

Populism and the Claim to a Moral Monopoly: An Interview with Jan-Werner Müller

Conducted by Niels Boel, Political Scientist and Lecturer, Carsten Jensen, PhD and Political Scientist, and André Sonnichsen, PhD and Political Analyst.

*Jan-Werner Müller's (born 1970) political analysis of contemporary populism reached way beyond an academic audience with the publication of his short and punchy essay *Was ist Populismus? Ein Essay in 2016*.¹ Perhaps because his work has been able to articulate the concerns of many liberal democrats, who see a real and present danger in the spectacular rise of various kinds of populism in Europe and the USA, Müller's arguments have been widely embraced, also here in Denmark. The debate initiated in the Danish media by Müller's visit to Copenhagen in October 2016 was the impetus behind the interview published below, which was conducted in Vienna in early 2017. Here, the group behind the interview pursues some of the trajectories that follow from Müller's arguments on populism. In the interview, Müller sustains his central idea that populism, in both its Left-wing and Right-wing versions, is a threat to representative democracy. Müller teaches politics at Princeton University and was, at the time of the interview, also a visiting fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences, Vienna.*

"When I rule, the people rule"

Interviewers: In many ways, the label 'populist' is childless. Certainly, those who often are referred to as populists seldom call themselves populists. We would like, therefore, to start with the basics and ask you to define precisely what you understand by the term populism?

Jan-Werner Müller: Contrary to what we read and hear virtually every day, not everybody who criticizes elites – as the clichéd phrase goes – is a populist. Of course, when they are in opposition, populists criticize the government, but they also do something else: populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people. That is the decisive

¹ *Was ist Populismus? Ein Essay* (2016, Berlin: Suhrkamp). See also 'What is Populism?' (*The Utopian*, March 2011) and 'Parsing Populism. Who is and who is not a populist these days?' (*IPPR*, October 2015)

criterion. And it clearly is not about policy content. For example, if you tell me what you think about immigration or the European Union, I am not able to tell immediately if you are a populist or not. It is a particular claim concerning representation, not a specific position on a policy issue.

Populism is always detrimental to democracy in at least two ways. Firstly, it follows from its anti-pluralism that populists assert that all other contenders for power are essentially illegitimate. Again, this is never just a matter of disagreement about policy, which is of course perfectly normal in a democracy. No, the populist immediately claims that the issue at stake is entirely moral; and they make everything into a personal question: the others are bad characters, they are corrupt, they are crooked, they don't work for the people, they work for the multinationals, or the EU, or what have you.

Secondly, and perhaps less obviously, all those who do not share the views of the populist (and hence do not support the populists politically), can have their status as properly belonging to the people put into doubt. Thus, populists always perform two exclusions. One is at the level of the elites – that is, party politics, professional politicians, and so on. The other is at the level of the people themselves, if you like. That is, populists claim that some citizens are not really part of the people. Last year Donald Trump² said: "The most important thing is the unification of the people and all the other people do not mean anything". *That's* what I am talking about. All the others, even if they have an American passport, do not truly belong, or so the populist decrees. So, it is not just anti-pluralism at the level of elites; it's also anti-pluralism among the people themselves.

So, just to be clear, people who say they are against the establishment also make a claim that they have a monopoly of representing the people. In doing so, do they try to deny the rights of others to belong to the people?

Yes, for me the decisive criterion is that populists claim a distinctly moral monopoly of representation. Again, take Trump. I assume that his speechwriters did not try to contribute to a political theory textbook on populism when they wrote his inauguration speech – but had they done so, one must admit that they succeeded brilliantly. Remember what he said in essence: "Today, power is given back to the people." In other words: when Trump rules, the people rule. It is this equation that, to me, amounts to a claim to a monopoly of representation, which is peculiar to populists.

All the other things that people mention when describing populism – criticizing the elites, 'being against the establishment' and so on – are not in and of themselves dangerous for democracy. On the contrary: any old civics textbook would tell you that good democratic citizens should be critical of the powerful, keep a close watch on elites in politics, the economy, culture, etc.

² Elected president of the USA on November 8, 2016 and assumed office on January 20, 2017.

What was the intellectual path that led you to work with the concept of populism? Who were the initial inspirations?

