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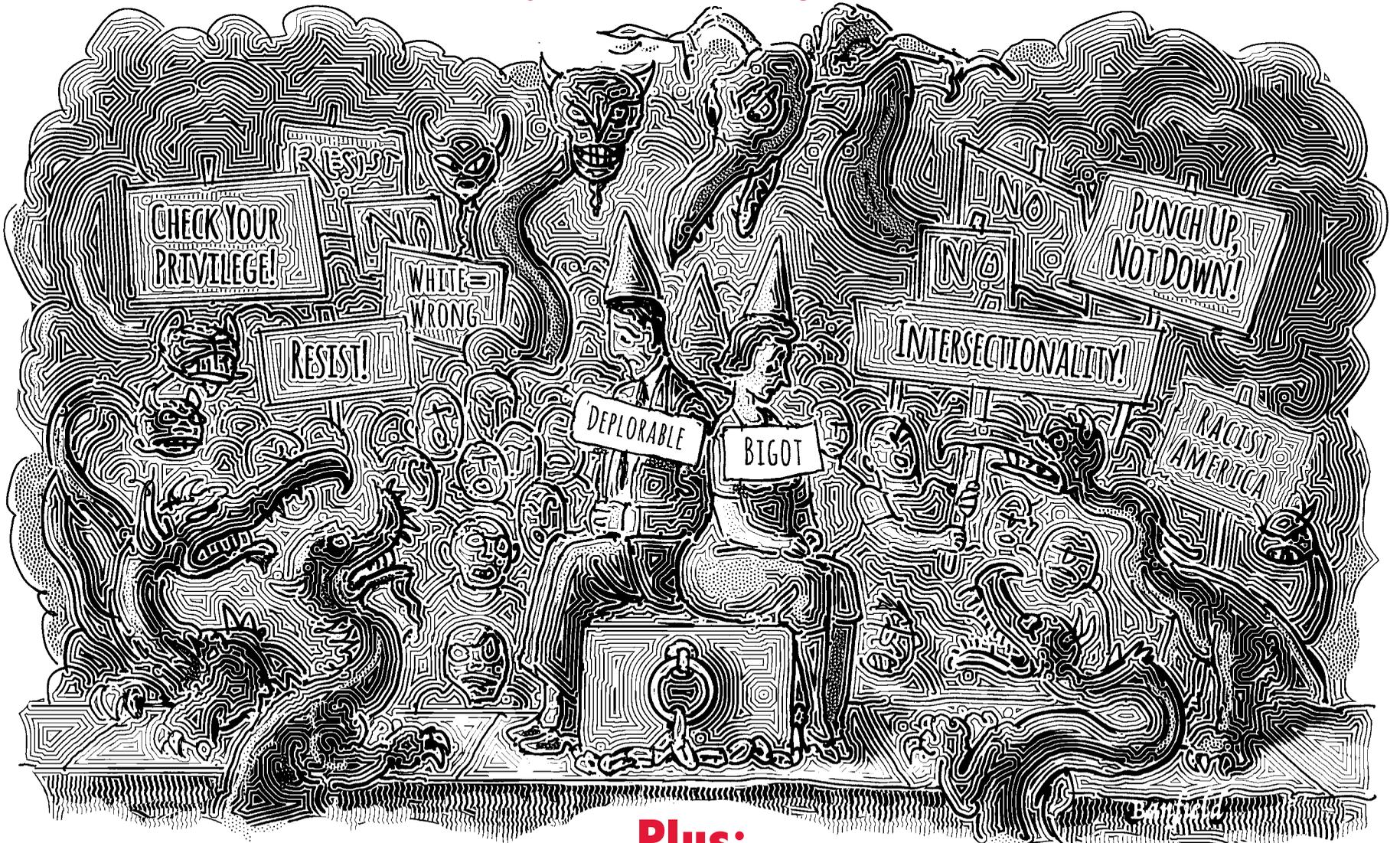
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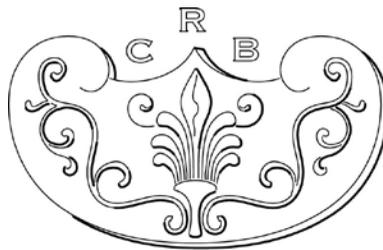
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Essay by Christopher Caldwell

What Is Populism?

