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## False Flags

### The Myth of the Nationalist Resurgence

*Jan-Werner Müller*

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### The Myth of the Nationalist Resurgence

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*Jan-Werner Müller*

There appears to be one indisputable global trend today: the rise of nationalism. Self-described nationalists now lead not only the world's largest autocracies but also some of its most populous democracies, including Brazil, India, and the United States. A deepening fault line seems to divide cosmopolitans and nationalists, advocates of “drawbridge down” and “drawbridge up.” And it seems that more and more people are opting for the latter—for “closed” over “open.”

They do so, many commentators claim, because they feel threatened by something called “globalism” and crave to have their particular national identities recognized and affirmed. According to this now conventional narrative, today's surge of nationalist passions represents a return to normal: the attempts to create a more integrated world after the Cold War were a mere historical blip, and humanity's tribal passions have now been reawakened.

This, however, is a deeply flawed interpretation of the current moment. In reality, the leaders described as “nationalists” are better understood as populist poseurs who have won support by drawing on the rhetoric and imagery of nationalism. Unfortunately, they

have managed to convince not only their supporters but also their opponents that they are responding to deep nationalist yearnings among ordinary people. The more that defenders of liberalism and the liberal order buy the stories these leaders (and associated movements) are selling and adopt the framing and rhetoric of populism, the more they allow their opponents' ideas to shape political debates. In doing so, parties and institutions of the center-left and the center-right are helping bring about the very thing they hope to avoid: more closed societies and less global cooperation to address common problems.

#### THE PEOPLE AND THE NATION

What the past few years have witnessed is not the rise of nationalism per se but the rise of one variant of it: nationalist populism. “Nationalism” and “populism” are often conflated, but they refer to different phenomena. The most charitable definition of “nationalism” is the idea that cultural communities should ideally possess their own states and that loyalty to fellow nationals ought to trump other obligations. “Populism,” meanwhile, is sometimes taken to be a shorthand for “criticism of elites,” and it is true that populists, when in opposition, criticize sitting governments and other parties. More important, however, is their claim that they and they alone represent what they usually call “the real people” or “the silent majority.” Populists thus declare all other contenders for power to be illegitimate. In this way, populists' complaints are always fundamentally personal and moral: the problem, invariably, is that their adversaries are corrupt. In this sense, populists are

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indeed antiestablishment. But populists also deem citizens who do not take their side to be inauthentic, not part of “the real people”: they are un-American, un-Polish, un-Turkish, and so on. Populism attacks not merely elites and establishments but also the very idea of political pluralism—with vulnerable minorities usually becoming the first victims.

This antipluralism explains why populist leaders tend to take their countries in an authoritarian direction if they have sufficient power and if countervailing forces, such as an independent judiciary or free media, are not strong enough to resist them. Such leaders reject all criticisms with the claim that they are merely executing the people’s will. They seek out and thrive on conflict; their political business model is permanent culture war. In a way, they reduce all political questions to questions of belonging: whoever disagrees with them is labeled an “enemy of the people.”

Populism is not a doctrine; it is more like a frame. And all populists have to fill the frame with content that will explain who “the real people” are and what they want. That content can take many different forms and can draw on ideas from the left or the right. From the late 1990s until his death in 2013, the Venezuelan populist leader Hugo Chávez created a disastrous “socialism for the twenty-first century” in his country, wrecking its economy and demonizing all of his opponents in the process. Today’s right-wing populists mostly draw on nationalist ideas, such as distrust of international institutions (even if a nation joined such organizations voluntarily), economic protectionism, and hostility to the idea of providing development aid to other

countries. These beliefs often cross over into nativism or racism, as when nationalist populists promote the idea that only native-born citizens are entitled to jobs and benefits or insinuate that some immigrants can never be loyal citizens. To be sure, one can be a nationalist without being a populist; a leader can maintain that national loyalties come first without saying that he or she alone can represent the nation. But today, all right-wing populists are nationalists. They promise to take back control on behalf of “the real people,” which in their definition is never the population as a whole. Nigel Farage, the leader of the far-right UK Independence Party at the time of the Brexit vote, celebrated the outcome as a “victory for real people,” implying that the 48 percent of British voters who preferred that their country stay in the EU were not properly part of the nation.

#### **DON’T BELIEVE THE HYPE**

The potent combination of nationalism and populism has spread in recent years. A populist playbook—perhaps even a populist art of governance—has emerged as politicians in disparate countries have studied and learned from one another’s experiences. In 2011, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, who leads Poland’s populist ruling Law and Justice party, announced that he wanted to create “Budapest in Warsaw,” and he has systematically copied the strategies pioneered by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in Hungary. On the other side of the world, Jair Bolsonaro got elected president by following the playbook, railing against immigration (even though more people leave Brazil than enter) and declaring, “Brazil above all, God above everyone.”



