

Interview with Michael Billig

- 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?**

I think that it is too soon to know how current populism (such as Trumpism, the governing movements in Hungary, Poland, Turkey and Italy or the popularity of Brexit in Britain) will develop. Certainly there are similarities with past movements; in many ways Trump resembles Berlusconi – both take delight in displaying a contempt for the constraints of logic, truth and consistency; both have questionable business backgrounds; both are openly nationalist; both enjoy using power, both personally and politically etc and etc. On the other hand, the current wave of populism is occurring in new circumstances which might echo past circumstances but are not complete repetitions of the past. We might be seeing a reaction against the free market philosophy of neo-liberalism, based on a right-wing protectionism.

As for defining populism, I could not offer a convincing definition. I consider that social scientists often put too much importance on definitions. Sometimes it is better to come towards definitions after careful analysis of the phenomenon in question – rather than in advance of the analysis. Because I have not studied the phenomenon of populism, I am in no position to offer a definition.

- 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?**

I do not think that populism represents a return to nationalism because nationalism never went away. Trump may have campaigned on the slogan “Make America great again” but Obama was never shy about declaring the USA to be “great”. When Trump was nominated the Republican candidate, the American flags were noticeably waved at the Republican convention – but they were also waved at the Democratic convention when Obama was selected as candidate. What may be different is that Obama’s nationalism was balanced by an international perspective – Trump’s is not. What may distinguish populism may not be the nationalism as such, but the absence of countervailing values.

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

I must admit my ignorance. I have not heard of the concept of “sovereignism”.

- 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?**

There are similarities in that current populisms pose threats to democracy (i.e. in Turkey) — but unlike the fascist movements of the 1920s and 1930s they are not openly anti-democratic — in fact, they claim to be democratic. Nor do they have equivalents of militias of storm-troopers. History does not repeat itself exactly but today's populisms do pose a threat to democratic values and respect for other opinions.

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

I may be interested in the past, but I have no knowledge of the future!

- 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?**

I think that the problems of neo-liberalism are crucial to the rise of populism. Neo-liberal capitalism has failed to protect the economically and socially insecure. Trump's promise to protect the coal-mining industry in the USA is evidence that he was reacting or taking advantage of the consequences of anti-protectionist, neo-liberal economic practices. I think that the popularity of Brexit in the United Kingdom can be seen in similar terms: those who feel that they live in disadvantaged, forgotten areas want the protection that they think that openly nationalist (i.e., non-internationalist) politics will give them.

- 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?**

The problem is that populist movements are not ostensibly anti-democratic but they can and do lead to a weakening of democratic values, as opponents are branded as "traitors" and "enemies of the nation"; and exclusionary immigration policies are openly directed against "foreigners" or certain groups of "foreigners".

- h) How would you define the current political regimes of Russia and Turkey? Populists or not? Is there any affinity between them and does it make sense to support Trump's America?**

I don't think I know enough to make an informed judgement or to offer meaningful definitions. I do feel saddened that the possibilities of Turkey becoming a liberal, modern democracy have been diminished. And in part I hold to blame the European Community and its lack of encouragement of the Turkish plan to become a member. At the root of that was, I believe,

a fear of having a member with a Muslim majority. Thus, nationalism and ethnocentrism were not invented by the populists.

- i) **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?**

I do not think I am in a position to offer an opinion. I lack the knowledge.

- j) **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?**

I am afraid that the current Italian government is basically ignored in Britain at the moment. At the moment, British interest in politics is dominated by Brexit and has become almost exclusively focussed internally. It is an example of how nationalism narrows horizons.