What We Talk about When We Talk about Populism
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What Is Populism?, by Jan-Werner Müller, University of Pennsylvania Press.

At the end of the twentieth century, an election result in the prosperous Alpine country of Austria rattled the European political scene. The Freedom Party won 26.9 percent of the vote, and in 1999 entered into the government in a coalition with the conservative People’s Party. The result struck a nerve because of the Freedom Party’s nationalistic politics of intolerance and the party’s roots in the country’s Nazi past. The Freedom Party had been gaining strength since the 1980s; now it had a claim to power. The architecture of Europe’s postwar settlement had been crafted to prevent such a breach. Warnings sounded across the continent as the leadership of the European Union attempted sanctions against Austria’s government. But the crisis passed as the Freedom Party tumbled in the next elections.

Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, France, Sweden, and elsewhere in Europe the electoral prospects of the right-wing nationalist parties rose and fell and rose again. Silvio Berlusconi clung to power through alliances with nationalist movements with fascist roots, but he could be dismissed as an Italian problem. In 2015, in another prosperous Alpine country, the right-wing nationalist Swiss People’s Party emerged as the nation’s largest political party with 29.4 percent of the vote, but in Switzerland and elsewhere in Western Europe right-wing movements had yet to capture a third of the electorate. There were, however, danger signs to the east. Victor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary, intensified his attacks against democratic norms and the “poison” of immigration, while in Poland Jarław Kaczyński’s Law and
Justice Party followed Orbán's model by undermining the autonomy of the courts, the civil service, the public media, and other institutions. The nationalist and authoritarian turn in Hungary and Poland had specific origins in the post-Soviet transitions in those countries.

But three elections in 2016 put an end to the notion that more-established democracies were less susceptible to the lures of right-wing nationalism at the ballot box. The first marked the return of the Austrian Freedom Party, when on 22 May its candidate Norbert Hofer came within a fraction of a percentage point of victory in the presidential election. A court overturned the results, and on 4 December Austrians went back to the polls, and this time Hofer lost by more than seven percent. Even so, the Freedom Party with its xenophobic and intolerant platform has emerged as the country’s biggest political party and is knocking on the door of power.

Then there was Brexit. In a 23 June referendum, a majority of British voters supported taking Britain out of the European Union. Nigel Farage and his UK Independence Party spearheaded the Brexit campaign with nationalistic appeals focusing on the “invasion” of Polish and other immigrants and the Muslim “fifth column.” They did so in combination with an anti-EU bloc of Conservative Party politicians. The result was the British negotiating their exit from the European Union, which has spurred the ambitions of Geert Wilders’s Freedom Party in the Netherlands, Marine Le Pen’s National Front in France, and other right-wing nationalist movements across the continent.

On 8 November, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. Nigel Farage, who had campaigned with Trump, declared that “the world has changed.” Victor Orbán saluted Trump’s victory as marking “the year of rebellion.” And Marine Le Pen declared a new phase in the “global revolution.” Compared to most of his fellow revolutionists in Europe—who tend to be polished and sophisticated politicians—Trump is uninformed, crude, and brutal. But his message is the same: immigrants are dangerous and criminal; Muslims are a Trojan horse threatening Christian civilization; politicians and journalists are traitorous for coddling immigrants and Muslims; and political norms and institutions are rigged against the people and in favor
of the nation’s enemies. In alignment with the Trump White House, right-wing nationalist movements are scrambling political calculations across much of Europe.

How are these developments to be understood? What is the nature of this intolerant and authoritarian wave that has come ashore on both sides of the Atlantic? And why now? The word of the moment is *populism*. Political analysts, journalists, and other commentators seem to agree that citizens are abandoning the established parties to throw in their lot with populist insurgencies. It turns out, however, that there is no agreement on what populism is, its characteristics, or why it happens. Nor is there agreement on who is and who is not a populist. Using populism as a tool of analysis has led to the clarity of mud. For many Europeans, just as for some Americans, *populism* is understood simply as ethnic and racial intolerance and nationalism. That might serve as journalistic shorthand. But as an analytical concept, in Europe as in the United States, populism is a jumble of confused meanings, many of which are bound up in the tangled roots of American political and intellectual history. Untangling these roots provides a starting point for making sense of the emergent power of right-wing nationalism in a transatlantic context.

The People’s Party of the 1890s, also known as the Populist Party, marked a departure in American politics. Apart from its role in putting the word *populism* in our political language, the Populists were responsible for several major innovations. They introduced a set of economic reforms aimed at creating a more equitable and just society: a progressive income tax; government regulation of industry and public ownership of railroads and banking; a flexible national currency and farm credits; and union rights and the eight-hour day for workers. The Populists looked to achieve their goals by extending democracy and checking the corporate purchase of the political process. They conducted wide-scale campaigns of political education and deliberation; demanded the direct election of senators; and brought hundreds of thousands of women into the movement, many of whom worked
effectively for women's suffrage. The Populists forged the most successful class-based political movement in US history to that point, and perhaps ever. The Populists had urban and middle-class reformers within their ranks, but their party was founded as an “industrial congress” of the Farmers' Alliance, the Knights of Labor, and other farm and labor organizations.

