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Is Populism a Threat to Democracy?

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For the past few years, ‘populism’ has become a buzzword. One politician after another has been called a ‘populist’, from Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil to Viktor Orbán in Hungary. The term’s been applied to left-wingers like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and to right-wingers like Donald Trump in the USA. It’s even been applied to Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn. Most commentators agree that populism is on the rise. Here for example you can see a graph of the increase in votes for populist parties across the world through the 20th century up to the present day. There are two peaks – in the 1930s, and from around 2010 onwards. Populist parties are averaging around 35 per cent across the globe.

But at the same time, there doesn’t seem to be much agreement on what ‘populism’ actually means. Indeed, if it applies equally to left and right, does it actually mean anything at all? Is it just a style, without any real content? So what I want to do this evening is to try and fix its meaning, to reflect on the reasons for its current popularity and to understand the successes and failures of the political figures it’s been used to describe. I’ll ask whether populism is a threat to democracy, and if so, in what ways. Is populism in the end just another way of describing democracy, the rule of the people? Is populism just defined by its critical attitude towards rule by elites? Or is it something distinctively different?

Historically speaking, the term itself has two distinct origins. The first of these goes back to Russia in the 1870s and 1880s, when radical intellectuals known as the *narodniki* began to argue that the way forward for Russia was to eliminate the thin layer of aristocratic landowners, bureaucrats, military men and other servants of the Tsarist autocracy, leaving the vast mass of the Russian peasantry to develop their own democratic institutions, centered on the rural commune. In this way the evils of capitalism and industrialization could be by-passed, and Russia go its own way, separate from that of the West. Small groups of these populists went out into the villages to try and win over the people. The peasants, however, did not understand them and mostly turned them over to the authorities. Here’s a picture by Ilya Repin of the arrest of a populist in 1892, with a Tsarist policeman inspecting a populist tract. The movement, although it generated some significant ideas, was an abject failure.

Disillusioned, the revolutionaries turned to violence instead, trying to bring down the Tsarist structures of rule by murdering officials and government ministers, until their campaign culminated in the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. The group that carried out this act called itself ‘The People’s Will’, but what it represented was of course nothing of the kind: the members of the group were in reality a tiny faction of intellectuals, no more. The Russian populists seemed in any case to a new generation of revolutionaries to be going up a blind alley, and their ideology gave way in due course to that of the Marxists, led eventually by Lenin, who put their fate in the urban proletariat that was emerging as Russia began to industrialize. Still, the Russian populists did not disappear entirely, and their ideas resemble those of their modern successors in a number of ways, above all in their claim to be acting on behalf of ‘the people’ against entrenched and exploitative elites.

The second, perhaps more important origin of the term populism lies in America, where it was also a movement that placed the rural community at its centre. The Populists, organized in the People’s Party of the 1890s, argued that the



economic woes suffered by farmers in the agricultural depression of the time were caused by a vast conspiracy of vested interests, as they put it, by

“extortionists, usurers and oppressors marshaled from every nation under heaven. Every instrumentality known to man – the state with its civil authority, learning with its lighted torch, armies with their commissions to take life, instruments of commerce essential to commercial intercourse, and the very soil upon which we live and move and have our being – all these things and more, are being perverted and used to enslave and impoverish the people.”

By ‘the people’, they meant everybody, industrial workers included, but the American Populists failed in practice to extend their base beyond the farmers of the mid-West, and like all American third parties, it soon faded away, its demise speeded by the return of agrarian prosperity from 1896 to the First World War, as this cartoon shows. Still, here too, there were themes that recur in the populism of our own age: once more, the evil machinations of self-serving elites, including the government, the universities, the military, bankers and industrialists, that conspire to keep themselves in power; the hollowness of the existing party system and structures of the state; the resentments of parts of the population that feel marginalized and neglected.

The first obvious characteristic of populism, then, is that it is anti-elitist. Populists, whether right-wing or left-wing, claim that behind the elaborate structures of representative democracy, of general elections, political parties, national legislatures, supposedly independent judiciaries, business and banking institutions, universities and educational systems, lurk elites that are all linked together to control society for their own benefit. Often populists go further and claim that these elites are also linked to international interests that betray those of the nation and its people. Mainstream political parties might seem to oppose each other, but underneath the surface they are both the same, vehicles for the self-perpetuation of entrenched elites who are in politics for their own gain. Populism asserts the participatory rights of parts of the nation that feel left out.

