Christoffer Hentzer Dausgaard: In your work 'Contesting Democracy' you clarify how authoritarian movements of the 20th century utilised the language of democratic values to legitimise undemocratic policies and politics. Can these historical examples teach us something about dealing with populists and their use of this language today?

Jan-Werner Müller: I think we have to be careful with historical analogies. It's easier always to ask 'but is it like fascism?' than to think through our present moment and try to understand its specific complexity. But I also think that it is important to remember that parties and movements that pose a danger to democracy will indeed not always do us the favor of announcing this openly. One of the fateful developments of our day is that we have conceded the very term democracy too readily to these actors. Think, for instance, of how many observers now call Viktor Orban's populist regime in Hungary an 'illiberal democracy' – as if it were just one of many legitimate versions of democracy. I am not denying that there are tensions between liberalism and democracy – but if rights to free speech and assembly are threatened, media pluralism is radically reduced, then it's not just liberalism that suffers. Rather democracy itself is damaged – because these rights are constitutive for democracy as such. Moreover, we put in place an implicit division of labour, where the nation state always does democracy and the EU features the liberal repair crews that are sent in by Brussels if something is wrong with the rule of law.

CHD: You have said that the lack of clear-cut political choices undermines the legitimacy of a democracy. What if the lack of political choice simply reflects an actual consensus among people? When is a political consensus problematic?

JWM: We would have to talk about specific issues: I don't see it as problematic if there is a complete consensus about the abolition of the death penalty, or if, by and large, there's a consensus about preserving the NHS in general in the UK. Put more broadly: by definition there is no real consensus, if certain questions become seriously contested and individuals – whether professional politicians or citizens – start to offer others a chance to identify with and rally behind that contestation. This multiplication of claims to representation is precisely what democracy is designed to achieve. But it only works if, unlike populists, actors also accept that maybe they are not as representative as they thought they might be and, ultimately, fail to mobilize majorities.

CHD: What do you think are the prospects of right-wing populist parties, which at the moment claim exclusive democratic legitimacy, becoming 'normal' parties acknowledging political pluralism and representing just another segment of voters?

JWM: In theory, this is a possibility: they could

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give up their claim to a moral monopoly of representing the the 'real people' and just advocate certain policy positions. They would then have to accept their share of the vote – let's say 11 per cent – as an empirical fact (and defeat!) and not keep insisting that the silent majority or the real people are actually behind them – rendering all their competitors essentially illegitimate. Even this scenario is not unproblematic, though. One might ask: is it really possible to advocate for a radical reduction in immigration without on one level casting suspicion on people who have already immigrated? Of course, officially, Trump was only against the 'rapists' and the 'bad people' Mexico had allegedly sent, but de facto he was inciting hatred against an entire minority of immigrants from Mexico and their descendants.

Let me add this: in practice, I think there are virtually no real examples of this kind of moderation. In a sense one can see why; why would Marine Le Pen all of a sudden say that the other parties also legitimately represent French citizens? Whatever success the Front National has had – in the minds of its leaders, I suspect – is built on radical anti-pluralism. They would probably be worried that seeming like any other party would undermine their major rhetorical asset.

CHD: You criticise the technocratic crisis management of recent years for undermining the legitimacy of European democracies, to the benefit of populists. Are the populists right that there is a structural flaw with current democratic institutions since these technocratic elites were able to exclude political opposition? How can such technocratic government be prevented?

JWM: I've tried to show in some of my historical work on political thought in post-war Europe that, after the experience of fascism and communism, there was indeed a certain amount of distrust of citizens' direct involvement in politics; such distrust was often built into constitutional structures and formed part of political cultures (though that rapidly diminished after the 1960s). But this is not the same as technocracy; after all, there was real party pluralism and real competition of different political and also moral visions for society; technocrats, by contrast, effectively hold that there is only one rational solution to a policy question, and that whoever disagrees reveals themselves as on one level irrational. During the Euro crisis we have heard some rhetoric of this type, and no doubt some technocratic assumptions have been built into the architecture of the Eurozone over the past few years. However, it is not impossible to politicize the EU more – it's really a question whether professional politicians and, ultimately, citizens, really want to try. In that sense, the emergence of movements and then eventually parties like Podemos and En Marche – different as their programmes might be – are a hopeful sign.

CHD: In your works on democracy and populism, you emphasise the importance of political narratives or conceptions of politics in political change; you attribute much of populists' success to their narrative as the sole representatives of "the people" and their moral conception of politics. Which counter-narrative could challenge this?

JWM: I'd take issue with some things implied here. Too often, I believe, the whole question of how to deal with populists is treated as if it were just a question of narratives – ultimately, something like just another PR challenge, where we only have to do a better job of selling democracy or the EU or whatever it is that citizens voting for populists supposedly have not 'bought'. Of course, narratives and framing are extremely important in politics. But the challenge of populism is not just a PR question: there are questions here of substantive content, and it is a kind of insult in a democracy to think that citizens just need better ads, and not also better reasons. Having said that: it is true that populists ultimately offer a form of identity politics (which is not to say that all identity politics is populist), often based on a story of how historical greatness was lost and can now be regained through decisive leadership by populist politicians. Such stories can and should be opposed with different – above all, more inclusive – ones. And when populists try to appropriate particular symbols – think of Joan of Arc in France and her appropriation by the National Front – that appropriation should also be contested. It's important though, that we don't get stuck just with 'counter- narratives' – for by definition these remain fixated on whatever narratives populists offered; they are too reactive. Thus I want to emphasise one more time the need creatively to think about content which then in turn can inspire narratives that are not just facile PR for liberal democracy. ♥

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