

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

What is Populism?

Public Affairs

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Transcript

JOANNE MYERS: Welcome to this podcast, which is coming to you from the Carnegie Council in New York. I am Joanne Myers, director of Public Affairs programs, and I would like to thank you all for joining us.

Today I am speaking with Jan-Werner Müller. Currently, Professor Müller is a fellow at the [Institute of Human Sciences](#) in Vienna and teaches politics at Princeton University, where he is also the founding director of the [History of Political Thought Project](#). He is the author of several books, including *What is Populism?*, in which he explores the meaning of populism and its significance today. This book is the basis of our conversation, and we are delighted to have this opportunity to speak with him.

Professor Müller, populism appears to be all the rage these days. Populist movements featuring unconventional politicians have been gathering a foothold across the globe. So, let's begin at the beginning: What does the term "populism" actually mean?

JAN-WERNER MÜLLER: We read and hear virtually every day that everywhere "the people" are supposedly rising up against "the elites" or that we have a revolt of "the masses" against "the Establishment." But not everybody who criticizes elites automatically is a populist. In a sense, we as citizens should all be critical with the powerful and keep an eye on them. That is nothing out of the ordinary. That is what every civics textbook would tell us. Now, at first sight that may not sound terribly dangerous or problematic, but it immediately has two consequences, both of which I would argue pose a peril to democracy.

One is that the populists will always claim that the other contenders for power are in some sense illegitimate. So this is not just about a disagreement concerning policy, which is of course completely normal in a democracy. In a sense, populists always immediately make it a moral or, if you like, a character issue. Of course, [Donald Trump](#) has done this in an [absolutely extreme and in many ways unprecedented way](#), but in a certain way he is just an extreme; he is not really an exception. Populists generally tend to cast some moral doubt on their opponents.

Second, and maybe less obviously, populists will also cast some doubt on all those among citizens—among the people themselves, if you like—who do not support them and who do not go along with their understanding of the supposedly real and authentic people. If I may, I will give you two brief examples from very recent history.

Remember how during the night of [Brexit](#), [Nigel Farage](#) gave a [speech](#) where he said that this had been a victory for what he called "real people." Of course, the implication of that was that the 48 percent of voters who wanted to stay within the European Union somehow were not quite "real" and might not properly belong to the real people, the real—in the case of Farage—England, probably more than the United Kingdom.

Or think one more time of Donald Trump, something he said in May that was hardly noticed because it

seemed so harmless compared to all the racist and sexist remarks he has made in other contexts. In May, Trump [said](#), "The important thing is the unification of the people, and all the other people don't matter." This was again another way of saying that the populist decrees who the real people are and supposedly unifies them, but that all the other people—even though they might have an American passport, even though legally they might be part of the people—somehow do not count, can be excluded, can be cast aside.

Populists, on the basis of, I would say, their essentially anti-pluralist stance, always perform two exclusions: One at the level of the politics, parties, politicians, and elites; and the other at the level of the citizens themselves.

JOANNE MYERS: May I ask: Why now? What causes populism to erupt? It is not a new phenomenon, but—whether in Europe with [Orbán](#), in Asia with [Duterte](#), or in South America/Latin America with [Morales](#) and [Chávez](#), and in America with Donald Trump—it seems so prevalent

JAN-WERNER MÜLLER: I would say two things. One is that, in general, I find that we have an inflationary use of populism. So while indeed it is correct that we see a lot of what at least I will be describing as populism right now, usually we include far too many examples that, in my view at least, are not populist.

If you are at all willing to go along with my understanding of it, [Bernie Sanders](#) is not a populist. This does not mean one has to like his policies, but he does not have this claim to exclusive moral representation. Neither do some of the usual suspects in southern Europe, like [Syriza](#) in Greece or [Podemos](#) in Spain. Again, it does not mean one has to like them, but they are not really equivalent to, let's say, [Marine Le Pen](#) in France or others.

I am not saying that, by definition, there cannot be left-wing populists—Chávez, who you mentioned a moment ago, was indeed a populist. There came a point when it was impossible to disagree with Chávez without being called by the Chávistas an enemy of the people, a traitor, and so on and so forth. But we should not, in a sense, artificially enlarge the sample more than is actually the case.

Second point—and an actual answer to your question—I think in certain ways populists do respond to a real underlying conflict that characterizes our time. So it is not entirely an accident or arbitrary that we see so many parties and movements of this type.

What is the underlying conflict? In very broad terms, it is, on the one hand, between those who want in the broadest sense more openness—and this can come in the usual version of more economic globalization, counter-globalization—but it can also mean, for instance, more openness toward religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities within one's own country. So it is not quite the same as what Trump has been deriding, for instance, as globalism. That is one end of the pole. At the other end of the pole, there are those who then want more closure, maybe want to stick to more traditional hierarchies of some sort or another.