These themes can be identified in the rhetoric of Pat Buchanan in his Presidential campaign of 2000 when referring to the federal government in Washington: - ‘Neither Beltway party is going to drain this swamp: it’s a protected wetland; they breed in it, they spawn in it.’ Buchanan took the phrase from Ronald Reagan in his own successful campaign for the Presidency some years earlier, and in turn it was taken up by Donald Trump, who used it repeatedly in his Presidential campaign of 2016. ‘Drain the swamp’ in the case of the Trump campaign turns out to mean somehow getting rid of a whole range of far-right bugbears, not just crime and corruption but also the liberal financier George Soros, globalism, Islam, and mainstream broadcasting stations. Similar slogans have commonly been used by American populists: ‘Main Street versus Wall Street’, or ‘the silent majority’. We can find a comparable populist rhetoric in this country in connection with the Brexit campaign, which sought, with some success, to portray the UK’s membership in the European Union as a policy mainly benefiting international elites and giving unelected bureaucrats in Brussels power over the British people. The British people, we were told, had had enough of experts even if they worked for organizations like the Confederation of British Industry, which in any case were little more than mouthpieces for the European Union. ‘The people’, as defined by the Brexiteers, would take back control from the experts.

Criticism of ‘the Establishment’ and of a system of representative democracy that, far from being truly representative of the people, gives us governments stuffed with Old Etonians or, in the USA, Wall Street billionaires - a system that in practice makes it impossible to oust entrenched elites – is certainly a feature common to all populists. But other political tendencies often take a similar line. You can find it for example in Marxist revolutionary movements, or in Islamic fundamentalism. Both these movements make a clear distinction between their supporters, even if they are in the majority – the proletariat, or the faithful – and their opponents – the bourgeoisie, or the infidel. Both of them in their different ways regard representative democracy as a cloak for vested interests. What makes populism different is its claim to represent not just one particular group of people, however large it may be, but *all* the people, or to put in another way, what makes populism different is its claim that its supporters *are* the people, and opponents and dissenters are not. Populism might begin with the assertion of the participatory rights of those who feel neglected by



the political process, but it typically expresses this assertion by claiming that these people are not just part of the nation, they *are* the nation, while the elites, ultimately are not.

Thus, for example Brexiteers claim that ‘the British people’ voted to leave the EU, although in fact only just over 37 per cent of the electorate did, as you can see from the lower chart. Even if you discount the 27.9 per cent of the electorate, roughly 12 million people, who did not vote, 52 per cent of those who did bother to vote still doesn’t equate to ‘the British people’. Nigel Farage said that the victory for Brexit was ‘a massive victory for the people against the establishment’, thus disqualifying the 48 per cent who voted to remain from being part of ‘the people’. The Brexiteers’ populist rejection of anyone who disagreed with them as being part of the people reached its most absurd extreme with the headline in the *Daily Mail* labelling three judges ‘enemies of the people’ because they ruled that the government had to have the approval of parliament to leave the European Union; when the Brexiteers campaigned on the slogan ‘take back control’ they clearly did not mean to say that Parliament or the British Constitution should take back control; what they were expressing was the populist notion that ‘the people’, as defined by themselves, should take back control. Similarly, the ‘birther’ campaign through which Donald Trump came into politics, tried to disqualify Barack Obama from running for the Presidency by alleging he was not an American citizen, and so, by implication, his supporters and campaigners were un-American as well, in fact, part of a Muslim attempt to take away America from the people. The country was under foreign occupation: ‘the people’ had to vote for Trump to take it back.

As the leading student of contemporary populism, Jan-Werner Müller, has argued, this absolutist ideology poses a clear threat to democracy. Of course, in a sense, of course, *all* political parties claim to represent the people and to implement their wishes against whatever opposition may come from vested interests. But democratic political systems are essentially pluralist. They rest on the acknowledgement that not everybody supports the party in government, and therefore that the views of opponents and the interests of minorities have to be respected. Populism does not: it disqualifies its opponents as not belonging to ‘the people’ at all. The populist Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has rallied extremist supporters as he has increasingly got into trouble. Demonstrators in Brasilia, the capital, have recently called for a military coup to defend him: ‘The Bolsonaro government only has us, the people’, one of them has said: ‘He doesn’t have the media and he doesn’t have Congress because lawmakers are a bunch of rats... We have to do a big cleaning.’ No matter how few of them there may be, the supporters of populist politicians are always ‘the people’, ‘the silent majority’, ‘the nation’: as Viktor Orbán said, when he lost the 2002 Hungarian general election: ‘the nation cannot be in opposition’. So those who actually won the election, his opponents, were not part of the nation at all, despite the fact that they were in the majority.

