

Interview with Roger Griffin

- 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?**

The term “populism” which has entered the language of politics and the media in the last 20 years is the short-hand for what in English is called “right-wing populism”, in Italian *populismo di destra*, in German *Rechtspopulismus* etc. We should not forget that there have recently been movements in Spain and Greece that could be thought of as “left-wing populism”, and in the US context populism refers historically to a late 19th century movement of agrarian reform, which was more centrist liberal.

Populism is a nebulous term, since its core component simply refers to “the people” with all the political ambiguity of that concept. As such, populism could refer to a number of extremely varied popular insurrections in history which have gained popular backing, such as the Peasant’s Revolt against the Poll Tax in 1381 in England, or the resistance to Austrian occupation in the Cinque Giornate di Milano of 1848, or the Civil Rights Movement in the US. As such populism can be seen an ancient component of human society and a latent possibility whenever there is the beginning of a movement of popular resistance to perceived state oppression. As for “right-wing”, if it refers to political behaviour based on a passionate commitment to protecting a sense of cultural, ethnic, national, or religious identity against perceived enemies, then it is probably even older, as old as human society’s need to protect itself against groups seeking to take its resources or subjugate it.

However, as a form of democratic politics in which segments of the electorate express their opposition to government policies which seem to ignore not just their material interests, but undermine their sense of belonging, identity, sovereignty and national pride, (right-wing) populism is a recent phenomenon, which is now expressed in a unique way/in unique political configurations in almost every modern liberal (and illiberal) democracy, both within and outside party politics.

As for a definition, I would suggest that in the context of modern democracies it refers to: «An “ethnocratic” form of politics which sees the indigenous population (ethnie) as under threat from the impact of both national and international forces which are held to be undermining its economic prosperity, cultural traditions, identity, and in some cases its religious hegemony biological homogeneity, and thus seeks democratic political representation and structural change that will enable the transfer of

power and sovereignty back to their original source, namely the mythically constructed “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?

As a historical force nationalism is constantly evolving and being shaped by international events, and there are myriad dialects of both liberal and illiberal nationalism in the modern world shaped by unique historical circumstances. Mercifully, the ultranationalism that fuelled European imperialism, the First World War or Nazism cannot be returned to, and it is unhelpful to think of nationalism as a single entity that dominated a particular period. It is more useful to think of populism as drawing on a variety of nationalism ranging from liberal nationalism’s concern with preserving sovereignty to biological fantasies of pure race and racial supremacy. Each country tends to evolve its own forms of populism with its own party–political expression, which generally represents not a point on a left–right spectrum, but a line which straddles democratic and illiberal forms of national sentiment. The Rassemblement National and the AfD host a wide range of French and German nationalisms, and in recent months there were attempts within UKIP leadership to turn it from a liberal nationalist populist party to an extreme right–wing one. Focussing on nationalism as the driver of populism creates confusion. It is more productive to think of right–wing populism as the democratic (but not necessarily liberal) expression of an international wave of identitarian politics that has arisen as a reaction to a nexus of such forces as globalization, the loss of national sovereignty to international bodies, the loss of Western hegemony to Asia, the 2008 financial crisis, de–industrialization, mass migration and multi–culturalism, and the refugee crisis, all of which impact on previous, broadly hegemonic national identities.

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

It is not part of my active vocabulary, and since the sense of the erosion of sovereignty is only one factor in populism, not very useful, at least in the UK context.

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?

Fascism is a revolutionary form of populist ultranationalism which rejects liberal democratic institutions and pluralism in all its forms, and longs to install a new national and international order based on nationalism and racism. Some fascists join or support populist political movements as a form of entryism, but right–wing populism only becomes fascist at the point where it wants to overthrow liberal democracy and install some

nebulous alternative to “the System”. What is worth comparing is the mass crisis in humanistic values, world-views and identities following the First World War (which bred fascism and authoritarian nationalism as a response to a liberal democratic order widely perceived as in terminal decline and to be superseded), and the modern socio-political crisis in which there is no perceived or plausible alternative to liberal democracy and capitalism, and thus discontent with “the System” finds an outlet in forms of non-revolutionary populism compatible with a party-political system and political pluralism.