I believe this conflict is as real as previous conflicts that tended to structure politics between city and countryside, conflicts around religion, conflicts between labor and capital. It is not the only conflict we have, but I think it has become much more pronounced in a whole range of countries. It is the kind of conflict where populists can say, "Ah, yes. We are in the business of responding to this; we are in the business of defining who belongs and who does not belong; we are in the business of inclusion and exclusion." In a sense, they always do identity politics, which is not to say that all identity politics have to come out as populist.

If our most serious, let's say, debate or conflict were about something else—global warming or bioethical questions—it would not be obvious, to me at least, that populists could really play a very big

role in that; they would not have the kind of answers that might resonate with people, other than maybe saying, "We distrust experts in general." But with this closure-versus-openness conflict, I think populists have a particular opening to become prominent.

JOANNE MYERS: Can you identify the characteristics that distinguish between right-wing and left-wing populists?

JAN-WERNER MÜLLER: If you are willing to go along with how I understand populism, it is not really a question of content. So one could not say that, "Oh, yes, if you tell me what you really believe about immigration or about free trade, I can tell you immediately whether you're a populist or not." We have plenty of other terms to describe some of these other phenomena—demagogue, nativism, racism, and so on—whereas populism, as the very term suggests, always has to involve some kind of claim about "the people" themselves.

Populists clearly need some content, they need to have criteria for saying who the real people are and why they and only they are its only legitimate moral representative, but that content can take many different forms, and it can take right-wing forms or left-wing forms.

But again, it is only the person who makes this particular kind of claim, as for instance Turkish—now president, at that time prime minister—[Erdoğan](#) did when he said at a party congress about himself and his party, "We are the people," and then turning to his critics inside Turkey, "Who are you?" That is an almost pure version of what I am trying to get at with my understanding of populism. But it is not about a particular, let's say, policy content.

JOANNE MYERS: How is populism then different from other kinds of politics? Who do they claim to represent? You said the "real people." Who are these real people?

JAN-WERNER MÜLLER: That depends on what populists tell us about them. Again, they can fill that category with different kinds of content. [George Wallace](#) in the 1960s basically always said "the American South is the real America, is the real people, and I am the one who represents it." Donald Trump obviously has cast certain parts of the population out, or I would say even incited hatred against them—Mexican immigrants and Muslims—all those, according to Trump, for instance, who do not really properly belong. So it can take different shapes and forms, but the populist always will suggest something along those lines and, therefore, will always propose some version of exclusionary identity politics.

Just to add a word, because one might of course object, "But look, in a sense all politicians try to reach out to the people; all politicians offer sometimes a definition of national identity." That is true, and of course also all politicians believe that they are right and their opponents are wrong.

So pluralism does not mean that all of a sudden we have to be relativist. But one important difference is—and again we can see this play out in the [election](#) now—that the populist very often will say, "Look, if it seems like we (the populists) or I (the populist) lost an election, it is not because I failed to represent the real people; it is because it was rigged," because in a certain way they have to somehow resolve the contradiction between their claim truly and only to represent the real people and then a possible election loss. The easiest way to always do that is to resort to some version of conspiracy theory and say, "You know, the Establishment, the elites, did something behind the scenes to prevent the 'silent majority'"—as the almost inevitable phrase in this context goes—"to express itself." If the majority were not silent or if it were not kept silent by the elites, then, according to their self-understanding, the populists would always be in power.

Unlike other politicians, who will concede an election and who will say, "Look, of course I still think that my policies are better, but all I can do at this point is to try again in two years—or four years or

whatever it might be." The populist will not usually accept this kind of outcome and, therefore, will constantly delegitimize an existing democratic system. Obviously all of us are free to criticize the electoral system, all kinds of aspects—it is not as if the status quo is somehow unquestionable—but what the populist specifically does is to say, "Because I didn't win, the system is rigged." And that in a democracy is not an acceptable argument.

JOANNE MYERS: What happens if they actually gain power? What do they do then?

JAN-WERNER MÜLLER: It depends on the circumstances. If, let's say, in a European context a relatively small populist party becomes a coalition partner of a bigger party that is not populist, we should not immediately panic and think that, "Oh, something horrible is bound to happen." But we have enough cases now where populist actors came to power and had very large majorities and few countervailing powers, such as independent media, constitutional courts, or things like this. Think, for instance, of Turkey, or in the European context think of Hungary. There we have seen a very distinct pattern.

Contrary to the, I think very naïve, belief that populists, almost by definition, cannot govern because they are always protest parties—and protest parties logically cannot govern because you cannot protest against yourself once you are in government—and also contrary to the, I think also naïve, view that populists always have very simplistic policy ideas so they are bound to fail immediately once they attain power—contrary to all that, we see a pattern that clearly involves taking countries in a more authoritarian direction.

At the same time, we see that populists will justify whatever they are doing in the name of their basic monopoly to moral representation of the people. For a long time, what they do and how they present it can still sound relatively democratic—they do not declare dictatorships. They do not say that, "Now we have discovered that authoritarianism is something superior"—no. They will try to push a democratic language as much as they can.