In short, Populism was a progressive farmer-labor movement. Its demands, methods, and makeup resembled the labor and democratic socialist parties that emerged in the other industrializing countries at the end of the nineteenth century. But while most such parties emerged within the constellation of parliamentary representation, the People’s Party collapsed under the pressure of America’s two-party system. The party fractured when in 1896 it endorsed for president the reform Democrat William Jennings Bryan in a losing cause. Afterward, former Populists in Texas, Kansas, and Oklahoma provided the rural base of the Socialist Party. But most Populists regrouped in the progressive wings of the Democratic and Republican parties, which by the 1910s had enacted much of the Populist program, including the progressive income tax, bank regulation, and the direct election of senators. Populist ideas about federal jobs programs and farm credits took shape under Roosevelt’s New Deal. And Lyndon Johnson, in formulating his Great Society, drew lessons learned from his Texas Populist grandfather Samuel Ely Johnson Sr. After the Johnson presidency self-immolated in Indochina, Oklahoma Senator Fred Harris and other progressive Democrats called for a “New Populism” of inclusive and egalitarian reforms. And down to the present, the broad political currents that Americans call progressivism, or New Deal liberalism, or democratic socialism, have roots in the Populism of the late nineteenth century. There is a reason why Bernie Sanders has an image of the Populist and socialist Eugene Victor Debs on his wall.

But a group of Cold-War-era scholars scrambled this common understanding. In the 1950s, with the Holocaust a recent memory, and with the menacing rise of McCarthyism, social theorists promoted the idea that mass movements like Populism carried the danger of fascism and other horrors of the time. In his Pulitzer-Prize-winning
The Age of Reform, the Columbia University historian Richard Hofstadter applied the methods of mass psychology to explore the anxieties, misplaced fears, and irrational delusions of the Populist farmers of the 1890s. According to his findings, Populism was the taproot of America’s politics of unreason, demagogy, authoritarianism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and intolerance. The left-wing Populism of the 1890s, he suggested, had “soured” into Joseph McCarthy’s right-wing paranoia of the 1950s. The evidence for this shape shifting was anecdotal. He pointed to the example of Tom Watson, a leader of the People’s Party in Georgia, who later emerged as a vocal negrophobe and anti-Semite. Hofstadter’s Age of Reform would be described as “the most influential book ever published on the history of twentieth-century America.” It was also an expression of enormous condescension toward rural and working people and their alleged psychological pathologies.

Over the last half century, scholars studying the Populists of the 1890s have left the Hofstadter thesis in tatters. Despite a wide range of interpretive frameworks, they have reaffirmed that the Populism of the 1890s was a moment when millions of working people mobilized against corporate power in a relatively democratic and inclusive fashion. The Populists had their share of panaceas and conspiracy theories, but they were no match for the dogmas, demagogy, and delusions to be found within the corporate boardrooms and the councils of the Republican and Democratic Parties. In the South, the Populists’ record of interracial cooperation was marred by prejudice and even hostility, but they proved no match for the Democratic Party and its century-long parade of virulent negrophobes. When it came to anti-Semitism, the post-Populist Tom Watson, for example, was a small-fry bigot compared to Madison Grant, the anti-Semitic Manhattan millionaire, friend of Teddy Roosevelt, and master-race theorist, who escorted through Congress the quotas barring Jews and other immigrants lacking pure “Nordic” blood. As for the “souring” of left-wing Populism into right-wing intolerance, it never happened—as Michael Rogin, Walter Nugent, and other scholars have demonstrated over the last fifty years.
Nonetheless, more often than not, variations of Hofstadter’s populists find their way into contemporary punditry. Journalists tell us that we are living in a populist moment, and commentators across the political spectrum speculate on its trajectory and debate among themselves whether populism represents a dangerous threat or a welcome corrective to the political order. Yet, they tend to agree on the nature of the beast: Populism, they tell us, represents a revolt against the elites and their institutions; it contains a psychological element of anxiety, fear, or resentment; and its driving force is economic pressure on the working classes. This is a beast, they tell us, that transcends ideological categories. The populist revolt of the commentariat is both Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party, both the left-wing Spanish Podemos and the right-wing French National Front, both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. But this analytical framework obscures more than it clarifies. By tossing democratic socialists and authoritarian nationalists into one populist bucket the effective result is analytical sludge.

