

Interview with Jan–Werner Müller

- a) **In your opinion, does the populism of which we speak so much in Europe and in America today is an unprecedented phenomenon or is it something old? And, above all, how to define it?**

Contrary to conventional wisdom today, not everybody who criticizes elites or “the establishment” is necessarily a populist who somehow poses a danger for democracy. Of course, when populists are in opposition, they tend to criticize sitting governments. So, in that sense, they do criticize elites. But above all, they tend to say that they — and only they — represent what populists often call “the real people” or also, typically, the silent majority. Populists will deny the legitimacy of all other contenders for power. This is never merely about policy disagreements or even disagreements about values which, of course, are normal and ideally productive in a democracy. Populists always immediately make it personal and moral. They also suggest that citizens who do not share their understanding of the supposedly “real people” do not really belong to the people at all. So populists always morally exclude others at two levels: at the level of party politics, but also among the people themselves, where those who do not take their side politically are automatically deemed un–American, un–Polish, un–Turkish, etc. So anti–elitism is not crucial. What’s crucial — and dangerous — is anti–pluralism: the tendency to exclude others at the level of the most basic political identity. The phenomenon is clearly not unprecedented: plenty of political actors have claimed this kind of moral monopoly of representing the people. And as long as we live in representative democracies, we cannot get rid of it: someone can always appear and claim that only they speak for the real people.

- b) **Often there is talk of populism as a return to nationalism. In your opinion, is this so, or is it necessary to make distinctions?**

For me, populism and nationalism are different concepts. Populists claim a moral monopoly of representing the real people, so populism is not anything like a traditional political ideology. But of course they need substantive content to describe the people — and, in the case of right–wing populists, that is often nationalism. But one can be a nationalist — attribute moral significance to nationhood — without being a populist; and, conversely, not every populist is necessarily a nationalist.

- c) **Does it convince the expression, also very fashionable, of “sovereignism”?**

As a concept, this makes little sense to me. As a signal that one is committed to a form nationalism that prioritizes short-term benefits (always America First! Italy First! etc.), as opposed to long-term, win-win cooperation, it does make sense — but it is politically misguided, I would say. Let me add one thing: many populist leaders are better at “simulating sovereignty” than at actually “taking back control”, as the Brexit slogan went. An Orban rails against neoliberalism and control by EU multinationals, but in practice his government prioritizes the goal of keeping the German car industry, which has massive investment in Hungary, happy and content.

d) Some critics of today’s populisms evoke comparisons with the fascisms of the first half of the twentieth century. What do you think about it?

I am skeptical about this analogy. Of course, historians have been debating definitions of fascism for a long time, and it is not as if we had a consensually agreed understanding of it against which we could measure today’s populism. But, at least for me, fascism involves a cult of violence as well as projects to racially re-organize the state. It also involves the mobilization of society for projects of national glory and rebirth. I do not see these aspects today, which is not to say that developments in Hungary, Turkey, India, etc. should not worry us — on the contrary. You can have authoritarianism, incitement of hatred against minorities, pushback against free media etc. all without necessarily getting fascism.

e) As a historian, do you think that this age of ours will be remembered as the age of populism, or not?

As a historian, I do not make predictions. What I would say though is this: the danger is that today “populism” has become so ubiquitous in political discourse that it is conflated with all kinds of other phenomena: nativism, nationalism, protectionism, being anti-globalization, to name just a few examples. We are not doing ourselves a favor — in fact we are weakening our capacity for political judgement — if we lump all these different phenomena together instead of drawing proper distinctions.

f) Is the vast success achieved by the populist phenomenon the consequence of a crisis in the liberal-democratic system or is it the cause?

Observers often say that populists are the ones with simplistic explanations and solutions. But the search for mono-causal explanations — populism is all a result of immigration, or globalization, or identity politics, or a crisis of representation — can also be very simplistic. As pedantic as it might sound: you still have to look closely at individual national constellations. The reasons for the rise of Jean-Marie Le Pen are not the same as the reasons for the rise of Orban, which in turn are not the same as the reasons for Trump’s triumph. Still, populists of course on one level look the same because they adopt a common strategy — but that does not mean that there is necessarily a common cause for their initial success.

- g) **Populist movements claim to represent the interests of the “people” betrayed by the so-called financial oligarchies. In this regard, there are those who argue that they would not constitute a fracture with the democratic system, but rather a more effective implementation of it. What do you think?**

Someone can criticize the tendency towards oligarchy in today’s democracies without thereby becoming a dangerous populist. The point of my approach is precisely to distinguish critiques of elites from populism, which, I argue, is based on anti-pluralism.

- h) **Populism is a protean political phenomenon or tends, however and everywhere, to transform itself into a specific political–social order whenever the opposition movement becomes a force of government?**

It is often said that almost by definition populists cannot govern, because all their policy ideas are horrendously simplistic, or that, once in power, they have to cease being populists because they cannot keep attacking “the elite” when they themselves are now the governing elite. I think these are mistaken views. We have seen plenty of regimes in our time when populists not only govern, but govern specifically as populists — which is to say: as actors who ultimately do not accept the legitimacy of the opposition. I would go even further and say that that what I described earlier as a “common strategy” might also be called a shared populist art of governance. It involves attempts to hijack the state itself for partisan purposes, engaging in patronage politics and mass clientelism, and, not least, trying to undermine protest and opposition from civil society with the claim that all protest is always paid for and manipulated from outside the country (with the blame often put on the CIA, George Soros, etc.). I am not saying that this art makes these populist–authoritarian regimes invincible, but we should let go of the illusion that populists will all automatically fail in government.

- i) **How is the current Italian politics perceived and represented in your country? In your opinion, does the category of populism fit you fully or not?**

There are plenty of indications of populism. But there is also, apart from populism, the far-right political content pushed by Matteo Salvini. The latter not only managed to transform the Lega away from being a regional party; he now also has become a real reference point in European politics more broadly. Cinque Stelle, by contrast, as far as I can tell, is not seen as a real model elsewhere in Europe. Moreover, it seems that the Movement is not really succeeding in making good on its promise of a successful experiment of dispensing with two intermediary institutions which were seen as crucial for the functioning of representative democracy ever since the nineteenth century: political parties and a professional press. M5S has always wanted to be seen as a non-party; and Beppe Grillo has always

attacked professional journalists alongside *la casta* of professional politicians. However, as far as I can tell, M5S looks to involve mass online plebiscites instead of genuine democratic participation — but I could be wrong. I recognize that it is an ongoing experiment and that we should keep an open mind as to the outcome.