Commentary

Discontent and its geographies

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Everywhere you look around the globe, discontent in various shapes and forms is rising. Over the past decade or so, a wave of right-wing populism surged in advanced countries and the developing world as well. This can be seen not just in the election of Donald Trump in the USA, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, but also of course in the rise of Brexit in the UK, of Rob Ford in Toronto and the rise of Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, Viktor Orban's Fidesz in Hungary, Italy's Northern League, the Golden Dawn in Greece, France's National Rally, the Swiss People's Party, the Freedom Party of Austria, the Swedish Democrats, the Danish People's Party and more. This right-wing discontent reached a fever pitch in the mass rallies of Trumps ill-fated 2020 election campaign and in the storming of the US Capitol in protest of the 'stolen' election.

Both the academic literature and the conventional wisdom suggest that such increasing discontent is a consequence of rising economic inequality and economic insecurity. But something more than *just* economic inequality is at work. Rising discontent can be seen as a quintessentially geographic phenomenon—a fundamental product of distinctive economic and cultural geographies and of deepening differences in the day-to-day lives of different class and racial groups.

Considerable attention has been paid to the rise of discontent on the political right, typically referred to as the rise of populism. Right-wing populism has been defined in terms of three key characteristics: anti-establishment disdain for traditional elites in business, government, academia and the media, authoritarianism and nationalism particularly regarding global trade and immigration (see Mudde, 2018, 2019). This growth in right-wing discontent has been mapped by leading political scientist in the United States and across the world. Several decades ago, Ingelhart (2006, 2018, 2021) and Ingelhart and Baker (2000) identified the decline of traditional materialist politics associated with the old industrial societies and the rise of a newer post-materialist politics and political culture of post-industrial societies. More recent work with Norris has shifted attention to the backlash to this new political culture brought on by the surge in right-wing populism (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Their research ascribes the rise of populism not simply to economic inequality or economic hardship *per se*, but to the cultural backlash against the modern values of post-industrialism. Using voting

data on 250 political parties in Europe between 2002 and 2015, Norris and Inglehart (2019) find that populist candidates did not draw significant votes from the demographic groups that were suffering the most—the low skill, low pay service workers in urban areas. Class-based voting in general was at the lowest level that has been measured since the 1950s. In fact, support for populist candidates was strongest among relatively more affluent and educated groups, particularly *petite bourgeoisie* small business owners. Their research finds that what best predicts populist voting is conservative cultural values, specifically anti-immigration sentiment, authoritarianism, mistrust of global national governance and right-wing ideological self-placement.

Right-wing populism is most concentrated among older white males, religious people and the less-educated groups, which are geographically concentrated in left-behind regions. The driving fissure is not economic hardship *per se* but cultural difference. This precedence of culture issues also helps to explain why people often vote against their economic interests—rejecting government-support and subsidies for example—because they want to restore a fading social order.

These findings are reinforced by detailed studies of the rise of Donald Trump and of Trumpism in the USA (see Rothwell and Diego-Rosell, 2016). A key driver of Trump support was not economic insecurity *per se*. In fact, Trump supporters have incomes that are above the median and work in industries that are reasonably stable. At the individual level, Trump supporters were older, white and less educated. Across metropolitan areas, Trump support was concentrated in older, whiter communities, with higher levels of manufacturing. Interestingly, these rural and exurban voters, though they are less prosperous than their urban counterparts, are not notably discontented with their own situations. As their research notes, Trump supporters are relatively happy with their communities and their jobs. What they are discontented about are the more liberal or cosmopolitan values of those they consider to be an urban elite.

A recent study (Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021) posits that psychology, and in particular emotion, provides a critical mediating link between economic and cultural dimensions of populism. It begins from the puzzle that even though populism is shaped by economic divisions, cultural variables tend to be better predictors of support for populism in public opinion surveys. It argues that economic shifts generate psychological reactions that spur cultural discontent and ultimately shape support for populism (Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021).

At bottom, populism and the discontent on which it is premised are fundamentally a geographic phenomenon. There is a growing literature on the spatial dimensions of discontent. Urban and economic geographers, most notably Rodríguez-Pose and McCann (see McCann, 2019, 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2020), have outlined the core dimensions of the geography of discontent—evident in the growing spatial separation of more innovative and productive spaces and left-behind regions. The rise of right-wing populism is a spatial process. Between 2013 and 2018, one in four votes in the EU's 63,000 electoral districts went to Eurosceptic parties, mostly concentrated in 'left-behind' places (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018a). As Dijkstra (2020) writes: 'Low economic growth, low employment rates, low levels of education, low turn-out, low density, and low shares of young people are consistently linked to more votes for Eurosceptic parties'.

The geographic dimensions of discontent are connected to the process of spatial sorting. A decade and a half ago, Bishop (2008) famously identified the 'big sort'—a quintessentially geographic process whereby different groups vote with their feet and segregate and sort themselves into places with fit with and

reinforce their identities and values. Those who work in knowledge industries and who hold more open-minded, liberal or with cosmopolitan values gravitate to bigger cities and tech hubs, while those with less education and less skill and who hold traditional, family values are concentrated in left-behind places and in suburbs and rural areas.

Such spatial sorting divide both provokes and intensifies political and cultural divides. Its political geography has been probed by Rodden in his book, *Why Cities Lose* (2019). Rodden argues that modern politics of advanced nations is premised upon a fundamental spatial imbalance. Across the advanced world, the centres of the knowledge economy and of progressive politics are crammed into a small number of superstar cities. These superstar cities have more economic power but relatively less political power. This leaves them and their constituents on the urban left at a permanent political disadvantage.