I think I was originally puzzled by the idea of Left-wing populism. Was it possible to develop such a thing and why exactly would it be desirable? I also wanted to think about a notion often put forward by populists themselves, namely the claim that they are the real defenders or even today's only authentic promoters of democracy. And some observers – who are not populists themselves – advance a conceptual split according to which the populists are illiberal democrats and maybe some of the elites are undemocratic liberals. But can democracy really benefit from populism?

I was intrigued by these kinds of questions, but contrary to what I read about myself sometimes now, I'm not an expert on populism. There are people who have been studying these parties and movements in great empirical detail – I cannot possibly offer what they can offer. I learned tremendously from people who really are experts like Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser.³ But I hope that my take on populism has been useful as a contribution to democratic theory and that, perhaps, it might also inspire further empirical research. At the same time, I generally have argued against the case for Left-wing populism that has been put forward by Ernesto Laclau⁴ and Chantal Mouffe⁵.

What was your aim in writing 'What is Populism?' Did you achieve the goal?

I think it's best to leave judgments like this to readers. Well, one aim was to offer some kind of understanding and, more particularly, a set of distinctions as well as an examination of the dynamics of populist regimes. In the European context, in the public debate, you often get the feeling that everybody is a populist and everything is populism. Many movements and leaders have been pigeonholed together – either because politicians, journalists, and academics are lazily following received opinion or because they actually have an ideological agenda and seek to discredit certain parties by grouping them with populists (given that, in Europe, populism, unlike in parts of US discourse, mostly has a bad name).

I was, for instance, struck by announcements from representatives of the European Union, who at one point said that there are populists on the Left and on the Right and that they are all dangerous and fundamentally anti-European. I thought it was important to hold on to some distinctions, to say, no, not every protest is populist, not every protest is a threat to the system, some protests can be healthy and productive. We do

³ Cas Mudde (1967), Dutch political scientist and populism expert who teaches at The School of Public and International Affairs, University of Georgia. Wrote *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, 2007.

⁴ Ernesto Laclau (1935 - 2014), Argentinean political philosopher and political activist. He taught at the University of Essex, UK and is known for his work on hegemony and populism.

⁵ Chantal Mouffe (1943), Belgian political theorist. Professor at the University of Westminster, London. She was originally inspired by Antonio Gramsci. Since the early 1990s, she has studied liberalism, neo-liberalism, and populism.

not want to be in a situation where we say that we need to hold on to long-established parties in order to preserve our democracy – or else. Not all new parties or movements are threats to democracy.

It can be fateful to collapse distinctions and dismiss new parties and movements as populist, because you send a message to the supporters of what are sometimes democratically productive movements or parties that basically we don't accept anything new, there is no place in the system for them. It can give them the impression that the system is broken, and that you can't do anything differently in what critics sometimes call technocracy or post-democracy. They are quickly labelled as anti-European if they want a different Europe or just different policies. Some are even equated in that way with Marine Le Pen⁶, who really *is* anti-European.

I also worry about the way certain descriptions of 'populism' are accepted as valid, neutral, or quasi-objective by journalists. Many of us now take it for granted that there is something like a homogeneous 'elite' or 'the establishment' and that everyone is fed up with them and are revolting against them and so on. This is already talking populist language; many populists do not represent 'the people,' but at best a third of the electorate. We should not buy into this simplistic narrative which populists themselves are suggesting, especially if the 'rise of populism' is presented as something absolutely inevitable.

Another example is the idea that populists always necessarily have simplistic policy proposals. Some people say this without any kind of neoliberal policy agenda, but some advance this claim because they want to discredit any other political options. It is easy to discredit somebody who criticizes you, if you say that they are populists, so they must be like Le Pen or Orbán⁷ or Trump and therefore they must be dangerous.

So, these were some of my intentions. Again, I leave it to you to judge whether they were realized or not. On a self-critical note: The question I often find most difficult to answer is what do we do in response to populism? I stick to all the answers in the book, but I think that this is also the area in which I have been pushed to develop new answers since the book came out.

Populism and the liberal democratic order

I guess you would agree that the concept of 'the people' is operational in both democracy and populism. Nevertheless, you seem to suggest that populists misuse the concept of the people, but that the democrats don't. Can you elaborate?