However, Müller is, I believe, wrong to point to the stigmatization of minorities as a key aspect of populism; similarly, Cas Mudde and Cristobal Kaltwasser, in their *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, are, I think, mistaken in their identification of populist regimes as ‘ethnocracies’, or in other words promoting the rule of one ethnic group, usually the majority, over minorities. It’s not necessarily populist to say, for example, that gypsies in Eastern Europe are not part of the people: such exclusions have a much longer and broader tradition, namely that of nationalism; the idea that a nation should have its own state inevitably involved saying who belonged to the nation and who did not, particularly where, as in most European countries, nationalism was based on language: thus German nationalists ruled out Czechs as part of the nation, Polish nationalists ruled out Jews, and so on. The idea of the nation involved assimilating those who the majority didn’t accept as part of it – hence nineteenth-century English attempts to suppress the Welsh language, nineteenth-century German, or Russian, or Austrian attempts to suppress Polish culture, and so on. This was the reason why the League of Nations was so concerned to legislate for the protection of national minorities between the two world wars, though it failed utterly to have any effect. It’s true that for example Eastern European populist regimes in the present day exclude the Roma, or gypsy community from the nation, but this is a product of nationalism, and has been long before populists came to power. Populism can be racist, like Donald Trump, and it’s certainly the case that populists in some countries have exploited anti-immigrant feelings in some parts of the population. But this doesn’t define populism in itself. What populism is concerned with is not so much ethnicity, though that may come into the picture, as ideas. Populists define the nation as those who agree with them, and those who do not belong to the nation as those who do not agree with them.



Thus, they *know* what the people want, they articulate what they present as the sound common-sense instincts of the people. Because of this intuitive grasp of the people's will, populists feel they do not need to work through elaborate electoral and constitutional systems. They prefer referendums, which bypass representative democracy in favour of putting a simple straightforward question framed to secure the expression of the people's will as they conceive it. A referendum reflects the basic populist hostility to electing representatives who can decide for themselves what government can be formed and exercise their independent judgment on what policies should be supported; the basic populist belief that policies have to be decided in direct communication between 'the people' and their leaders, without any intermediate institutions. The advantage of representative democracy is that laws can be framed with expert advice and after long and careful consideration; if the voters don't like them, they can vote out those who have framed them at the next election. Direct democracy is not rule-bound and can't take account of the complexities of the problems facing modern societies. It also opens the way to political manipulation. As Mrs Thatcher, referring to the postwar Prime Minister Clement Attlee, said: 'Perhaps the late Lord Attlee was right when he said that the referendum was a device of dictators and demagogues' – demagogue being by definition 'a political leader who seeks support by appealing to the desires and prejudices of ordinary people rather than by using rational argument', or what we would today call a populist.

Of course, there are no such things as 'the desires and prejudices of ordinary people' in a collective sense, since ordinary people are always deeply divided about what they want and what they think. For populists, ordinary people do speak with one voice, a voice that is ventriloquized by the populists themselves. Populists in power will do their best to ensure they get the correct results in any elections they are obliged to contest. And if a populist loses an election it must be because the other side has cheated: hence Donald Trump, when he lost a Republican primary election in 2016, claimed that the system was rigged against him; and when Hillary Clinton won nearly three million more votes than he did in the election itself, he explained the result by the Democrats' use of fraudulent postal votes (for which, of course, there was no evidence). Populist leaders even claim a total identity between themselves and 'the people': as Rudolf Hess proclaimed at the Nuremberg Rally in 1934, 'The Party is Hitler! Hitler, however, is Germany, and Germany is also Hitler!' Or the Venezuelan left-wing populist Hugo Chavez's slogan 'Chavez is the people!' So in populist movements there's no discussion or debate, no committees or congresses to formulate policy. None of this is necessary: the leader expresses the will of the people, and the party follows. A prime example of this in the UK was provided by Nigel Farage's Brexit Party, which won the largest number of seats in the 2019 European elections in Britain: the members have no say in the formulation of policies, which are decided by Farage alone.