Le monde, the french newspaper of record, admitted last summer that readers had been complaining about the indiscriminate way its journalists hung around the word “populist.” It seemed to describe dozens of European and American political actors with nothing in common except the contempt in which *Le Monde* held them. The meaning of “populist” was nonetheless easy to decode. A dispatch in that same edition of *Le Monde*, about a new political alliance between populist governments in Italy, Austria, and Hungary, was titled: “Europe’s hard right lays down the law against migrants.” To call someone a populist is to insinuate that he is a fascist, but tentatively enough to spare the accuser the responsibility of supplying proof. If one sees things as *Le Monde* does, this is a good thing: populism is an extremism-in-embryo that needs to be named in order that it might better be fought. Others, though, will see populism as an invention of the very establishmentarians who claim to be fighting it, an empty word that allows them to shut down with taboos any political idea that they cannot defeat with arguments. In Europe, populism is becoming the great which-side-are-you-on question of our time.

is summer in the German city of Chemnitz, a young carpenter named Daniel Hillig was stabbed to death, and two of his companions were wounded, by two recent Kurdish immigrants, one from Syria and the other from Iraq. The word “populist” was used to describe nearly everything that followed. Day after day, crowds of hundreds, even thousands, massed around the giant statuary head of Karl Marx in the center of Chemnitz. They chanted denunciations of Chancellor Angela Merkel, who in September 2015 had opened Germany’s borders to refugees from war-torn Syria. Merkel’s invitation brought to Europe almost 2 million migrants from across the Muslim world. Not all were refugees, and most of them were military-age men. Six thousand have settled in Chemnitz. Public opinion is divided on whether Merkel’s invitation was typical German hospitality or typical German megalomania.

The marchers in Chemnitz leaned towards the latter view. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) Party, which won 13% in last fall’s national elections for an anti-migration platform often called populist, marched alongside the rabble-rousing Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West (Pegida). There were people in

the crowd yelling “Foreigners out!” and a few were photographed making stretched-arm Hitler salutes. There were cell-phone videos of locals chasing foreign-looking people. But the marches also drew ordinary residents who had “had it up to here,” as a few of their hand-scrawled placards put it, with the disorder the sudden influx of migrants had brought. Hillig, the beloved victim in whose name the demonstrations were being held, had been a dark-skinned man of Cuban ancestry who had been born in Chemnitz back in the Cold War, when it was called Karl-Marx-Stadt. If this populism had elements of right-wing radicalism, it had more mainstream elements, too.

Whatever populism is, it is prospering across Europe. By late September, in the wake of Chemnitz, support for the AfD had risen to 18% nationwide, placing the party level with the once-colossal Social Democrats as the country’s second largest, behind Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU). In Hungary, Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz Party has held roughly two thirds of the seats in the country’s national assembly since regaining control in 2010. Italy’s two populist parties—the Five Star Movement and the League—were mocked when they



came together to form a coalition last May. After four months of pursuing a hard line on migration, their government has become one of the most popular in Italy since the Second World War. Between the two of them, the parties had the support of 64% of the public by early October.

Populist movements, however, even when strong, can be checked by social convention and threats of ostracism. Few call themselves populist. In Sweden, the anti-immigration Sweden Democrats took 18% of the vote at elections in September but at their own demonstrations their supporters are sometimes outnumbered, and always outshouted, by activists massing in the name of anti-racism or anti-fascism. That populists have a hard time seizing and holding public platforms is a problem for the movement. It may mean, though, that sympathy for populism runs deeper than it appears to. The decision of Britain's voters to withdraw from the European Union in a 2016 referendum won only narrowly, with a 52-48 margin in favor of the Leave option. But when London's *Independent* asked Britons days before the vote how the results would make them *feel*, 44% said they would be "delighted" with a Leave vote, while only 28% said that about Remain. There seems to be more support for populism in citizens' inmost hearts than on the Letters to the Editor page.

