual interests of some members of the community. When competence and government performance are all that we discuss in relation to Covid-19, we neglect the much more difficult discussion of how we should manage the conflicts of interest that run through our societies. For instance, what of the inter-generational transfer of wealth that comes with an approach focused on saving the lives of the most vulnerable, but paid for by the least vulnerable?

These are the sorts of deeper political questions that we should be discussing and worrying about, but our technopopulist age reduces political debate to a synthesis of appeals to “the people” and to expertise. This political logic has its roots in the decline of class-based identities and in a moralised celebration of competence, one of the worst features of our meritocratic societies. Technopopulism is unstable and unappealing, but it is likely to be with us for some time to come. ●

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