This is what makes Jan-Werner Müller’s *What Is Populism?* so useful. In the pursuit of analytical clarity he suggests cutting the knot and separating left-wing inclusive movements from right-wing exclusive ones. For Müller, it is the latter category that deserves the populist label. The US People’s Party may have called themselves populists, he notes, but in actuality they were a type of democratic socialists. The same goes for Pablo Iglesias of the Spanish Podemos, Jean-Luc Mélenchon of La France Insoumise, Jeremy Corbyn of British Labour, and Bernie Sanders of Our Revolution, who all seek to revive a more left-wing, egalitarian, and democratic alternative to the increasingly centrist and compromised leaderships of the Socialist, Labour, and Democratic Parties. By contrast, Müller argues that it is the likes of Victor Orbán, Marine Le Pen, and Donald Trump, with their exclusive and undemocratic politics, that belong to the political category of populism. This definition is not necessarily preferable to describing these movements as varieties of ethnic and racial nationalism. But terminology aside, as a German political scientist now at Princeton, Müller offers a transatlantic perspective that, although written before the US presidential election, gives clues to the meaning of the Trump
administration by exploring the workings of a political type. In places he offers the briefest sketch, and his categories cannot always do justice to the overwhelming complexity of our historical moment. Nonetheless, he puts conventional wisdom to the test with provocative insights that are useful for anyone trying to make sense of how 2016 changed the political landscape.

Populism, according to Müller, is “an exclusionary form of identity politics.” This awkward phrase is rooted in contemporary political debate, but Müller’s argument is worth following. He explains that populist parties and leaders assert that they represent the people, while equating a section of the people with the whole people—or the only “real” people. Victor Orbán says that he champions the people of Hungary, but the Roma, immigrants, non-Christians, and former communists and other political opponents do not belong among them. Donald Trump tells his supporters that “the only important thing is the unification of the people—because the other people don’t mean anything.” In other words, Trump represents the unity of certain people, while banning, deporting, vilifying, and jailing “other people” who “don’t mean anything.” According to Müller, this *pars pro toto* mindset about “the people” lies at the center of the distinct claims and inner logic of populism. But to understand this finding and its significance requires working through the problems of what is not unique to populism and what is not populism at all.

The first problem has to do with elites. Characterizing populists as outsiders or underdogs fighting against elites or the establishment raises more questions than it answers. All types of political movements or candidates “run against Washington,” so to speak. Since the advent of universal male suffrage in the United States, this has been the language of politics driven by office seekers trying to gain votes to replace insiders holding office. Moreover, right-wing nationalist movements embrace all kinds of elites and establishment fixtures just so long as they align with the right people against their adversaries. In Europe, these movements are said to be revolts against politicians, but, as Müller notes, career politicians such as Geert Wilders and Victor Orbán lead these very movements. But being extremely rich
and powerful is good, too. Silvio Berlusconi’s billions, telecommunications monopoly, and “bunga bunga” lifestyle have been essential to his political success. Nigel Farage plays the part of Joe Everyman in political commercials, but made his money as an investment banker in the City. The head of the Swiss People’s Party, Albert Rösti, is the president of Swisssoil. Then there are populist elites by birth. The Countess Beatrix von Storch, an heiress to European royalty, serves as a deputy in the European Parliament for the right-wing nationalist Alternative for Germany.

Billionaires, bankers, oil executives, and countesses all fit seamlessly within the logic of exclusion. They serve as symbols of the success and power that the leaders will bring to their people. No one employs this symbolism better than Trump. His cabinet includes career politicians like Jeff Sessions, whose public life has been devoted to the xenophobia, scapegoating, and intolerance that has defined Trump’s political messaging. A batch of tough-talking generals adds to the aura of elite power. But Trump’s team is mainly about money. It includes the ex-chair of the world’s biggest oil corporation; the president and three veterans of Wall Street’s biggest investment bank; and a group of billionaire heirs and heiresses who got their fortunes from their families, all led by America’s most ostentatious such billionaire, who lives in a gilded tower in the middle of Manhattan. And in the nationalist formula of his political appeal, the more gilded the tower the better.

To focus on personnel trivializes the extent to which the Trump administration is also a creature of the political establishment and the structures of national and global corporate power. Lobbyists for Wall Street financiers and oil corporations write the administration’s regulatory policies, while Republican majorities in Congress handle its legislative agenda. In both cases, the overriding policy goals are further to empower and enrich corporations and people of extreme wealth; beef up the military-industrial complex and its global empire; and, in the name of free markets, dismantle health-care programs, public education, and the social-safety net. The right-wing nationalist parties in Britain, Switzerland, and other countries have similar social policies, whereas Marine Le Pen in France and Jarosław Kaczyński in
Poland, for example, promise state pensions and social welfare to protect the citizens they favor from the vagaries of the capitalist market. At times, Trump has made similar promises. And his failure to deliver on these promises has led commentators to speculate that this may lead some of Trump’s supporters to feel betrayed. But it would be a mistake to underestimate the role of untrammeled corporate and military power—the highest profits and the biggest bombs—in a nationalist narrative of American greatness.