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

If it is, it will be a very myopic response: the early twentieth century should be remembered as an age of ecological and demographic catastrophe, and missed opportunities to avert them, presided over by the captains of a structurally dysfunctional, short-termist liberal capitalist system that ignored human biological dependency on the planet, and by political elites that could not see the big picture and were too inept or corrupt to take their populations with them towards a sustainable 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 would question whether populism has been success, beyond disrupting the EU’s progress to closer integration of its member states, putting liberal elites on the back foot, and fuelling xenophobia, West-centric thinking, and narrow national self-interest. Having said that, populism is both symptom and cause of crisis. It is partly the product of the progressive socio-economic and cultural ghettoization of the bulk of Western political elites who over time became utterly out of touch with the real lives, concerns and fears of the majority that they were governing. At the same time, populism risen to the point where it has become an important causal factor of the multi-factorial democratic crisis in the West in its own right, though in a unique way in each state.

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?

I hear very little in the way of coherent economic analysis situation or alternative economic policies offered by populists beyond a generic resentment of taxes, the loss of markets to foreigners, or the power of the EU, or the calls for protectionism of one sort or another. The type of democracy that populism promotes is both ethnocratic and illiberal, and therefore increases the democratic deficit from a global perspective rather than correct

it. Thus I would warn against seeing any sort of healthy socio-economic redistribution of power or wealth resulting from populist politics. This is partly because the drivers of populism are more existential than economic (which is why Switzerland, Denmark and Sweden have strong populist parties despite the absence of the “rust zones” found in the UK, the US and France). Certainly, national elites in many countries have failed to tackle the core economic issues at a local level stemming from de-industrialization, a failure that has led to the destruction of communities and of hope, and thus fed dangerous forms of populism in some regions, and it would be a democratic gain if elites and oligarchs addressed this phenomenon even if solely out of self-interest.

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

I see them, along with Hungary, as illiberal democracies whose stability is assured by a powerful constituency of right-wing populists, ultranationalists and xenophobes in the general population. To that extent they can be seen as populist states, but not as being run by populism: they are run by astute autocratic politicians who are exploiting populism. They could thus be called populist autocracies as long as Putin, Orban and Erdogan are in power.

i) Populism is a protean political phenomenon or tends everywhere to transform itself into a specific political-social order whenever the opposition movement becomes a force of government?

Yes. It is a protean political force shaped in unique ways in every country, but when a government is formed based on populism it creates a particularly insidious form of institutionalized illiberal democracy which manipulates rather than responds to populist pressures, a form of modern democracy neither fascist nor totalitarian, which needs to be monitored more closely. We are too obsessed with populism and Trump. There is a mechanism for removing Trump democratically, a time-limit on his misrule, but this does not apply to not populist autocrats.

j) How is the current Italian politics perceived and represented in your country? In your opinion, does the category of populism fit fully or not in such a case?

There is general ignorance about Italian politics in the UK, which has become extraordinarily introspective, narcissistic and self-obsessed since the catastrophic Brexit referendum. There is thus general ignorance about Italian parties and about populism in general. The BBC’s specialist reports about Italy are excellent and detailed but have little impact on the general knowledge of the average Brit. It is my impression that there are populist elements in both the Lega and Cinque Stelle, which taken together straddle the spectrum from non-racist/liberal to racist/illiberal concerns with

reasserting Italian identity in the context of the EU and the refugee crisis/multiculturalism, and an ongoing economic crisis caused by the EU and membership of the Eurozone. These have produced deep anxieties about the country's economic future and national identity expressed sometimes in populist xenophobia, but not on the scale of pockets of extreme racism in some parts of the former GDR. I believe Italy actually hosts several strands of populism, and both liberal and illiberal right wing populism which are interacting in a complex and a potentially (for the quality of Italian democracy and civil society) dangerous way.