



## "Pluralism and political uncertainties. Or why populists increasingly reject both migrants and democracy "

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of the links between the represented and the political representative, as well as on an implausible vision of political debate. But it is rendered almost conceivable by a simultaneous moralization of political life. According to the populist worldview, the “real” people adhere to and perpetuate a set of noble values anchored in a shared common sense. By contrast, and quite logically, those who do not share this moralistic vision of the world are not entitled to belong to “the people” or, worse, would prove to be its enemy. Hence the epithets regularly thrown at journalists by populist leaders. For, by doing their daily job—that is, collecting and cross-checking reliable data and information—they debunk the myth according to which there would be a near perfect coincidence between the will of the people and the populist political platform. The moral claim to be the spokesperson of an “authentic” people, rhetorically endowed with all the virtues, eventually allows the populist to ignore (or, in more serious cases, to overrule) the counter-powers standing in her way.

What is worth pointing out is that these discourses, made of moral unanimity and radical exclusion, have been constructed along a peculiar historical trajectory. In a nutshell, since the 1980s, an anti-migrant rhetoric carried by political formations of the far-right has been gaining ground in public debates. At first, the issue of immigration was the preserve of ethnological nationalist parties. It was, however, seamlessly integrated into the ideological software of the populists, who coupled it with the generic denunciation of a vaguely defined elite. It almost goes without saying that this elite group is corrupt, since its defining feature is that a large gap separates it from the rest of the population, and particularly the constructed “virtuous” people. The populists then quickly accused the corrupt elite of facilitating the arrival of migrants, on the grounds that migration supports the economic interests of the elite. The latter claim packs a punch for it is not entirely baseless. There is indeed a longstanding tendency in the labor market for job providers to turn to cheap foreign labor in order to put a downward pressure on workers’ wages. This economic pattern got spun into a political narrative, according to which there is a hidden coalition between several groups: the liberal elite, migrants and their offspring (that is, minorities) because it is believed that they are driven solely by their self-interests, and thus have a lack of concern for the “virtues” of the people.<sup>1</sup>

But the novel fact of the last few years is that this rhetoric now extends into a much broader and radical condemnation. Rather than denouncing this or that democratic decision taken by some supposedly nefarious politico-economic elite and judged to go against what is constructed and presented as the popular will, populist discourse slipped imperceptibly

## PLURALISM AND POLITICAL UNCERTAINTIES: OR WHY POPULISTS INCREASINGLY REJECT BOTH MIGRANTS AND DEMOCRACY

Martin Deleixhe

I would like to put forward a tentative explanation, in a very concise format, of what is at stake in the astonishing proliferation and success of so-called “populist” formations. Although most of them would be better described as “nationalist,” a few notable exceptions compel me to maintain the umbrella term “populism.” Their electoral success is built, in most cases, on the massive use of “discourses that kill,” to quote the title of this symposium. The political scientist Jan-Werner Müller goes as far as turning this dehumanizing discourse into the distinctive feature of populism.<sup>1</sup> According to him, what provides a unique ideological shape to populism is the populist leader’s claim to embody the single will of a homogeneous people. Of course, such a claim rests on a simplistic understanding

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1. See Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (London: Penguin, 2017).

towards a denunciation of democracy as a political regime. It is therefore not so much the outcome of a public debate that is contested, but the very principle of democratic deliberation.

My thesis, to explain this disturbing evolution, can be summed up in a few words. I think that hidden behind this mutation from a sustained but focused criticism levied at migration to an unqualified denunciation of democracy is the same logic: the need for certainties. Or, to say it in the negative, a fear of the void, of indeterminacy, that manifests itself in the rejection of all critical debate.

What would explain the fact that some people's hatred of migrants precedes and prefigures the detestation of democracy? To put it briefly (and glossing over the nuances that would have to be injected in a longer text), both migrants and democracy share an intrinsic link with the notion of *pluralism*.

By joining a political community in which they did not grow up, migrants bring in ways of doing, seeing and thinking that are *just not done around here*. Their behaviors are not always in close alignment with the values and norms that weave the fabric of national public culture. This misalignment can then constrain the two actors in this interaction towards some mutual adjustments. In this respect, 'the stranger' is no different from "the young," since both are "newcomers" to the community.<sup>2</sup> Both foreigners and new generations must find a way to integrate into the political community without betraying who they are and how they were raised. In return, they can invite, deliberately or unknowingly, the political community to question the legitimacy and the justice of its collective practices. The foreigner, because he brings something new, obliges his host community to take a reflexive and critical look at itself—which it can experience as a painful reproach, even as a questioning of its own existence (one thinks of the conspiracy theory of the "great replacement" which circulates on the extreme right in France and the US). In this sense, the foreigner is at least a vector of uncertainty since he or she raises new questions. In fact, the stranger poses a question to the imaginary and always debatable foundations of the myth of national community.

The same goes for democracy. Understood as the exercise of power that legitimates itself through the opening of public debate to all, democracy is inseparable from a plurality of points of view. The very principle of the alternation of power confirms the link between democracy and pluralism. After the democratic revolution, political power is no longer the

property of anyone. No-one can be in power for an indefinite period. Power is only temporarily entrusted to the representatives of the current majority point of view. Thus, democracy presupposes the acceptance of a diversity of worldviews, which goes hand in hand with a form of relativism. Participants in public debates can only exchange constructively if they admit that they cannot be the only ones to hold an absolute and infallible truth. Everyone must admit the very principle of the criticism of their arguments and positions within a continuous deliberation (although punctuated by electoral deadlines). Therefore, democracy cannot claim to establish its legitimacy on either a state ideology, a philosophy of history, or a theological authority. It is the political regime that is founded upon (and therefore depends on) the participation—pluralistic and conflictual—of its citizens.

This explains why populists, after having made foreigners a convenient scapegoat, are now attacking democracy itself. Both convey a certain discomfort, an obligation to submit to a critical examination which is incompatible with the postulate of a homogeneous and unanimously virtuous people. They, democracy and foreigners, invite us to examine ourselves, and expose the fact that the community as a complete whole does not exist. Only society, fragmented and traversed by various currents, can demonstrate concrete existence. At the risk of appearing pessimistic, it must therefore be posited that this mutation of an anti-migrant rhetoric into an anti-democratic rhetoric is only the reflection of an intensification of its intrinsic principle: the rejection of critical pluralism. If we don't oppose these discourses that kill, they will not only continue to jeopardize the lives of migrants. Eventually, they will also threaten the vitality of democracy.

2. I owe this insight to Stavo Debovage, *Qu'est-ce que l'hospitalité?* (Montreal: Liber, 2017).