Then there is the problem of mass psychology. The rise of populist movements, we are told, is an expression of often intangible and irrational forces of anxiety, fear, rage, and resentment. This may seem plausible enough, although it might be worthwhile to ask how the configuration of transatlantic anxiety, fear, and anger has shifted since Trump’s election. But more fundamentally, as Müller argues, such “social-psychological” explanations are a form of paternalism that infantilizes adult, often very savvy, political participants. Trump has proposed walls and bans, and we are supposed to accept that when his core supporters applaud walls and bans they do so because they abandon reason to their anxieties and fears. But what if they do so because they share similar assumptions about how the world works with the celebrated intellectuals who write about the “clash of civilizations”? And what if research papers churned out by Ivy-League scholars at well-funded conservative think tanks and disseminated via the Wall Street Journal, Fox News, and right-wing websites confirm these assumptions? They are wrong, they are narrow-minded, and they are xenophobic, but there is no reason to believe that Trump’s core supporters are in any way less rational than the well-heeled conservative researchers with whom they agree. The difference between these groups is largely a matter of political style, not substance.

When Trump supporters and Republican activists deny climate science, this too is interpreted as an emotional response, a sign of resentment against science and expertise. Yet this interpretation underestimates right-wing commitments to scientific arguments. Yes, there are religious arguments, too, but conservative websites are filled with scientific information about the climate. Trump himself has
no interest in such things, but many of those who subscribe to his “America first” nationalism believe science is on their side, and dismiss climate change as a globalist religion. Dedicated bloggers and self-styled experts post their findings—on sunspot cycles, temperature buoys, and ice sheets—because they do believe in science, and are convinced that if it were done correctly it would prove that the claims about climate change are a hoax. They are mistaken, and the quality of their science is no better than that of the scientists supported by the tobacco industry, the agnotologists who labored to create doubts about the link between smoking and cancer. But we have no way to measure whether the freelance climate-change deniers are more angry or resentful than the high-salaried Exxon-Mobil and Koch Industries-funded climate experts who pursue parallel goals and whose science is similarly awful.

At the same time, to believe that climate change is a hoax is to embrace a theory that thousands of climate scientists in dozens of countries are conspiring to fudge their findings with the aim of getting research grants and stripping Americans of their carbon-driven way of life. This theory is staggeringly implausible, especially given how much more money could be made from science disproving the human contribution to climate change. But conspiracy is an intrinsic part of what Müller describes as populist logic. Trump came onto the political stage riding a conspiracy theory about Barack Obama’s birth. As the logic goes, a black man and the son of an immigrant with a Muslim name could not possibly be a legitimate representative of real Americans. The only explanation, Trump insisted, is that Obama is a fake American with a fake birth certificate. Trump responded with the same logic after his election when confronted with the fact that he had lost the popular vote by nearly three million ballots. Since he alone represents the “real people,” the discrepancy could only be explained by the fact that his opponent had received three million fraudulent ballots cast by immigrants. This, too, is implausible, to say the least. When Trump’s supporters embrace this claim, however, they are not embracing rage or irrational fear. They are echoing the policy studies on voter fraud put out by think tanks like the Heritage
Foundation and translated into voter-restriction legislation by cool and calculating Republican operatives. The angry crowds at Trump rallies and the Republican insiders who speak the jargon of policy science share a common belief that “others” are stealing elections from real Americans.

And finally there is the question of class. Although on both sides of the Atlantic right-wing nationalist parties have attracted working-class voters, Müller argues that these parties have a complex sociology and tend to be “catch-all” parties attracting supporters among all classes. These parties frame their hostility to immigration, for example, as a defense of the wages and social benefits of nonimmigrant workers, but the messaging has a broader appeal. When the Austrian Freedom Party releases an anti-immigrant advertisement claiming that it is necessary to wear a headscarf to get a spot in social housing, the purpose is to elicit a sense of injustice among renters competing for low-cost apartments, as well as among “real” Austrians who own houses and villas. When Trump scrapped the Paris climate agreement in the name of an “America First” policy of protecting workers’ jobs, he did so backed by virtually the entire Republican Party establishment, a collection of coal and oil magnates, the US Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, and other lobbies representing a large swath of the American business class.

Pundits make rough estimates of working-class support for right-wing nationalist parties that often tell us less than advertised. They point to the fact that men without university degrees have been voting in large numbers for such parties, suggesting that they represent a vehicle of discontent for the industrial worker displaced in the new economy. But men without degrees are not a homogeneous group of unemployed coal miners and factory hands. In fact, such men, including those in rural districts, are to be found in a wide range of vocations and professions. When Trump makes authoritarian appeals to law and order and military power, he enjoys a natural audience among people without degrees employed as prison guards, police officers, the border patrol, military personnel, and related male-dominated professions. Building contractors, franchise owners, real-estate agents,
managers, retailers, and investors often lack degrees, too. Not all of
them can afford a membership at Mar-a-Lago, but in Trump’s prom-
ises of national greatness some of them may see possibilities for their
own monetary success. The votes of men without degrees suggest not
a working-class alliance so much as the cross-class appeal of right-
wing nationalist politics.