Well, I would rephrase the question. First, I do not think that anybody should have a special privilege to say what the people really is and that other conceptions are wrong,

⁶ Marine Le Pen (1968), leader of Front national. Member of the French parliament. Daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen.

⁷ Viktor Orbán (1963), Prime Minister of Hungary.

or that somebody necessarily misuses the term ‘the people.’ The concept of the people is always up for grabs, and democracy is also about a permanent contestation of what democracy is, as the French theorist Claude Lefort (1924-2010) often pointed out.

Moreover, we all have a right to go to the streets and claim that we can represent interests and identities, which have as yet not been properly represented. But this is different from someone claiming that they and only they represent the people, or what populists often call ‘the real people’ (notice again the exclusionary implications – some people do not form part of the people, even though to the innocent observer it might seem so). Also, for populists the people are always homogenous. And this is empirically not true, obviously. As Habermas⁸ once put it, the demos can only appear in the plural.

When a ‘normal’ democratic politician looks at society and says, ‘this problem has not been addressed before’, certain citizens’ interests and identities have not been properly represented, the ‘normal’ politician treats those claims to representation as hypothetical, as essentially fallible. If it turns out that nobody is following their lead, they say, ‘Ok, but we don’t give up, we will reframe our appeal, we have just got to mobilize better’ and so on. Whereas the populist, not always but typically, is going to say, ‘Somebody has prevented the real people, the silent majority, from expressing itself.’

Again, the obvious example is Trump, who in effect said during the campaign, “If she wins, it was probably rigged”. It is one thing if populist leaders say that. It’s yet another thing if 70 percent of self-identified Republican citizens believe it – a bad sign for any democracy. In that sense, populists do something that ‘normal’ politicians do not do – they constantly erode the trust in democratic institutions.

I hasten to add that, of course, any of us can criticize our democratic institutions; they are not sacrosanct. There might be many good reasons to say that our election system is flawed, or that our system of party financing is problematic, or whatever it might be. But that is not what the populists say. The populist effectively says: ‘If I don’t win, the system is flawed.’ *That* is not a democratic argument.

Would you agree, seeing that the notion of the people is common to both populists and democrats, that the danger of populism is inherent to the democratic order?

Yes, I would agree with that. Although, if you find anything plausible in my theory, it is specifically about representative democracy. In Athens, you could have had demagogues, you could have had rabble-rousers, but you would not have had populists as I describe them, because you would not have had the principle of representation at the core of the democratic order. So, in that sense, yes, it is a permanent danger, which also means that we can never get rid of it. As long as we have representative democracy somebody can make populist claims. It does not mean that they will be equally successful, but it is not something we can exclude for good. It is a further question why some populist claims resonate more at certain times than at others.

⁸ Jürgen Habermas (1929) is a German sociologist and philosopher.

In your book, you dismiss both what you call a political-sociological diagnosis and a social-psychological diagnosis of populism. The former refers to attempts to explain populism by reference to a threatened lower class and middle class and the latter to suggestions that populist anger is a simplistic response, which misunderstands its target, in the same way that August Bebel⁹ once claimed that antisemitism is socialism for dummies. But, if you dismiss these explanations, how then would you account for the contemporary surge of populism?

I would say two things. First, I am struck by the fact of how easily we liberal democrats buy into the populists' own narrative. We are always saying that populists are not trustworthy, that their ideas are too simplistic, and so on. But when they offer us a one-line explanation as to why they are being successful – things like 'it's all about the losers of globalization' or 'the working class don't like foreigners anymore,' we often immediately buy into these stories. Why? Because we seem to want an easy life, too, and rest content with simplistic, one-dimensional explanations. That does not answer your question, but I wanted to mention it, because it is surprising that people who generally do not believe a word the populist say immediately think they are right on the reasons for their own success.

Also, we would never accept such simplistic explanations concerning other kinds of political parties. We do not think that voters of social democratic parties all have exactly the same interests and the same motivations, belong to precisely the same class or are exactly in the same psychological state. We would at least think from the start that we are dealing with a heterogeneous coalition of interests and identities and that the support for the party depended on how it presented itself, and so on. Trivial, I know, but with populists we all of a sudden forget such basics.