*Full of hot air: at the inauguration of Jair Bolsonaro, Brasília, Brazil, January 2019*

To some observers, it appears that nationalist populists have profited from a bitter backlash against globalization and increasing cultural diversity. This has, in fact, become the conventional wisdom not only among populists themselves but also among academics and liberal opponents of populism. The irony, however, is that although critics often charge populists with peddling reductive messages, it is these same critics who now grasp at simple explanations for populism's rise. In doing so, many liberal observers play right into their opponents' hands by taking at face value and even amplifying the dubious stories that nationalist populists tell about their own success.

For example, Orbán has claimed that the 2010 parliamentary elections in

Hungary constituted a “revolution at the voting booths” and that Hungarians had endorsed what he has described as his “Christian and national” vision of an “illiberal democracy.” In reality, all that happened was that a majority of Hungarians were deeply disappointed by the country's left-wing government and did what standard democratic theory recommended they do: they voted for the main opposition party, Orbán's Fidesz. By the next time Hungarians went to the polls, in 2014, Orbán had gerrymandered the electoral map in Fidesz's favor; erected the Orwellian-sounding System of National Cooperation, which included drastic restrictions on media pluralism and civil society; and weakened the independence of the judiciary and other sources of checks and balances.

Similarly, in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, “the people” did not comprehensively endorse a nationalist “America first” agenda. Rather, in more mundane fashion, citizens who identified as Republicans came out to vote for their party’s candidate, who was not a typical politician but also hardly the leader of a spontaneous grass-roots antiglobalization movement. Donald Trump ultimately won the backing of the party machinery; the enthusiastic support of establishment Republican figures such as Chris Christie, Newt Gingrich, and Rudy Giuliani; and near-constant cheerleading on Fox News. As the political scientists Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels have argued, it turned out to be a fairly normal election, albeit with an abnormal Republican candidate who faced a deeply unpopular Democratic contender.

Likewise, Bolsonaro did not win last year’s presidential election in Brazil because a majority of Brazilians wanted a nationalist military dictatorship. The bulk of Bolsonaro’s support came from citizens fed up with the corruption of traditional political elites from across the political spectrum and unwilling to return the left-wing Workers’ Party to power. It also helped that the country’s powerful agricultural sector and, eventually, its financial and industrial elites threw their weight behind the far-right candidate—as did influential evangelical Christian leaders.

As the political scientist Cas Mudde has pointed out, nationalist populists often represent not a silent majority but a very loud minority. They do not come to power because their ideology is an unstoppable world-historical force. Rather, they depend on the center-

right’s willingness to collaborate with them—as was the case for Trump, Bolsonaro, and the pro-Brexit campaigners—or they win by at least partly hiding their intentions, as was the case with Orban.

Once in power, most nationalist populists don’t actually work to take back control on the people’s behalf, as they promised to do. Instead, they perform a sort of nationalist pantomime of largely symbolic gestures: for example, promising to build walls (which achieve nothing concrete other than inciting hatred against minorities) or occasionally having the state seize a multinational company. Behind the scenes, such leaders are generally quite accommodating of international institutions and multinational corporations. They are concerned less with genuinely reasserting their countries’ autonomy than with appearing to do so.

Take Trump, for instance. He has threatened individual companies that planned to close facilities in the United States. But he has also stripped away labor regulations at a breakneck pace, making it hard to claim that he cares about protecting workers. Likewise, after deriding the North American Free Trade Agreement during his campaign, Trump wound up negotiating a new trade deal with Canada and Mexico whose terms are substantially similar to those of NAFTA. In Hungary, Orban has nationalized some industries and railed against foreign corporations that he claimed exploited the Hungarian people. Yet his government recently passed a law that allows employers to demand that workers put in 400 hours of overtime each year, up from the prior limit of 250 hours—and to withhold

payment for that extra labor for up to three years. The main beneficiaries of this measure (dubbed “the slave law” by its critics) are the German car companies that employ thousands of Hungarian factory workers.

### **NOT EVERY FIGHT IS CULTURAL**

Many politicians, especially those from mainstream center-right parties, have been at a loss when it comes to countering nationalist populism. Increasingly, though, they are betting on a seemingly paradoxical strategy of what one might call “destruction through imitation.”

Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, for example, have tried to outflank their far-right competitors with tough talk on refugees, Islam, and immigration.

This strategy is unlikely to succeed in the long run, but it is bound to do serious damage to European democracy. No matter how fast one chases populists to the fringes, it’s almost impossible to catch them. Extremist outfits such as the Danish People’s Party or the Party for Freedom of the far-right Dutch provocateur Geert Wilders will never be satisfied with the immigration proposals of more established parties, no matter how restrictive they are. And their supporters are unlikely to switch their allegiances: they’ll continue to prefer the originals over the imitators.