But the most useless measure of class is geography, as in the
“coastal elite” versus the working class of “flyover country.” This arti-
ficial binary exaggerates the regional divide. New York and California
are the homes to more than their share of billionaires, but some of the
richest billionaires on the planet live in Texas, Kansas, and Arkansas.
Similarly, demeaning work, stagnant wages, and poverty are national
courges, not regional ones. The same goes for the national scourge
of right-wing nationalist politics. It was only a short time ago that
California Republicans were at the forefront of the politics of xenophob
and racial resentment. During the 1990s, the state’s governor
Pete Wilson backed propositions to drive undocumented children out
of schools and to ban affirmative action in college admissions. He gov-
erned with the same racial venom as Jeff Sessions, minus the Alabama
accent. But Pete Wilson awoke an opposition that shifted statewide
voting against the Republicans, and nowhere was this shift more sig-
nificant than in the voter-rich Los Angeles basin. Yes, Los Angeles has
Beverly Hills and Hollywood. But the wider region makes up a vast
industrial belt, with ten million residents, seventy percent of whom
lack college degrees, many of whom work in electronics, metal fabri-
cation, apparel, and food processing, often in sweatshops and at low
pay. The voters of this industrial region, many of whom are people of
color and from immigrant backgrounds, have turned sharply against
Republican candidates, and Trump drew less than a quarter of their
ballots. Yet, we have not heard much about a working-class voters’
revolt on the West Coast. This is because assumptions about the work-
ing class being both white and male drive the narrative about “coastal
elites” versus “real Americans.”

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What then does explain the dark clouds of xenophobia and right-wing nationalism that have gathered over the United States and Europe? Much of the commentary focuses on economic hard times, and the growing crisis of wealth inequality. No doubt lost jobs, stagnant wages, and decaying social protections have played a part in shifting the political landscape. But exactly what part and by what mechanism are not self-evident. While Europe remains in the doldrums of near-recession, it is a striking fact that right-wing nationalist movements have made some of their strongest showings in places like Austria, Denmark, and the Netherlands, prosperous winners in the globalization sweepstakes that also have robust social-democratic policies providing protection from slow growth. Moreover, the Austrian Freedom Party realized its first stunning success in 1999, the very best of economic times.

Explaining the rise of Trump as a political expression of hard times poses an historical puzzle. Capitalism has always involved grueling work, meager pay, insecurity, and shuttered industries, all of it accompanied by strands of intolerance blaming outside groups for the workers’ plight. But in American history, some of the most severe outbursts of xenophobia and racial intolerance have taken place during moments of relative prosperity. And contrary to accepted wisdom, there is no clear pattern connecting hard times with ethnic and racial nationalism. The usual reference point for this story is the depression of the 1870s, when unemployed white workers rioted in the sandlots of San Francisco against Chinese immigrants, putting Sinophobia on the national political agenda and leading to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. But the depression of the 1890s produced no comparable fevers. In 1894, jobless workers meeting in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park did not protest the Chinese. Rather they decided to march on Washington to demand a federal jobs program. At the same time, Jacob Coxey, a Populist-Party politician, led a parallel march from Ohio of unemployed workers, including black workers. Coxey’s march passed through steel-mill towns to the cheers of Polish immigrants, and arrived in the nation’s capital welcomed as heroes by the city’s African American community.
Washington experienced a much different march in August of 1925 when forty thousand members of the Ku Klux Klan in full regalia paraded along Pennsylvania Avenue. This was in the middle of the industrial boom of the Roaring Twenties, when millions of workers gained employment in mass-production industries. It was also a moment when the shocks of war, the Soviet revolution, labor radicalism, and the African American migration out of the South produced an explosion of white nationalism and xenophobia. Inspired by Madison Grant’s racial theories, Congress passed the 1924 immigration quotas that would bar entry to Jews, Slavs, and other immigrants. And the KKK reached a membership of several million in mainly northern places like Indiana and Michigan. With a history drenched in racial violence, the KKK was also a movement of ordinary men and women, who made common cause with chambers of commerce, churches, the American Legion, and both Democratic and Republican politicians to protect “real” Americans from multiple threats: Bolsheviks, trade unionists, immigrants, Catholics, Jews, African Americans, sexual deviants, bootleggers, and other violators of law and order.

The KKK revival had cooled by the late 1920s and the onset of the Great Depression. With a quarter of the country out of work, in 1932 the old Populist Jacob Coxey returned to Washington, this time with the Bonus March of unemployed veterans, again petitioning for a federal jobs program. Meanwhile, in the early years of the Depression, the federal government “repatriated” hundreds of thousands of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans, including US citizens, to Mexico. Forced removals, including the infamous “Operation Wetback,” would resume in the prosperous postwar years. But it was in the summer of 1943, in the midst of the wartime boom, that hostility toward Mexican Americans and African Americans turned into brutal conflict with the “Zoot Suit Riots” centered in Los Angeles, a wave of “hate strikes,” and the Detroit race riot that left thirty-four dead and over four hundred injured. And, of course, Japanese internment, the product of xenophobic hysteria, also took place during wartime prosperity.