Discontent is a dynamic process that evolves historically across places. In this sense, it is a product of the wrenching transformation from an industrial to a post-industrial economy. It is not just a disembodied economic process, but one that has ripped apart the institutional and the traditional structures of class and status, and the cultural values that went along with them. Beginning around 1980, capitalism began a decade's long and still ongoing transformation from an older largely industrial economy to one that is driven by knowledge and innovation. Temin (2017) defines its fundamental characteristic as a new kind of 'dual economy' organised around an advantaged core of finance, technology and electronics which comprises about 20% of the workforce and a less advantaged 80% employed in lower paying and more precarious service and manufacturing work. And these economic divides give rise to, and are overlaid by, deep fissures of race and class, which make mobility across the two sectors difficult if not impossible.

Crucially, these two economies are organised in two distinct geographies. The older industrial economy was much more spread out geographically than the newer knowledge economy which is far more concentrated in a small set of places. Manufacturing industries, physical skill and working-class jobs were more evenly distributed across places. The knowledge economy is premised on the clustering of knowledge, skill and talent (Glaeser, 2008; Morreti, 2013). This clustering underpins increased spatial inequality and polarisation, as the leading centres pull away from the rest based on their higher rates of innovation and productivity. This shapes the rise of a spiky (Florida, 2005), increasingly winner-take-all geography (Florida et al., 2020) with a relatively small set of geographic winners and a much longer list of losers. And the attendant spatial polarisation creates a cultural divergence between more cosmopolitan cities and tech hubs and more traditional outlying areas. This divide is organised around two distinct kinds of places that not only have different economies, but different politics, different cultures, different norms and different world views.

Analyses of US elections in 2016 and 2020 find clear evidence of this spatial sorting and geographic division. Across 350-plus metro areas (Florida, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2020), Trump support was concentrated with the share of blue-collar workers, lower levels of income and education, lower levels of density, smaller metro size, greater levels of gun ownership per capita and higher levels of religiosity. Support for both Clinton and Biden was positively associated with the opposite—larger metro size, greater density, higher levels of income and education, lower levels of religiosity and higher concentrations of immigrants and the gay and lesbian population. The average Biden metro was home to about 1.3 million people, more than four times the size of the average Trump metro. Though 59% of the US's metro areas voted for Trump, Biden decisively won the

largest ones, which house 57% of US population and account for 79% of the country's economic output.

The geographic dimension of this sorting process can be seen in the salience of one key factor: density. A decade or so ago, a study pegged the inflection point at which places turn from conservative or Republican to liberal or Democrat at roughly 800 people or more per square mile (Florida and Johnson, 2012). My own analysis of 2020 election (Florida, 2020) puts it at about 700 people per square mile. This is especially the case in suburban counties. The denser they were, the more Democratic they voted in 2020. Most red suburban counties have densities of fewer than 500 people per square mile. Most purple suburban counties are clustered at densities of between 400 and 1,500 people per square mile. Solidly blue counties have more than 1,500 people per square mile. Geography in the form of density is a key fault-line in the political divide (Wilkinson, 2019).

The spatial dimensions of discontent operate within, as well as across, geographies. Rob Ford rose to mayor of Toronto, a dynamic and progressive city, on a populist program that took aim at so-called urban elites and their preferences for amenities like bike lanes, and organised support not just from the white working class but from new immigrant groups questing after the Canadian Dream of home and car ownership (Florida, 2019). This right-wing populist appeal to immigrants and members of ethnic and racial minorities is not limited to Ford. In 2020, Trump increased his support among Latin Americans, South Asians, and even African Americans, as well as drawing large shares of White working-class voters.

The divides of modern knowledge-based capitalism are fractal and exist across every spatial scale. Large superstar cities are riven by the same divides which exist across regions. They have a spiky winner-takes-all geography all their own. As I wrote in *The New Urban Crisis* (Florida, 2017), 'those at the top locate in communities that afford them privileged access to the best schools, the best services, and the best economic opportunities, while the rest get the leftover neighbourhoods, which have inferior versions of all of those things, and hence offer less of a chance for moving up in life. The well-off, living in a relatively small number of advantaged cities and an even smaller number of advantaged neighbourhoods within them, capture a disproportionate share of the economic gains for themselves and their offspring'.

Discontent is not just reflected in the rise of right-wing populism; it manifests itself on both sides of the political spectrum. Such left-wing discontent can be seen in the Occupy Movement and the wave of protests for racial and economic justice fall under the rubric of the global Black Lives Matter. On top of this, the COVID-19 pandemic shaped the rise of less organised urban discontent, particularly in large cities and downtown areas, which Milder (2021) dubs this rising 'downtown disorder' evident in rising urban crime and popular protest in US cities. These are areas where more research is warranted.

Discontent is no fleeting moment or passing fad. It is a fundamental characteristic of the wrenching economic, social and cultural transformations occurring in the nature of capitalism. The older industrial order with its relative spatial balance, mass-based institutions, working-class political parties and materialist political ethos has given way to a new and highly concentrated urbanised knowledge economy that is riven by economic and geographic division. Discontent is more than a product of economic inequality and of cultural division. It is a fundamentally geographic process, driven by and reinforced by the sorting of different socio-economic and racial and ethnic groups into distinctive geographies, which in turn reinforce extant economic, racial and cultural divides. We can expect this discontent and its geographies to shape our society and its politics for a considerable time to come.

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