

CHAPTER 1 — A label instead of an answer

“Idiot” — the word that comes on its own

There is something deeply satisfying about the word “idiot.”

When we look at a politician who says things that are plainly untrue, when we watch a leader make decisions that defy elementary logic, when we listen to a speech full of contradictions and open lies — the word appears almost reflexively. You don’t have to search for it. It comes on its own, ready-made, precise, satisfying. For a moment everything fits. The world makes sense. The problem is identified. The guilty party named.

And it is precisely at that moment — in that instant of satisfaction — that we make a mistake which will follow us through this entire book if we don’t recognize it now.

Because the word “idiot” is not an answer. It is a substitute for one. It is a label that looks like an explanation but is in fact the end of one. To see this, all you have to do is ask a single simple question. If the problem lies in this particular man — in his stupidity, ignorance, irresponsibility — then how do we explain that similar people appear in so many different places and at such different moments in history? How do we explain that the same pattern — a simple message, absolute certainty, a division into the good and the bad, contempt for experts and institutions — appears simultaneously in wealthy democracies and poor developing countries, in Europe and in Latin America, in the twenty-first century and two and a half thousand years ago in ancient Athens?

Behind every recurring pattern there is a mechanism. And it is the mechanism — not the particular person — that is the real subject of this book.

I think it is worth stating right away how I use the word “populism” in this book. I do not mean a specific political program, nor the left or the right. By populism I mean a style of leadership and rhetoric: self-assurance unsupported by facts, a simple narrative explaining complex problems, a sharp division between “the people” and “the elites,” and a readiness to undermine the institutions that stand in the way. This style appears on both sides of the political spectrum — and that is precisely why the mechanism that produces it is a systemic phenomenon, not an ideological one.

Let us also settle one thing: the hunger for power is not idiocy. A person can be intelligent, competent, and perfectly aware of his own actions, and still pursue power at any cost.

A shortcut that replaces thinking

We cannot do without labels. Without them we could not function.

Every day we process enormous amounts of information — about people, situations, events. If we analyzed everything from scratch each time, we would be unable to make a single decision. So the brain uses shortcuts. It classifies, simplifies, assigns labels. This is not a flaw — it is a necessity. Evolution designed us in exactly this way, because in most situations a quick, approximate answer is better than a slow, precise one.

The problem arises when a label replaces thinking instead of setting it in motion.

When we call someone an “idiot,” we do several things at once. We describe — we attribute certain traits to that person. We explain — we say why he does what he does. And we close the subject. The label works like a latch. Once we’ve fastened it, the question is finished. There is no need to go any further.

And it is exactly where the label ends that the real question begins.

The case of Farage

Take a concrete example. In 2016 Nigel Farage, one of the most recognizable spokesmen for the campaign to take Britain out of the European Union, stood before the cameras and announced that the United Kingdom had regained its independence. He said things that experts immediately dismantled as untrue or greatly exaggerated. He ignored the economic data. He reduced complicated trade relationships to a few catchy slogans. From the perspective of someone who understood the complexity of the issue, it looked like a spectacle of ignorance.

An idiot — said many observers.

But Farage won the referendum. He convinced millions of people. He changed the course of history of one of the largest countries in the world. Can an idiot accomplish that? Can a man devoid of competence and reason spend years building a political movement, recognize the moment when society is ready to embrace it, and put it to effective use?

Farage may have made mistakes of substance. His vision of the world may have been simplistic. But calling him an idiot does not explain his success — it hides it. It replaces the question “why did he succeed” with the answer “because the others were stupider.” And that is an answer that explains nothing.

The same goes for Trump, Orbán, Bolsonaro, Le Pen, and dozens of other politicians whose careers over the past decades have left commentators dumbfounded. Each of them had his obvious weaknesses, mistakes, and oversimplifications. Each of them was regularly described by part of the media as unserious and incompetent. And each of them, in spite of that — or perhaps precisely because of it — gained real influence and real power.

The label “idiot” does not explain this phenomenon. It masks it.

The guilty man, the innocent system

Worse still, the masking has consequences. If we believe that the problem lies in a particular man, we stop looking deeper. We stop asking about the conditions that produced that man. We wait for him to leave — and we are surprised when someone else takes his place, someone similar, perhaps even worse. Because the conditions remained. And the conditions produce people who fit them.

There is one more problem with the label, less often noticed but just as serious. The label shifts all the responsibility onto the individual and lifts it off the system. If a particular man is guilty, then the system is innocent. And if the system is innocent, there is no need to change it. It is enough to change the man.

History shows clearly, however, that changing the man without changing the system rarely solves the problem. The new man steps into the old system and either adapts to it or is rejected by it. The system endures. The conditions endure. And after a while another politician appears who surprises and unsettles us, and who hears, once again, the same word.