The second thing is that, from my theoretical point of view, in one sense populism is the same everywhere, because all populists make the same moral claim that they alone represent the people. But it doesn't follow from this that the *causes* of populism are the same everywhere. Again, we make it easy for ourselves if we say, oh, we have this populist phenomenon everywhere on the global level so it must be the same causes everywhere. But of course, this doesn't follow. I have not studied these cases in any great empirical depth, but it seems clear enough to me that national contexts matter a great deal. The reasons for the rise of Jörg Haider¹⁰ are not the same as the reasons for the rise of Jean-Marie Le Pen¹¹, which are again not the same as the reasons behind the rise of Donald Trump.

In other words, the causes can be very heterogeneous. It seems to me naive to think that there is just one kind of populist voter and that if we magically could find his

⁹ August Ferdinand Bebel (1840-1913) was a German politician and labour leader. He was the first chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Germany.

¹⁰ Jörg Haider (1950-2008) is the former leader of the Austrian Freedom Party.

¹¹ Jean-Marie Le Pen (1928) is the founder of the French extreme right-wing party Front National and father of its current leader, Marine Le Pen.

or her sorrows and grievances, then the whole sordid phenomenon of populism would just go away.

What this also implies – something a lot of people don't want to hear – is that we need to distinguish between particular policy content and populism as such. Racism and nationalism are not the same as populism. To be sure, Right-wing populists do draw on racism and ethnic nationalism, but analytically, it is possible to distinguish between content and form. In other words, it is at least theoretically possible for a populist, let's say far-Right party, to get rid of populism and still have the same views on racism and nationalism.

This brings up a difficult issue. I think that if we accept pluralism, it also means that we must engage with things we don't like morally and politically – fighting against them with the best arguments we can muster, but also accepting their place in a democratic system. For instance, within a democratic spectrum, there can be space for parties and politicians who advocate minimizing immigration and very conservative family policies. At least, as a democratic theorist, one must say that this can be part of legitimate pluralism, as long as these parties cease to be populist, that is to say, do not claim a moral monopoly of representing the people (and do not talk about immigration in a way that incites hatred of minorities).

The problem with this nice or not so nice story is that I can't think of any populist parties that have ceased being populist. The example I sometimes hear – you probably know much more about this – is the Norwegian Progress Party. From what I understand, it's not true they are not populist anymore. That they are in government does not mean that they are not populist.

So, we are talking about a possibility, but not necessarily a reality. It is easy to see why. For instance, if you were Marine Le Pen now, why should you cease to be a populist at this moment? Things are going extremely well [this was said before the French presidential elections, ed.], and you know that if you change your politics and conceded the fundamental legitimacy of the other parties, then that would probably cause a bit of cognitive dissonance.

I guess what we are trying to hang on to is an explanation for the preference for populism, which would have the same theoretical status as the psychological and social explanations, which you seem to dismiss in your book. Beyond a reference to a contextual description, is there a way of theoretically accounting for why a given voter chooses populism?

I'm not saying that we can't learn from these approaches. What I am saying is that we have to be very careful with such psychological generalizations, because we open a door through which all the clichés of 19th century mass psychology re-enter; according to these, the irrational masses are always waiting to be seduced by some great demagogue.

Again, we make it too easy for ourselves, if we just assume that people are all angry and resentful and then stop with that supposed fact. We should have known from Aristotle onwards that people are not just angry for no reason. Very often it has to do with feelings of righteousness, of unfairness, and injustice. If we stop with facile mass psychologizing, we never get to the point of asking why people are, in fact, angry. Their answers might not be convincing, but we should at the very least hear what they are.

Still, you are right to say that we need to discuss more general explanations and not just say that it is all entirely contextual – though, to be sure, in all likelihood we have a complicated combination of various factors; it is not just one cause that explains everything. So, context is not a meaningless answer.

But you are going to press me again and rightly so. So here is what I can come up with as a theoretical answer, which is present also in the book, but not very much developed there: I think that our time is characterized by an increasing conflict between those who want more openness (which takes the clichéd versions of economic and cultural globalization, but can also mean the recognition of ethnic, sexual, and religious minorities in one's own country – in other words, it doesn't have to be something to do with the international) and those who want more closure. In this conflict, the populists appear as actors who have answers ready; after all, they always do identity politics and they have an account of who the real people are, about who belongs and who doesn't. It does not mean that they are right, but this is an issue where they can say something.