In short, the correlations between economic hard times and intolerance are hard to pin down, and the causal relationships between the
two are not always self-evident. That is the value of Müller’s focus on politics and institutions. Most important, he identifies the declining role of political parties and their ability to mediate political conflict as a key factor in the rise of right-wing nationalist movements. In Austria’s recent presidential election, the candidates representing the country’s two main historic parties, the conservative People’s Party and the Social Democrats, came in fourth and fifth place. This result shows the crisis of the postwar political arrangement in which, seeking to avoid the political violence of the 1930s, the two parties have comanaged the country’s generous welfare state by way of technocratic administration. In France, too, neither of the candidates of the two main traditional parties made it into the runoff in the recent presidential election. A multinational effort to contain political conflict, the European Union has placed a great deal of decision making in the hands of its unelected professional managers. And in doing so, European-wide management has undermined political parties and representative government. The protracted dilemma of the Euro as a single currency has stirred up old nationalist resentments, and it has revealed the flaws in a supranational arrangement that has taken vital questions of monetary policy out of the realm of representative politics. And the EU policy to address the refugee crisis has become the latest flashpoint for xenophobic and intolerant agitation.

The political system in the United States has suffered its own shocks. The attacks of 11 September, endless wars in the Middle East and Central Asia, the financial meltdown, and the election of Barack Obama created the context for the rise of right-wing nationalism. But it has been the weakening of political parties that has allowed right-wing nationalists to gain control not only of the federal government, but dozens of state governments as well. For much of the twentieth century, both Republicans and Democrats relied on party organization, built up from neighborhoods, precincts, and congressional districts, to raise funds, get out the vote, and otherwise connect constituents with their respective parties. Tip O’Neill overstated the case when he said, “all politics is local,” but since his day powerful forces have been at work—megadonors, corporate lobbies, and national
media—nationalizing politics and eroding the role of parties on the ground.

The Republican Party has corroded to the point that it has farmed out what were once party functions to the various branches of the Koch brothers’ right-wing corporate network. The Kochs and other billionaires provide the funding; Americans for Prosperity puts in place the teams that do the canvassing and get out the vote. The American Legislative Exchange Council provides the legislative boilerplate for breaking unions, dismantling public services, and other measures to be rubberstamped by Republican lawmakers. Meanwhile, virtually every Republican official in the country has sworn allegiance to Grover Norquist’s corporate lobby Americans for Tax Reform, taking its oath never to raise taxes, and thereby renouncing any serious deliberation on fiscal policy, deliberation that is the lifeblood of representative government. And now the GOP has meekly submitted to a semihostile takeover by a real-estate tycoon and political neophyte. The Democrats have undergone a similar process, relying on top-down and corporate-funded models that have allowed local party building to atrophy. They have lost too many state and local offices that are essential for a viable national party. And the systematic destruction of trade unions has, in too many places, robbed the Democratic Party of its historic bridge to the working class.

But the biggest change has been the racial realignment of the two parties. During the first half of the twentieth century, bigotry and xenophobia fractured along the lines of party and region. Democrats in the North and the West counted on the votes of Catholics, immigrants, and eventually African Americans, while relying on the white-supremacist bloc in the South. Republicans played on Protestant prejudices against Catholics and immigrants, while still courting the black vote. The Civil Rights revolution forced a party realignment. The sorting took decades, and the arrival of Obama in the White House was the last phase of a process that has given new power to the politics of ethnic and racial intolerance. To understand this process, the key election was not Trump’s victory in 2016, but almost all of the
congressional and state elections since 2010, which have allowed the Republican Party to gain control of both houses of Congress and two-thirds of the state legislatures and governorships.