Populist leaders don't have to come from the people – they can be, and often are members of the economic and social elites themselves, like Donald Trump, or career politicians under a representative system, as Viktor Orbán originally was. What defines them is the relationship they claim with 'the people' as defined by them. They emerge, and tend to triumph, when there is a major economic crisis, as with the bank crash of 2008, or the depression of the early 1930s, which leaves significant numbers of people blaming the elites for their plight; where democratic political culture has shallow roots, as in Hungary, which had not experienced a democratic political system before 1989, or Turkey, or Poland; where political parties are weak, as in Italy, which had seen the traditional party system dominated by Christian Democrats and Communists, collapse after the fall of the Berlin Wall and populists such as Beppe Grillo and Silvio Berlusconi emerge to take their place; and where significant parts of the electorate has come to suffer in real and emotional terms from rapid and, for them, damaging change, whether it's the decay of traditional heavy industry and the communities it supported; cultural alienation through the arrival of immigrants who speak another language or practise another religion, or more generally, the advocacy of multiculturalism by liberal elites; or in similar terms the emergence of issues such as the legalization of abortion, and same-sex marriage.

Above and beyond this, however, a crucial factor in the success of populist politicians and populist movements has been their ability to secure the collaboration of existing parties and what one might regard as significant parts of the Establishment. The prime example of this is Donald Trump, who was initially scorned by the Republican Party, the 'Grand Old Party' but after he looked to be succeeding, won over its unquestioning support, deepening the already serious divisions between Republicans and Democrats in the process; similarly, Hitler, a populist even if he was also



much more than that, would not have come to power without the collaboration of a political elite that shared his desire to dismantle the democratic system of the Weimar Republic. Indeed, his government, appointed on 30 January 1933, was initially a coalition of conservatives and Nazis in which the Nazis were in a minority within the cabinet. Boris Johnson is not a populist by any means, since he operates within the normal constraints of the British constitution and British institutions, even if, on occasion, he threatens to disrupt them. At the same time, however, over the last decade and more, electoral pressure has pushed the Conservative Party to adopt some of the policies and ideas of Farage's populist Brexit movement, not only on Brexit itself but also on issues like immigration. The more populist parties win votes, the harder mainstream parties try to win back the votes by adapting their policies.

It's only in recent years that populists have actually come to power, but some of them have held the reins of government long enough for us to begin to see what they actually do when they are in charge. Populism proposes simple solutions to complex political problems: surely, then, they are bound to fail. But in political terms at least this has turned out not to be the case. A major reason for their success in power has been the ruthlessness with which they have moved against the key institutions of the democratic state. Politicians like Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Jaroslav Kazynsky in Poland, or Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, have moved quickly to destroy the independence of the judiciary and the police, take over the media, turn a neutral civil service into a partisan instruments of their own power, and curb the freedom of teaching and learning in their countries' schools and universities – in Turkey's case by the summary dismissal of 15,000 educational workers in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt of 2016, part of a much wider purge.

Since they claim to be the exclusive representatives of 'the people', populists in power feel justified in reducing the central institutions of civil society to passive recipients of their own orders. They regard criticism of their policies as illegitimate because ultimately, it's criticism of what the people want, as defined, of course, by them. Populists feel this makes it justified either to take over the independent press, or pass laws muzzling it, or arrest critical journalists, as with for example a cartoonist who had been campaigning against the corruption of the populist Modi government in India. They can fill key positions with their own friends, relatives and clients because this is the best way of ensuring that the people's will is implemented without interference from outside. Of course, this leads inevitably to corruption and nepotism on a massive scale, as the populist strongmen syphon off state funds to feather their own nests. But this in no way compromises their popularity with their supporters: if they're corrupt, what does this matter in comparison to their ability to get things done? Similarly, populists can also undermine the functioning of the state, since this is regarded as the instrument of the elites; hence Donald Trump for example has repeatedly fired senior officials who he feels don't follow his every wish: he's been through four national security advisers in under four years, four White House Chiefs of Staff, three Directors of the FBI, four Attorney Generals, and so on; and he has left so many offices of state unfilled that one commentator has observed that 'empty offices are the new norm'.