If our central problems were different – if we were talking much more about bioethics or if we actually took global warming seriously – I don't think populists would have much of a prominent role. In those debates, they can try to discredit and delegitimize the experts, but beyond that, they probably would not have much of substance to say. But, concerning the conflict around globalization, openness or closure, which I think is now as real as the conflict between capital and labour, between the countryside and the city, they have something to say. It provides them with an opening in a way that other conflicts do not.

Would you allow for the possibility that a populist party or movement could, in fact, internally display a very high degree of pluralism? In other words, that a party or a movement might have an anti-pluralist approach to the existing order and a very antagonistic relationship to it, while at the same time, internally, it might display a very high degree of pluralism? Do you think it is possible, under certain circumstances, that what we call a populist force might, in fact, be a pluralist society in waiting?

It is a very good question and I have two remarks in response. Firstly, there is no law that says that populist parties can't have internal pluralism. But, if you follow my approach, it is very unlikely because the starting point for populists is always that there is a singular authentic popular will based on the idea of a homogeneous people. So, populists would generally say: 'What's there to debate? We know what the real will of the real people is and, in fact, it should be obvious to everyone.' They always know that

authentic will in advance, because it is deduced from their symbolic construction of the real people – which, by the way, is a purely theoretical exercise, no actual input from the people is needed. It is very unlikely that we will have a vibrant internal debate, where at a party conference they will debate endlessly about what the single authentic will really is. We do not see the Orbáns or the Erdogans¹² of this world having a pluralistic, democratic internal life in their parties. But, I would not say that it is, by definition, totally impossible.

My second remark would be in response to critics saying: ‘Look at Podemos and Syriza, they have a lot of internal democracy, they are pro-refugee, they are pro-LGBT, and this shows that they can’t possibly be populist.’ That for me would be insufficient. The question basically is whether they make that central claim of a moral monopoly of representation or not? If they say that only they represent the true people, then it does not really matter, because the question is how you position yourself vis-à-vis other contenders to power and vis-à-vis citizens that happen not to agree with you.

We need to ask about the difference between Left-wing and Right-wing populism.

The difference has to do with the actual political content, the material from which a claim to a moral monopoly of representation can be derived. Contrary to what I sometimes hear, it is not by definition impossible to have Left-wing populism. There are some who say that this cannot happen, because the populists are the bad guys and the Left are, by definition, the good guys. But no, it is possible. Chávez¹³ is the obvious example of an actual Left-wing populist – there came a point at which it was simply illegitimate, per definition, to disagree with Chávez. You immediately became a traitor to the real Venezuela, to the project of twenty-first century socialism etc.

We would like to discuss the liberal democratic order that the populists claim to be up against. Do you think there is any merit to the argument made by many contemporary populists that the liberal democracies have not delivered?

Forgive me again for giving a very boring answer, but the only honest answer is: It depends! Again, we want easy answers and this kind of economic reductionism provides an easy answer. If it were true that populism is all about economic inequality and stagnation, then Geert Wilders¹⁴ would not be where he is now. Then we would see an explosion of populism in Ireland or Portugal, both of whom suffered tremendously during the Euro Crisis – but we just don’t see those things. So, there is no easy account that says that economic crisis results immediately in populism.

¹² Recep Tayyip Erdogan (1954), president of Turkey since 2014 and leader of the populist and Islamist AKP party. Former prime minister.

¹³ Hugo Chávez Frías (1954 – 2013), President of Venezuela from 1999 to 2013. Often labeled left populist by friends and foes alike.

¹⁴ Geert Wilders (1963), Dutch opposition politician and member of the parliament since 1998. He is leader of the Right-wing Partij voor de Vrijheid.

Let me go back to something I touched upon at the beginning. Whether you can make a case against the elites in an economic crisis is very contextual; and I don't think that we can use a simplistic model along the lines of, 'It's the economy, stupid,' or more or less politely say that 'populism is socialism for idiots.'