Idiot.

And the circle closes.

To break that circle, we have to learn to look differently. Not at the man, but at the

environment in which the man operates. Not at the effect, but at the process that leads to it. Not at who won, but at what had to change for such a person to be able to win.

It is a shift of perspective that seems small but leads to an entirely different place.

The garden and the gardener

Imagine a garden. In the garden grow many different plants — some strong and healthy, others weak, vegetating in the shade, almost invisible. For years the garden looks much the same. The strong plants dominate, the weak ones cling to the edges. Then comes a drought. Or the composition of the soil changes. Or someone stops tending the garden. And suddenly it turns out that the plants which for years had no chance at all begin to dominate. They take up space, they spread, they crowd out the former dominants.

A gardener who looks only at the plants will say: these weeds have grown stronger. A gardener who looks at the whole garden will say: the conditions in which the plants compete have changed.

In politics we usually look like the first gardener. We see a man growing in strength, and we focus on him — on his traits, talents, flaws. Less often do we ask about the soil. About the conditions. About what changed in the whole environment so that his strategy suddenly began to bear fruit.

This book is an attempt to look like the second gardener.

Here it is worth pausing over a certain misunderstanding that arises almost every time someone proposes such a shift of perspective.

This shift is sometimes understood as a defense of the politicians we are talking about. As if saying “the problem lies in the system, not the individual” meant “this man bears no responsibility at all.” That conclusion is false, but common enough that it is worth disarming right away.

Understanding a mechanism is not the same as excusing those who take part in it.

A politician who lies is responsible for his lies — regardless of whether the system created fertile ground for them. A politician who attacks institutions bears responsibility for those attacks — regardless of whether the institutions had already been weakened by others. The agency of the individual does not vanish when we notice the influence of the

system.

But noticing the influence of the system adds a dimension to the picture that is missing without it. And it is precisely this dimension that is crucial — because without it we can judge, but we cannot understand. We can condemn, but we cannot prevent. And prevention, after all, is the goal.

This is about us too

There is one more reason the label is dangerous — and this reason concerns us directly, not the politicians.

When we say “idiot,” we assume that we ourselves are on the right side. That we are not taken in, not manipulated, that we think critically and see what others do not. This is a comfortable and entirely understandable assumption. It is also an assumption that psychology has undermined, repeatedly and mercilessly.

Every one of us is susceptible to the mechanisms this book describes. Every one of us has a need for meaning, order, and belonging. Every one of us, under conditions of chaos and uncertainty, reaches for simpler explanations. Every one of us is inclined to reject information that threatens our picture of the world and to accept information that confirms it.

This is not a matter of intelligence. It is a matter of being human.

Education is not a shield. History knows too many examples of superbly educated people who, under certain conditions, adopted beliefs that from the outside — and from a distance in time — look like obvious errors or outright madness. Professors, lawyers, doctors, engineers — all of them, at various moments in history, supported or tolerated things that are unacceptable today. Education was not a shield. Intellect was not a shield.

This means that the word “idiot” has one more flaw beyond those we have already named. It is too comfortable. It gives us a sense of security we do not deserve. It suggests that the problem concerns others — the less intelligent, the less educated, the less critical. And it is precisely this sense of security that is especially dangerous, because it lulls our vigilance exactly where it is most needed.

It is an interweaving of several processes that together create conditions favorable to a

particular type of leadership. These processes are neither mysterious nor invisible — on the contrary, they are present in everyday life and we can observe them, if we know what to look for. I described them briefly in the Introduction. Each of these processes deserves a separate chapter — and each will get one. Together they create an environment in which a particular type of leader becomes not only possible but virtually inevitable.

The mechanisms we will be discussing are not irreversible. They are not destiny. They do not operate like the laws of physics, which cannot be resisted. They operate under specific conditions — and when those conditions change, the mechanisms lose their force. That sounds optimistic. And it is optimistic. But it is also demanding. Because changing the conditions is not simple and does not happen on its own. It requires understanding what is going on. It requires seeing the mechanism before it grows to a size that is hard to control. It requires acting at the right moment — and not after the fact, when all that is left is to assess the damage.

That is why this book begins with a label. With the word “idiot” and the satisfaction it gives. Because the first step toward understanding the mechanism is giving up that satisfaction.

I set the label aside and begin to ask.

Who really are these people who win? What distinguishes the moments when they win from the moments when they lose? What has to change in the system for their strategies to start working?

The answer to the first of these questions is less obvious than it seems.

Because, contrary to appearances, these people — these politicians we call idiots — are not idiots at all. They are something more complicated.