The path of Paul LePage to the governor’s office in Maine is instructive. LePage made national news with his crude rant about out-of-state African American and Latino drug dealers impregnating Maine’s white women. But that was just a sample of his regular diet of racism and misogyny. How did this intolerant right-wing Republican businessman become governor of a state famous for its tolerant and centrist politics? The best clue lies in the former Democratic strongholds in the mill towns of central Maine. LePage was born to a French-speaking family in a poor and neglected corner of the state where working a shift in a gaseous paper mill was one of the better options. When he was a young man, voters in these towns wore multiple political hats. In local politics, ethnic animosities meant voting for the “American” or “French” candidate. As union members, in state and national politics, voters responded to union campaigns for centrist Democrats like Edmund Muskie. As white people, they were also open to messages about white victimization. In 1972, the former governor of Alabama, George Wallace, ran in the Democratic primaries for president. This was a politician best known for his declaration: “I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever,” and his message resonated with many of the voters of central Maine who agreed with his claims that the taxes of white people were being stolen to support black criminals who refused to work. Four years later, they also listened to Jerry Brown and other progressive candidates who spoke out against corporate power and the tyranny of wealth. Paul LePage first ran for governor in 2010. He did so with a base in the business community and as an antitax, antiunion, antiregulation Tea Party conservative. The mill towns were still poor and neglected, the unions were under siege, and the centrist Democrats did not have much to offer. Meanwhile, the Tea Party challenged Maine’s Republican old guard with a militant message echoing that of George Wallace about resistance to taxing “real Americans” to pay for health
care and services for “other people.” LePage won that election and was reelected four years later, again drawing votes from the mill towns from which he came.

Hundreds of Paul LePages now inhabit state offices and legislative seats across much the country. Although most have better manners, they gained office as part of a similar process. As a result, erstwhile liberal states such as Michigan and Wisconsin have become laboratories for the Koch brothers’ experiments in crushing labor unions, denying women reproductive rights, dismantling public schools, poisoning the water and the air, and disfranchising minority voters. White voters concerned about their tax money going to the wrong people in Detroit or Milwaukee—voters who have either welcomed or tolerated politicians who advocate religious and racial intolerance—have sustained these experiments. But this does not mean that the citizens of these states have somehow become less tolerant than they were in the past. They, too, have worn many political hats. In 1972, George Wallace was the favored presidential candidate of Michigan Democrats, both in the comfortable suburbs and in the union halls, winning 52 percent of the votes in the state’s Democratic primary. He did nearly as well in Wisconsin. Meanwhile, the same voters in these states often favored Democrats in the progressive wing of their party. This has led analysts to describe such voters as “schizophrenic,” and as failing to vote for their own interests. But Wallace voters were as serious and complex as any other group of voters, and navigated a set of parochial, racial, class, and other interests.

Much has changed over the decades since the Wallace campaign. The base of the Democratic Party has atrophied with the loss of state and local offices, and especially with the dismemberment of the trade unions. It remains a broad centrist coalition, but its George Wallace or white-supremacist wing has decamped to the Republicans. As a result, the GOP has replaced the Democrats as the party of the white majority in the South, and Republicans have gained a virtual monopoly on the national politics of xenophobia and racial resentment. This is a first in American politics. It means that, much as the GOP has
turned abortion, taxes, and guns into reliable voting blocs, it has similarly captured the voters seeking an outlet for the politics of nativism, Islamophobia, and racial resentment. It was not that long ago that Democrats and Republicans competed for the nativist vote, the racial resentment vote, and the religious intolerance vote, sometimes with loud messaging and more often with so-called “dog whistles.” But this competition has turned into a rout. The monopoly that the Republicans now claim has demonstrated over the last several election cycles that, given America’s two-party and winner-take-all system, right-wing nationalist candidates have a good shot at winning office in any district or state where the demographics are favorable.

The weakening of established political structures and institutions has opened the doors of power to what Müller describes as populist politicians. But now that such politicians have taken charge of the world’s most powerful country, it adds urgency to the question of what type of political authority they might construct. Norbert Hofer leads a party with roots in the Nazi past. Beatrix von Storch happens to be the granddaughter of Hitler’s loyal finance minister. Donald Trump has a clear affinity for dictators and tyrants and so far has performed the part of a would-be Mussolini. But today’s right-wing nationalist parties in democratic countries are mainly electoral, working within the framework of representative government rather than through the militarist methods of the storm troopers and brownshirts that Hitler and Mussolini used to forge their dictatorships. And, at least up until now, they seem dedicated to colonizing rather than dispersing democratic institutions. This is the pattern in Hungary and Poland, where, to defend the “real people” against their enemies, the ruling parties have manipulated and pressured the courts, the civil service, the constitutions, and the media. The violence of Donald Trump’s verbal assaults on the media, the courts, and other institutions suggests a similar mindset, and he leads a political party that has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to trample on institutional norms and
bend the mechanisms of government toward undemocratic ends. That is the meaning of the GOP’s voter-suppression campaigns, aggressive gerrymandering, and theft of a Supreme Court seat in the name of letting “the people have a say.” With Trump leading the way, America’s ruling party is lurching down the road of what Müller describes as a “damaged” or “defective democracy.”