We should also not forget that some populists, like Hugo Chávez, in the beginning made very plausible claims about people's exclusion from a particular political and economic system. It would be crazy to claim that, for instance, Turkey was a wonderfully open and pluralistic society and then the mad Erdogan came and destroyed it all. The same with Chávez: of course, there were social exclusions and tremendous injustices in Venezuela. There are reasons why people end up like populists in certain times. There are times where people don't start out as populists, but become radicalized. It partly depends on the responses they get from other actors – such as existing powerful parties, judges, etc. We can't say from the beginning how things will end up. Maybe Chávez would have become a populist under any circumstances and maybe he would not.

A final theoretical question before we move onto the next focus area: Would you be prepared to inscribe populism as a stage in process of political change, so that one could say, for example, that populism emerges at certain 'stages' of democratic development, or that certain 'historical conjunctures' make it more likely than others?

I am sceptical of those kinds of theories, at least in relation to populism. That does not mean that populism is a random or mysterious phenomenon. There are some factors that play a role. I mentioned the role of the cleavage vis-à-vis globalization. If this is correct we should not be surprised to see a certain type of identity politics coming out in the open now.

But this is very different from saying that there are patterns over time so that you can tell the same story for all countries. In the US, for instance, it is fair to say that Trump would not have happened without the extreme partisanship of the Republican Party over the past 25 years. What explains his success is not some inevitable 'wave' of populism everywhere. It is that 90 percent of self-identified Republicans voted for Trump. If he had not been the Republican candidate, but a third party candidate, let's say leading a new grassroots movement of angry white workers, he would not be president today. Plenty of Republican voters seem to have said to themselves: 'Yes, he's a little crazy, but I can't possibly vote for the other side.' That kind of partisanship did not come out of nowhere. So yes, there is a story, but this story cannot be generalized.

Neo-Liberalism and the Populist Challenge

One of your main criticisms of populism is its anti-pluralism. Could we apply the same criticism to neoliberalism, especially as it has been expressed in recent years through the macro-economic policies of the EU under the label 'austerity'? Some critics have

claimed that these policies defend themselves simply by saying that "there is no alternative" (TINA). Is this not also an example of anti-pluralism?¹⁵

As I say in the book, one of the problems with technocracy is that they make it easier for populists to say, 'Look, where are the people in all this?' Technocrats in effect claim that there is only one rational solution and we, as citizens, just have to consent to it. If you don't agree, you are irrational; debate is unnecessary; no other solutions are available. That kind of discourse makes it easy for populists to say, 'I thought we had democracy, which means having choices.' But the twist of the argument is, as you rightly observe, that even if they seem to be extremes opposed to each other, technocracy and populism also have something in common: The technocrats say: 'there is only one rational solution,' while the populists say: 'there is only one authentic, popular will (and only we know it).' Everything between the two extremes disappears - and everything in between is, at least in my understanding, democracy: debate, persuasion, a chance to have a real choice.

That also makes it plausible to say, contrary to what we hear now about an omnipresent crisis of representation, that there are counter-examples where this in-between space, democracy has become strengthened. And as a result, more people seem again to be willing to accept existing democratic institutions. There is no break here. For example, whatever you personally think of Syriza and Podemos, their success makes it more plausible for people to say to themselves, yes, there are really options. There is a choice. And because they have the option to make their option as strong as possible, citizens are also more willing to say, 'OK, we lost, Podemos is still not in power, but we can try again and are prepared to live with the outcome until the next elections.' But, if I feel that it is post-democracy all the way down and that there is no alternative I can vote for, it is much more likely that I will turn away from the political system altogether.

I think some of these outcomes have been far from obvious. It was far from obvious, for instance, that young people in these countries left the squares and said, 'Okay, we are going to build parties instead, based on our experiences.' It would have been perfectly understandable if they had said, 'Okay, if this is the system, I give up on it entirely. We will stay in the squares and give up on party politics completely.' Or, another option that one could have easily imagined in light of European history, would have been something like armed struggle – just think back to what some young people did in the 1970s. And instead they formed parties, which help to reflect the actual conflicts and cleavages in society. So, it's hardly a homogeneous crisis of representation everywhere.