A deeper concern is the effect that established parties making opportunistic shifts in response to the populist threat will have. First, they denounce populists as demagogues peddling lies. Then, when support for populists grows, mainstream politicians begin to suggest that the populists have intuited, or even firmly know, something about people’s

concerns and anxieties that others haven't, or don't. This reflects an understanding of democratic representation as an almost mechanical system for reproducing existing interests, ideas, and even identities. In this view, savvy populist political entrepreneurs discover trends within the polity and then import them into the political system.

But that is not how democracy really works. Representation is a dynamic process, in which citizens' self-perceptions and identities are heavily influenced by what they see, hear, and read: images, words, and ideas produced and circulated by politicians, the media, civil society, and even friends and family members. Modern democracy is a two-way street, in which representative systems do not merely reflect interests and political identities; they shape them, as well.

Nationalist populists have benefited greatly from this process, as media organizations and scholars have adopted their framing and rhetoric, with the effect of ratifying and amplifying their messages. Casual, seemingly self-evident accounts of "ordinary people" who have been "left behind" or "disrespected" and who fear "the destruction of their culture" need to be treated with extreme caution: they are not necessarily accurate descriptions of people's lived experience. One can frame, say, the French government's recent decision to raise taxes on gasoline and to introduce tighter speed limits in the countryside—steps that spurred the "yellow vest" protest movement—as demonstrating disrespect for a "way of life" in rural and exurban areas. But a more mundane interpretation is that the French government simply failed to see how particular policies would have different effects on different parts of

the population. The government failed at distributive justice, not at cultural recognition.

Across Europe and the United States, journalists and analysts have posited that many people—especially older white people—feel disrespected by elites. It's hard to ascertain how many people have directly encountered disrespect. But virtually day and night—on talk radio, on TV news programs, and on social media—millions of people are told that they feel disrespected. What is routinely presented as a cultural conflict between supposedly authentic rural heartlands and cosmopolitan cities usually involves a much less dramatic fight over how opportunities are distributed through regulatory and infrastructure decisions: from the price of airline ticket for flights to more remote areas, to the status of community banks, to policies that determine the cost of housing in big cities.

By casting all issues in cultural terms and by embracing the idea that populists have developed a unique purchase on people's concerns and anxieties, established parties and media organizations have created something akin to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Once the entire political spectrum adopts populist language about voters' interests and identities, more and more people will begin to understand themselves and their interests in those terms. For example, voters fed up with established center-right parties might initially cast protest votes for populist parties such as the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) or outsider political candidates such as Trump. But if those voters are then continuously portrayed as "AfD people" or as members of

“Trump’s base,” they may well come to adopt those identities and develop a more permanent sense of allegiance to the party or politician who at first represented little more than a way to express dissatisfaction with the status quo. Eventually, as mainstream parties opportunistically adapt their messages and media commentators lazily repeat populist talking points, the entire political spectrum can shift rightward.

### **BEAT THEM, DON’T JOIN THEM**

This argument may sound like liberal wishful thinking: “People are not nearly as nationalist as populists claim! Conflicts are really all about material interests and not about culture!” But the point is not that fights over culture and identity are illusory or illegitimate just because populists always happen to promote them. Rather, the point is that establishment institutions are too quickly turning to culture and identity to explain politics. In this way, they are playing into populists’ hands—doing their jobs for them, in effect.

Consider, for example, populist attacks on “globalists” who favor “open borders.” Even center-left parties are now ritually distancing themselves from that idea, even though, in reality, no politician of any consequence anywhere wants to open all borders. Even among political philosophers not constrained by political concerns, only a very small minority calls for the abolition of frontiers. It is true that advocates of global governance and economic globalization have made serious blunders: they often presented their vision of the world as an inevitable outcome, as when British Prime Minister Tony Blair asserted in 2005 that debating global-

ization was like “debating whether autumn should follow summer.” Some supporters of free trade falsely claimed that everyone would benefit from a more integrated world. But nationalist populists don’t truly want to address those errors. They seek, instead, to cynically exploit them in order to weaken democratic institutions and lump together advocates of globalization, transnational tax evaders, and high-flying private equity investors—along with human rights advocates and immigrants, refugees, and many other marginalized groups—into an undifferentiated “cosmopolitan, rootless elite”: a “them” to pit against an “us.”

There are deep and often legitimate conflicts about trade, immigration, and the shape of the international order. Liberals should not present their choices on these issues as self-evidently correct or as purely win-win; they must convincingly make the case for their ideas and justify their stance to the disadvantaged. But they should also not adopt the framing and rhetoric of populists, opportunistic center-right politicians, and academics who make careers out of explaining away xenophobic views as merely symptoms of economic anxiety. Doing so will lead liberals to make preemptive concessions that betray their ideals. 🌐