But this road may be a familiar one, a road that the United States has traveled for much of its history. Prior to the Civil War, the institutions of American representative government were systematically bent to protect the power of slave owners. But it was after the Civil War that a type of “defective democracy” emerged that bears an uncanny resemblance to Müller’s populist model. For nearly a century the Democratic Party maintained a political regime in the former slave states—about a third of the country—based on “an exclusionary form of identity politics.” The institutions of representative government remained alive in Georgia, Tennessee, and Louisiana, where elections were held and policy differences were real enough. But the southern people were defined as white people, the Democratic Party claimed to represent those people, and the state constitutions, laws, and political norms were shaped accordingly. This one-party system clung to power for nearly a century. Its durability rested on violence: intimidating, beating, shooting, and lynching politicians, civil-rights activists, newspaper editors, labor organizers, and black citizens. Generations of Democratic governors and senators—the likes of Theodore Bilbo, Cotton Ed Smith, James Vardaman, Eugene Talmadge, James Eastland, Strom Thurmond, and George Wallace—mastered the ways of authoritarians, demagogues, and bigots. Other supporters of the system eschewed such methods, but adhered to a common logic. They argued for disfranchising black citizens in the name of combating voter fraud, because they did not see African Americans as legitimate citizens. They opposed funding public education, because “the people” should not be taxed to pay for the children of “those people” to go to school.

So it went for generations until the upheaval of the civil rights movement. Yet, as the dust settled, old patterns reemerged. Today’s
Republicans mobilize the same old arguments about unjust taxation and illegitimate ballots, combined with equally old arguments about newcomers and dangerous religions. In Michigan and Wisconsin as much as in Mississippi and Alabama, the GOP has consolidated power in the name of protecting “the people” from criminal Mexicans, plotting Muslims, and fraudulent black voters, as well as trade unionists, urban dwellers, and taxes to pay for education and health care for “those people.” And now the GOP has put in the White House a president that reminds us that New York City has produced its own share of demagogues, authoritarians, and bigots.

The rise of Trump cannot be extracted from the long history of “defective democracy” that stretches back to the dawn of the republic. This is not to suggest that the right-wing parties of Le Pen, Farage, and Hofer lack deep roots in their own national histories. From Vienna to Washington, right-wing movements carry the historical baggage of blood-soaked nationalisms that have weighed on the political world since the founding of modern nations. For Müller, the latest manifestations of these nationalisms represent what he defines as the danger of populism, the *pars pro toto* logic that proceeds from exclusionary notions of “the people.” The danger, he tells us, is no less real when ethnic and racial nationalism is not the driving force, completing his argument in the symmetrical fashion of political science. He has in his sights left-wing political theorists such as the late Ernesto Laclau, who argued in favor of a radical populism that constructs a symbolic “people” as a counterforce to exploiting tyrannies. This leads to its own tyrannies, Müller contends, as evidenced by the example of the repressive Venezuelan government of the late Hugo Chávez and his successor Nicolás Maduro. The dynamics of Venezuelan and Latin American politics, however, have their own logics. The regime in Caracas has justified its repression with claims to speak in the name of the people against its political enemies, but it has done so on the basis of a more racially inclusive politics, and in conflict with a political opposition that has claimed to speak for an ethnocultural (whiter) people of its own. The result has been a type of personalized and repressive regime that has recurred on the Latin American scene, but may not tell us
that much about the movements that have taken hold in the United States and much of Europe.

Meanwhile, looking farther east to Recep Erdoğan’s Turkey, Benjamin Netanyahu’s Israel, and Narendra Modi’s India reveals a telling pattern, as right-wing nationalists are colonizing nominally democratic governments across much of Eurasia. This suggests that what we are witnessing is a near-global phenomenon with enduring historical roots, and there are no simple answers as to what might be done about it. At the moment, the majority of citizens in most of Europe and the United States reject right-wing nationalist candidates. But Trump is president and Marine Le Pen is not because France does not have an electoral college and because the French multiparty system facilitated combining enough votes to block her path. This, however, is hardly reassuring. The 2016 US election was weird enough that it is difficult to draw lessons. Yet the several rounds of state and local elections that preceded it clearly demonstrated the urgent need to reconnect the majority with political life, rebuilding and reimagining networks, unions, and associations. Without organizations built up from neighborhoods and communities, the majority will be vulnerable to an organized and mobilized right-wing minority.

But organization must be animated by ideas. Therein lies the significance of the efforts to reimagine inclusive, egalitarian, and democratic alternatives to the corporate tyranny and spiraling inequality of the present. The new left-wing, labor, and democratic socialist movements may or may not win any given electoral contest. At least so far, their track record at the polls has yielded at best mixed results, and history tells us that even the strongest such movements usually require extensive coalitions with ideologically difficult partners to cobble together electoral majorities. Yet, such movements can play an outsized role in network and organization building, and in pumping oxygen into political life.

With the outcome of the 2016 elections, the global problem of right-wing nationalism is now very much an American problem. No country more than the United States needs an inclusive, tolerant, and egalitarian popular movement to provide a catalyst for breaking the
grip of the right-wing nationalists who, with their billionaire sponsors, are “colonizing” the country’s political institutions. A key resource for such a movement will be the historical traditions of democratic political mobilizations of the working people for a more just, equitable, and humane society. Populism, by an accident of history, just happens to be the name of one such tradition.