Of course, you could reply to me: 'I can vote for Tsipras¹⁶ ten more times, and nothing ever changes (in fact, it gets worse).' True – but it is important to distinguish between some national systems, where things actually have changed, and the EU level,

¹⁵ The phrase is attributed to Margaret Thatcher, who typically claimed that "There Is No Alternative", a statement which became known as TINA.

¹⁶ Alexis Tsipras (1974-) is leader of Syriza and Greek Premier Minister since January 26, 2015.

where the conflict – for shorthand – between austerity and anti-austerity is not being reflected and up for any kind of sustained democratic contestation. It can be reflected in Greece and Spain, but it cannot be properly reflected in the EU as a whole. In other words, we have to be precise about where the crisis is, instead of having a lazy approach, which says, ‘Same crisis everywhere.’ We should not subsume everything under the same concept and, for instance, say that protest parties are all dangerous. No, protest parties that accept the rules of the democratic system – which means not least: ‘we accept it when we lose’ – are good news.

Would you accept the argument that a certain dose of populism is healthy because it points to problems with democracy and that these problems can be made visible and thus corrected as part of an adaption to populism?

No, not in the general way that this argument is usually presented. The standard variety of it would say, ‘Oh, yes, we don’t like their style, and it might be dangerous what they do, but we recognize that they have identified people’s real concerns and real sorrows.’ The reason I would reject this is that it is based on a misunderstanding of how democratic representation works. It is not true that populists ultimately reveal the truth about what is happening deep down in society (even though again, in a strange way, it’s a real comforting story for us to say, ‘Yes, *now* we know what’s going on, because they have told us’). No, they have not. Because democratic representation is not some mechanical reproduction of given objective interests and identities out there, which parties merely transmit into parliaments.

Instead, it is a dynamic process, where different offerings of representation and identification by politicians and parties can make a huge difference to how people perceive themselves. An obvious example is that it is a big mistake to say, ‘Oh, Donald Trump has shown us that millions and millions of people in the USA are racists. Well, maybe we did not realize it before, but he has now told us the truth about American society.’ Now, of course it’s true that there are plenty of racists in the US and that he has managed to convince a lot of people – though not everybody who voted for him – to see themselves as *de facto* members of something like a white identity movement. But that was not inevitable. This is not the ultimate, objective truth about American society.

So it’s a dynamic process. I’m not saying that anything goes, that anything can gain traction with voters; there must be *something* there on the basis of which populists are able to mobilize. But to jump from this to the statement that they have discovered the truth about people’s real problems, and that we should accept what they tell us at face value, is a serious mistake.

Sorry to return again to the issue of anti-pluralism, but we would like to press the point, seeing it is at the core of your conception of populism. For example, some would currently assert that there is a neoliberal hegemony, which prevents welfare

states from being preserved. On the basis of this claim, could you say that the populists are right to say that the system itself is anti-pluralist?

It's true that the EU makes it more difficult to preserve welfare states; the goal of realizing a certain economic vision is indeed built into treaties. But I would not go so far as to say 'the system itself.' I think that too often the constraints placed by the EU on national systems are exaggerated. Let's not forget that politicians themselves often have an incentive to present their ideas in a much more technocratic way than they merit. It makes it easier for them. Rather than saying, 'I'm responsible for this decision or that decision,' it's much easier for them to say, 'I can't do anything, Brussels told me to do it.' For a politician, it's much more tempting than to fight for more room of manoeuvre or to accept responsibility for actual choices.

Again, there is a curious symmetry, when you think about it. The populist also say, 'Look, I'm not responsible, I'm just implementing the people's authentic will.' Both the technocrat and the populist deny actual personal responsibility. If things go wrong they can always say, 'Sorry that we have a terrible recession. Brussels made me do it'; and failing populists can say, 'I was about to implement the will of the people, but this judge prevented me from doing it' or 'The international financial elites prevented it from happening.'

In some of the media commentary about the rise of contemporary populism, some very serious concerns have been raised and some very dramatic scenarios painted. For example, Robert Kagan¹⁷ and others have used the word fascism in relation to Trump's campaign. What is your assessment of the current conjuncture? In your opinion, is the situation dangerous?