Migration and Merkel

EUROPE HAS ENTERED A PERIOD OF DEMOGRAPHIC, institutional, and ideological convulsion. Mass migration is the focus of populist concern. After World War II, Europe's countries, while not ethnically homogeneous, all had stable populations of European descent. The need to rebuild spurred many countries in wrecked northern Europe to import workers—primarily from southern Italy, Portugal, and what was then Yugoslavia. A boom ensued that intensified the short-term need for labor, and brought new workers from further afield. Turks and Moroccans came. Decolonization and war untethered vast populations from their Pakistani, Algerian, and Indonesian homelands. Soon storefronts were being converted into mosques. Europeans learned words like "couscous," "Ramadan," and "jihad."

Europeans assumed migration would end when their own need for migrant labor did. That was naïve. Middle Easterners and North Africans simply liked Europe better. What is more, at roughly this time European women stopped bearing babies, to the point where the population of native Italians

was projected to fall by a quarter, from 60 million to 45, before the middle of the 21st century. This had society-transforming consequences. By the beginning of this century there were tens of millions of Muslims living in western European lands where there had never been any. Now minarets towered over the urban neighborhoods where those storefront mosques had been, cities (including London) came under the control of ethnic political machines, and Islam replaced Christianity as the main source of religious zeal, if not yet as the professed belief of the largest number of residents.

The change riled Europeans. In virtually every western European land, when pollsters ask members of the public to list their country's most pressing problems, immigration ranks either first or second. But it seemed no one could do anything about it. The values that European elites proclaimed—a mix of post-Holocaust repentance and emulation of American civil-rights institutions—made it seem hypocritical and xenophobic to regulate the country's frontiers in any way at all. Europe no longer had the conviction to say "no" to anyone making a reasonable case for political asylum, and no longer had the will to deport even those whose petitions were deemed unreasonable. One of these was Daniel Hillig's alleged murderer Yousif Abdullah, who had accumulated a long criminal record in his three years in Europe. Abdullah's own asylum application had been rejected, and then reopened on a technicality.

Episodes of terrorism and crime do shift thinking in a populist direction. If there was a moment when public sentiment about mass migration began to swing, as if on a hinge, it came in the days after New Years' Eve 2015-16. Hundreds of women reported having been sexually assaulted by gangs of immigrants in the center of Cologne that night, but police took such pains to play down the attacks that news of the disorder did not reach newspapers for days. Notoriously, the city's mayor advised women to avoid such unpleasantness in the future by keeping suspicious-looking men "at arm's length."

Still, the ultimate impetus for populism among native Europeans probably lies not in any individual incident but in the prospect, more vivid with every passing year, of demographic decline and even extinction. By this decade, several countries had lost control of their borders—above all, Sweden, where almost a third of babies are born to foreign mothers. The Pew Research Center recently projected that Sweden will be 30% Muslim by mid-century if refugee flows continue and 21% Muslim even if they stop altogether.

The wave of migration from the Arab and Muslim world may be as nothing compared to what awaits. Sub-Saharan Africa is now seeing the largest population explosion any region has undergone in the history of the planet. By 2050, Africa is expected to double its population to 2.5 billion. That *increment* of 1.25 billion young people is roughly twice the present *population* of Europe. At mid-century, Africa will still be the poorest place on earth, but it will be the richest in young men of military age. Until 2017 charitable rescue ships were transporting hundreds, sometimes thousands, of African migrants across the Mediterranean to Italy daily. These provide the merest foretaste of the population pressures that await.

