

Lessons at the Gut Level

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The great lesson of the British vote is that no one has control of political processes. In a world where information is horizontal and everyone has access to it -as receivers and as informers- no one can limit what is known (be it true or false), what is discussed or what is concluded. Information is ubiquitous and anyone can lead a debate: everything depends on one's skill. David Cameron initiated the process on convoking a referendum and instantly lost control: once the cat was out of the bag, the debate remained in the hands of the most skillful and the vote in those of the electors. The English government was not the ablest and the voters had other plans and concerns.

More than supporting an inexorable, absolute and automatic connection between what occurred in the U.K. and what could happen with Trump in the U.S or with López Obrador in Mexico, what is evident from my perspective is that the world has changed and no one has control any longer: the winner will be that who understands the electorate better and responds to it on its terms. That is the genius of Nigel Farage (the principal promoter of the break with the E.U.) and of Trump in the U.S. They understood something that the others ignored. With all of their differences, the electorate in Mexico rebelled against the status quo last June 5 and practically none of the parties has understood what in reality took place.

“Public sentiment is not rational, it's emotional,” says Ariel Moutsatsos. And he goes on: “Can one easily think one's way out of sentiments of defeat, impotence, anxiety or fear?... Their arguments [those of Trump and the promoters of Brexit] make no sense and there is a battery of logical reasons, facts and tangible examples that clearly contradict them?... Well again, it's not rational, it's emotional”.

The referendum's advocates supposed that it would be obvious, the rational thing to do, to remain in the EU, thus they left the terrain to the opposition that understood the opportunity perfectly because they read the electorate well. The establishment did not understand its isolation and insularity: as George Friedman notes, “The lack of imagination, the fact that the elite did not have the least idea of what was happening beyond their circles of acquaintances” reveals the true problem that divides our societies. And, as Edward Luce wrote, “Voters are not in the mood to embrace the status quo.”

In all countries there are people who are angry with the status quo, resentful about the clash of expectations with the daily reality, the unemployment or the underemployment and the perception of being left behind without the least possibility of getting ahead. Up until now, those persons had no way of expressing themselves; today, a few quacks who do indeed understand them changed everything: individuals who are capable of articulating those emotions and feelings and converting them into a political force. From frustrated citizens they went on to change themselves into the center of attention, the protagonists. Their force, as the vote contrary to the EU proved and how Trump's followers have demonstrated to date, lies in the voice that these personages gave them until they became winners. Thus began the unanticipated consequences of absolutely rational decisions.

The grievances are perfectly understandable in rational terms; their manipulation required a capacity of mobilization of emotions and sentiments. That is where the triumph of these new populists resides: the reasons are relevant no more.

Is there something that we Mexicans could learn from that? Two things seem clear to me: first, if there are aggrieved individuals in England, Spain and the US., in Mexico there are many more and with better reasons. Whoever is able to capture their attention – and their fears, ire and frustrations- can easily create an unstoppable political movement. On the other hand, there are innumerable efforts and actions that the government, the business community and diverse groups of the society head up that do nothing other than fan these flames. Put in plain terms, the strength of López Obrador not only lies in his own and undeniable ability, but also in all of the information, actions and evidence of the most diverse type that these actors put in the public way every day.

Every time the government boasts of its achievements and that the citizen does not find a way to identify himself with it anger is fueled; every time someone publishes credible evidence of corruption (whether a photograph or an analytical study), emotions are stirred up and the one pre-candidate who denounces the corruption grows in strength day upon day; every time the enormous differences of wealth are made evident –and the attitudes that accompany them (as in the case of the “lords” and “ladies”)–, resentments grow. Sparking emotions and rousing grievances does nothing but fortify the one who knows how to manipulate them.

The country needs new emotional and rational referents for it to transform itself. The existing ones –of all the actors- do not work, thus the “poor social mood,” as the

president has called it. Leadership is urgent that is capable of constructing a positive future, one that is susceptible to winning the favor of the electorate.

The Economist summed up the moment as no one else: when “the unthinkable becomes the irreversible.” The big question is whether in Mexico we will understand it or, rather, who will understand it.

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