First of all, I would very much argue against the cliché that we are facing an irreversible process, a wave or even a "tsunami", as Nigel Farage¹⁸ put it, that is, "washing away the elites" (or, a variation of the same theme: Marine Le Pen's domino theory). Nigel Farage didn't bring Brexit about all by himself. He needed his very established British conservative collaborators like British Foreign Minister Boris Johnson¹⁹ and Michael Cove²⁰. In the same way, Trump did not win the election as the leader of a third, insurgent, anti-establishment, populist party. He was the candidate of a very established party. Just as much as Farage needed his Boris Johnson, Trump needed his Christie²¹ and

¹⁷ Robert Kagan (1958), American historian and columnist.

¹⁸ Nigel Farage (1964), former chairman of the UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party) and member of the European Parliament.

¹⁹ Boris Johnson (1964), foreign secretary of the UK.

²⁰ Michael Cove (1967), member of the cabinet of Theresa May since 2017. He is a well-known Euro-sceptic.

²¹ Chris Christie (1962), governor of New Jersey, has been an early supporter of Donald Trump.

Rudy Giuliani²² and, interestingly, his Newt Gingrich²³ who is an intellectual by the standards of the American conservative movement.

Long story short: nowhere in Europe or Northern America has a far-Right populist come to power on his own. Austria would have been the first if Hofer²⁴ had won the presidential election in 2016, but he didn't. Every single case where these parties have had some success, Trump's victory, Brexit – and Brexit is not a threat to the British political system like Trump is to the American political system – they had the support of their collaborators, and I use this word including its historical resonances, in the form of conservative elites.

Therefore, it is a mistake these days to be fixated on the populists in isolation. There is a larger dynamic. We should keep a very close eye on conservatives in particular. I still find it hard to believe that, if conservatives in The Netherlands and France refuse to collaborate with these people that they will have great triumphs in the coming elections, let alone that Frauke Petry²⁵ will be the chancellor in Germany.

Nevertheless, let's take a look at the worst possible scenarios. Is liberal democracy able to defend itself against 'the populist surge'? Under these circumstances, which measures would you be prepared to endorse in the defence of liberal democracy?

If you look at the American situation now, some of the liberals are extremely naive. Populists want conflict. They want confrontation. Ironically, they always talk about unification, but it is unification on their terms – if you do not unify according to their ideas, you are in for trouble.

But democracy is not about unification. Democracy is about legitimately contained conflict. It is a typical, clichéd American way of talking when US politicians say that the country is 'so divided' and that leaders, after all elections, have to heal the wounds of the nation. In a way, unification is way out of line in terms of a Madisonian understanding of democracy, which is not about unifying at all. It is precisely about enabling and maintaining conflict. As long as everybody acknowledges each other as legitimate opponents, democracy is in OK shape.

It's naive to think that as long as there is significant protest, Trump is failing. No. As long as he can portray protesters as a minority of people who are failing to defend our homeland, there is trouble. Around 40 percent of Trump's voters get their news from FOX, followed by much smaller proportions that get their news from CNN and Facebook. The Washington Post and The New York Times are not even in the top ten for Trump supporters. So how these media see the protests is essentially irrelevant for Trump's constituency.

²² Rudy Giuliani (1944), Republican mayor of New York from 1994 to 2001.

²³ Newt Gingrich (1943) is considered to be one of the leading ideologues of Donald Trump.

²⁴ Norbert Hofer (1971) is an Austrian politician who narrowly lost the Austrian presidential elections in 2016.

²⁵ Frauke Petry (1975) is the leader of the German Party *Alternative für Deutschland*.

Of course, it does not follow from this that we should not protest because we might see that protest incorporated into a Trumpist narrative. We should protest, but we should not be so naive as to think that it will translate immediately into something politically effective.

There are two things I would add. In an EU context, there are actually mechanisms available in the EU treaties. It is a tragedy and a shame that they have not been used. There are concrete things that could be done in the cases of Hungary and Poland – and, again, in the case of Hungary, it matters a great deal that supposedly mainstream conservatives have been covering for Orbán, who in effect is a far-Right populist.

The tougher question is about the possibility, which exists in some countries, to prohibit parties altogether. I would say, although these populist parties are dangerous to democracy, this is not enough to legitimate party bans. But it puts even more of a burden on politicians to respond to them in a way that makes it clear how populists undermine democracy, and that they are simply not like other contenders for power.