Populism is an ideology, but it's one that can be attached to other ideologies, and usually is. For instance, the Venezuelan socialist Hugo Chavez described himself as a Marxist, and as President carried out socialist policies such as economic redistribution, worker participation, welfarism and land reform. It would be wrong to describe these as populist in themselves, however, since populists can equally implement policies which, like those of Donald Trump, favour the wealthy and take away welfare provision. Chavez was typically populist in his self-portrayal as a champion of the people against capitalist elites, and once in power, he clamped down on opposition, attacked outside agents – above all the USA – which he accused of undermining his rule, or in other words, undermining the people, and ruled in effect by decree. Chavez's massive spending on reforms depended on oil revenues, and when these collapsed, his successor Nicolas Maduro only remained in power by force, with rapid impoverishment driving millions to leave the country, thousands of extra-judicial killings repressing opposition, and conspiracy theories about American plots to overthrow him rallying his supporters.

Indeed, populist leaders keep their supporters' allegiance through constantly generating a sense of crisis and threat that makes backing them the best way to stay safe. Conspiracy theories are a major tool of control here: one populist leader after another manufactures an imaginary enemy, usually outside the country, whom they accuse of fomenting conspiracies to destroy the country. For Orbán it's the Hungarian-American financier George Soros, whose global



support for liberal causes makes him an enemy of the state; for Erdogan it is the American-based Turkish scholar Fetullah Gülen; for Trump it is the Chinese, whom he accuses of manufacturing the coronavirus; for Brexiteers it is the EU. Once again, it is Donald Trump who is the conspiracy-theorist-in-chief: he began his political career as a champion of the ‘birther’ movement, and continued by alleging among other things that the convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, who killed himself in gaol, was murdered on the orders of Hillary Clinton, that, as Trump’s son said, the coronavirus is the product of a Democratic Party plot ‘They’ll milk it every single day between now and Nov. 3, and guess what, after Nov. 3, coronavirus will magically all of a sudden go away and disappear...’; that, as Trump himself said in 2012, ‘the concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive’, and more besides.

Populists appeal to emotion rather than reason; they scorn the usual rules of evidence and rationality and raise their own instincts over those of experts because they regard their instincts as the instincts of the people. Thus they have no regard for the truth, or for reason, or for measured and considered judgment. Nor do they have any hesitation about advocating violence against their critics. They belittle their opponents by attaching nicknames to them – so Donald Trump calls Hillary Clinton ‘Crooked Hillary’ and Joe Biden ‘Sleepy Joe’, just as Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels called the socialist police chief in Berlin Bernhard Weiss ‘Isidor’ to emphasize his Jewish origins, the populist American politician called his rival in the election for Mayor of Chicago, Anton Cermak, ‘Tony Baloney’. Populist politicians indeed often deliberately use vulgar and insulting language to stress the fact that they don’t belong to the elites or subscribe to their values or standards of behaviour: Rodrigo Duterte, the President of the Philippines, for example, habitually uses swear words and insults in public; criticized by Barack Obama for ordering and encouraging extra-judicial killings of drug dealers, he called the US President a ‘son of a whore’, giving rise to a diplomatic incident. They project themselves as men of the people even when they are not: just as Nigel Farage, a public-school-educated City banker, likes to be photographed in a pub environment downing a pint of beer, and advocates the legalization of smoking in popular institutions like pubs, rather like the American populist Huey Long made a point of drinking Potlikker, a Southern broth drunk by the very poor, which he described as ‘the juice that remains in a pot after greens or other vegetables are boiled with proper seasoning... delicious, invigorating, soul-and-body sustaining’.

Long, a left- rather than right-wing southern populist, who ran Louisiana like a fiefdom but devoted public spending to welfare and job creation during the Depression; he was a college-educated, qualified and practising lawyer but he wore pyjamas to formal occasions instead of formal dress, and though a Senator, publicly demanded the removal of his name from the Washington social register. Like other populists, he frequently attacked the press, which he regarded as the mouthpiece of the Establishment, and he even got his bodyguards to beat up reporters he didn’t like. As Governor of Louisiana he replaced state officials with his own cronies, and when he was elected Senator in 1932, he declared his replacement as Governor, who happened to be one of his enemies, to be an impostor and installed one of his own men in the office; he seized the ballot boxes during an election and manipulated the result, getting so many of his men into the state legislature that he referred to the Congressmen as his ‘trained seals’. Like other populists, he claimed to be clearing the enemies of the people out of the road to progress and neither he nor his supporters cared much how he did this. Another American populist, William H. Murray, called himself ‘alfalfa Bill’, used folksy language in his attacks on the elites - I will plow straight furrows and blast all the stumps. The common people and I can lick the whole lousy gang’. As Governor of Oklahoma in the early 1930s, he appointed twenty of his relatives to state office, and replied to allegations that he had appointed over a thousand new bureaucrats when he had promised to cut the bureaucracy simply by calling them lies. He also declared states of emergency and mobilized the state troopers on a record number of occasions.