But when they, for instance, weaken checks and balances, when they take hold of a state apparatus and essentially abolish a nonpartisan civil service by staffing the entire state with their own people, they will always do so by way of claiming that, "Look, the state should be there for the people. Of course, we, as the authentic representatives of the people, should take possession of the state. This is not authoritarian; it is not illiberal; it is not problematic."

What is also I think very typical—and we have seen this in a number of countries—is that when there is protest from within civil society against some of these actors, it is also symbolically very important for populists to somehow delegitimize this immediately. How do they do that? They very often say—and this was in many ways pioneered by [Putin](#) but has now also been done by [Orban](#) and [Erdoğan](#) in Turkey, for instance—they immediately say, "Look, what you think is authentic protest from within civil society, people demonstrating on the street and so on, isn't really civil society; it is all steered by foreign agents." So it becomes very important for these actors to exclude the possibility that the people themselves, who they always claim authentically and exclusively to represent, could somehow all of a sudden be against them.

Again, there is, if in doubt, a resort to a conspiracy theory that says, "Look, it only seems to be civil society; it is actually all manipulated by [George Soros](#) or other outside agents who are stirring up trouble against our particular political system."

JOANNE MYERS: For the last question—I think it is very disturbing what is happening—is there any way to overcome this attack against representative politics? Is there anything we can do out front to prevent this from happening?

JAN-WERNER MÜLLER: Let me, if I may, slightly disagree with the idea that it is really a revolt against representative politics, because populists have no problem with the idea of representation. It is true that sometimes people claim that really they want more direct democracy, more involvement of the people, more participation, but I do not believe that is true.

Essentially, populists always start with a symbolic construction of the real people, and from that they deduce what they take to be the singular authentic will of the real people. Then, like Trump at the [convention](#) this past summer, they will then say, "I am your voice." But this has been an entirely theoretic exercise. It is not as if they are really interested in starting a process of open deliberation, participation, and town hall meetings. We do not really see that happening in countries where populists acquire more power. Even when they call for a referendum, they basically say, "Look, we always already know the right answer, we always already know the authentic popular will, and all the people are supposed to do is basically tick the box or confirm what the populists have already been saying."

I think we should not make this concession and, as sometimes people do, say that, "Oh, yes, it is problematic, but still it might be a useful corrective for democracy because ultimately they do bring people back in, they do bring people closer to the state," and so on. I do not believe this is really true.

On the issue of what can be done, clearly there is no panacea. I think at the level of how to engage with populists directly, on the one hand, one should certainly debate them, not exclude them as sometimes people suggest, because if one does that—if one says, "Look, we are not even going to have you on the podium" or "We are going to exclude you from television appearances" or "In parliament we don't answer your questions"—it is a big mistake because that immediately confirms the narrative that populists always suggest to their own followers. They are immediately going to say, "Look, we told you the elites never listen, there are all these taboo subjects, we are not allowed to say certain things." So one has to engage.

But at the same time, within a debate one also has to draw very clear red lines, call a spade a spade. So if a populist politician says something racist, do not pussyfoot around it, do not argue that, "Oh, it's all about losers of globalization feeling bad." It is very important to call it what it is.

If they come with conspiracy theories, it is also important to immediately nail them down and say, "Look, unless you have the evidence for this, you have to stop saying this; this is not part of a normal democratic discourse." While at the same time, of course, having an open debate about subjects and issues that many people will say the populists do not have good, or even horrible, answers for but which are nevertheless legitimate topics in a democracy—level of immigration, for instance; the exact shape and form of trade agreements. These are all things that one can argue about, has to argue about, in a democracy.

As a last point maybe—but unfortunately I cannot in five seconds give you a terribly convincing policy idea about this—clearly, other parties also have to think about this underlying conflict between openness and closure, and they have to, much more in terms of substantive ideas, think about what they can offer to people who, sometimes for very good reasons, are discontent with what is on offer right now.

If nothing else, we should get away from this often very crude discourse that says, "You know, trade agreement—for or against; globalization—for or against," as if these things basically do not afford any room for political choices, for negotiation, for deliberation, and so on and so forth.

Going back to the beginning of our conversation, there as well I think it is important not to have this inflationary use of populism, not to try to delegitimize certain actors—such as in the United States maybe Sanders, or [Corbyn](#) in the United Kingdom, or some parties in Southern Europe like Syriza and Podemos—by immediately saying, "Oh, they're populists, so we don't really even have to listen to

them." One does not have to like their policies, but they can certainly be part of a democratic debate.

JOANNE MYERS: Professor Müller, this was so stimulating and illuminating that I just want to thank you once again. Whatever the outcomes of the elections in the United States, Europe, or elsewhere, we can be quite sure that the long-term consequences of shifts in the ways of doing politics will be with us for quite a while. But finding a good discussion, a good definition, would be impossible without reading your book *What is Populism?* Thank you again for being with us.

JAN-WERNER MÜLLER: Thank you very much. I really appreciate it. Thank you.

Audio

There's a wave of populist leaders around the world right now, from Erdogan to Trump. What defines a populist exactly, and why are they so dangerous? Learn more in this most timely interview.

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