If all of this sounds familiar, it’s because Donald Trump stands in a long tradition of American populists: even his narcissism and his craving for attention are less personal character flaws than typical traits of American populists: Huey Long for instance has been described ‘intensely and solely interested in himself. He had to dominate every scene he was in and every person around him. He craved attention and would go to almost any length to get it.’ Many populists have been adept at gaining starring roles in the media: Staying in the public eye is also crucially important for Trump: as a reality tv star, he craves high ratings with the public, and when they don’t materialize, he’ll manufacture them, as with his Inauguration in Washington DC, which he claimed had been attended by more people than any



before him. When it was pointed out that the photographic record showed his predecessor Barack Obama had attracted far larger crowds at his Inauguration, and so Trump's claims were bogus Trump's spokesperson rather than admitting he'd been lying, described his claims as 'alternative facts'.

When populists get into government, they are ill prepared for dealing with a real crisis, because they scorn the advice of experts and civil servants and prefer to rely on their own instincts, which of course they identify with those of 'the people'. During the present, worldwide coronavirus crisis, it's the populist regimes that have in general failed to impose the lockdown measures that have proved in countries like New Zealand and South Korea to be the most effective method of keeping the pandemic under control. Trump began by denying the existence of the epidemic altogether; Bolsonaro still does. Populists' reactions of course are not uniform: Viktor Orbán in Hungary has used the opportunity to pass laws giving him dictatorial powers, to which he has set no time limit. Nor can you identify failure to deal effectively with the pandemic entirely with populism; Sweden has misguidedly relied on citizens to take their own measures, while the UK fatally delayed unrolling a policy because the government and its advisers believed the British people would not tolerate them – another consequence of the myth of British exceptionalism that also powered the Brexit movement – those Continental Europeans might accept restrictions on their freedom, but we Brits won't.

All fascists are undoubtedly populists: you only have to look at the rise of Hitler to see the same characteristics, such as the self-identification with the people, the stigmatization of opponents as non-members of the national community, the hostility to state institutions and democratic norms, the disregard for mainstream science, the disdain for the truth. But all populists are not fascists, though some commentators mistakenly think they are. Besides these things, fascism was also a militaristic movement, with violence and aggression at its heart, the product above all of the brutalizing effects of the First World War. Its very aims were militaristic, driving forward the conquest of Europe, as Hitler did, or the creation of a new Roman Empire, as with Mussolini. War was its ultimate aim. Populists might flirt with violence, even employ it on a minor scale. Like Hitler or Mussolini, they reject international institutions: the interwar dictators destroyed the League of Nations, Trump leaves the Paris climate accords, destroys the Iran nuclear deal, treats the EU as an enemy, and is in the process of abandoning the World Health Organization and, if he gets a second term, he will probably take the USA out of the United Nations as well. Orbán has repudiated the 1919 Treaty of Trianon and lays claim for Hungary on large area of territory which the treaty assigned to other countries, such as Romania. Trump might encourage armed protestors to storm legislatures in American states demanding an end to the lockdown, but I don't see him putting hundreds of thousands of armed and uniformed stormtroopers onto the streets attacking and killing Democrats. In terms of foreign policy his isolationism involves withdrawing troops from conflict zones, not using them to conquer other countries. He might appeal to the racist instincts of his supporters by limiting immigration and building a wall on the Mexican border, he might even construct concentration camps there to hold illegal migrants in shameful and degrading conditions, but I don't see him putting them in gas chambers, like Hitler did with the Jews, or drop poison gas on them like Mussolini did with the Ethiopians.

All the same, populism is a clear and present danger to democracy. In countries like the UK and the USA with strong and deep-rooted democratic institutions, it is still possible to resist it. In countries where these institutions are relatively weak, it's a different matter. As Jan-Werner Müller says, it's important to examine the flaws in the democratic process that populists have identified and carry out reforms to correct them. We need to engage critically with the populists themselves, too; to develop effective methods of countering them and, ultimately, to expose them for what they are: enemies of democracy.

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