Merkel's invitation to Syrian migrants in 2015 was a detonator. Suddenly Germany had a million-odd Syrians, Pakistanis, Iraqis, and Afghans on its soil—culturally alien, hard to employ, and making claims for the admission of millions more wives, children, and siblings. Germans were thus forced to choose between (a) welcoming an even larger second wave of dependent family members, and (b) damage control. This would mean stepping up expulsions, revoking longstanding rules on family reunification, and overturning various longstanding taboos against discussing Germany's national interest and ethnic identity. Germans have opted for (b). They have shifted their votes from establishment parties (not just Merkel's Christian Democrats but also the Social Democrats) to radical ones (not just the AfD but also the post-Communist Left party).

New Problems, New Solutions

IN ITALY, INTERIOR MINISTER MATTEO Salvini has become one of the most popular politicians in Europe by turning his party, the League, from a regional separatist group into a nationwide anti-immigration force. For years now, foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been chartering boats to mount extensive rescue operations of African migrants adrift in the Mediterranean. Salvini derided these efforts as taxi services to deliver migrants from the North African coast. Extraordinary maps published by the *New York Times* in June 2017, which showed rescue operations moving steadily closer to the port of Tripoli as humanitarian operations increased, provide considerable justification for Salvini's view. But he went further. Salvini accused humanitarians of acting as go-betweens for two mafias: one that trafficked humans in Africa, and another that scammed Italy's social-wel-



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fare system in Europe. He then closed Italy's ports to such rescue vessels—first foreign-registered ones, then Italian ones. The result is that Salvini, called an "extremist" in many newspapers in the run-up to elections last March, now commands the support of 60% of Italians.

European leaders have assailed Salvini in the name of their values, none more volubly than French President Emmanuel Macron. In early June, when Salvini refused landing rights to 629 migrants aboard the German rescue ship *Aquarius*, Macron denounced him as irresponsible, cynical, and extremist. Salvini replied that, if Macron cared so much about European values, perhaps he could take some of the migrants himself. Macron did not. Indeed, when the same ship, the *Aquarius*, made for the French port of Marseille in late September with only 58 migrants aboard, Macron's government denied it authorization to dock. In mid-October, newspapers across Europe reported that French authorities had apprehended African illegal migrants in the Hautes-Alpes region, driven them across the Italian border in a police van, and dropped them off in the woods.

The debate between Salvini and Macron revealed something formulaic and flawed in the latter's way of thinking. Macron and his globalist allies sometimes acted as if the problems of human conflict had been solved by the Western "values," and as if history were done presenting contingencies and surprises. That made it easy to "build a legacy" or win an honorable "place in history." All one had to do was consult these values and order correctly from a menu of historical roles. With the rise of Salvini, the European Union's economic commissioner Pierre Moscovici warned of "little Mussolinis" in the continent's politics, and Luxembourg's Minister of Foreign Affairs Jean Asselborn accused Salvini of using "fascist methods and tones"—which presumably made Moscovici and Asselborn the Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt of our times.

Populists, by contrast, argued that today's events are not a replay of the 1930s—they are today's events. "What people call 'right-wing populism,' 'the new right,' or 'a return to nationalism,'" wrote Frank Böckelmann, editor of the contrarian German quarterly *Tumult*, "is only a reaction to specific new conditions." That is the way Salvini saw it: he was just reacting pragmatically to problems as they came up. He wanted Italy to include in every trade deal it signs with a developing-world country a "repatriation clause" linking economic ties to a willingness to take back migrants. "I think I am paid by my citizens to help our youth to have the babies they used

to have a few years ago," Salvini said, "and not import the best of African youth to replace the Europeans who, for economic reasons, don't have many children."

Was this reasonable or was it racist? In matters of identity politics, the two adjectives can describe the same action. National identity is maintained by preferring one's own people to others. This proposition sounds obvious and uncontroversial when you are saying, for example, that Italy's destiny is a matter for Italians alone to decide—and not for Frenchmen to meddle in, even Frenchmen as powerful as Macron. It is perfectly innocent to prefer Italians to French people in that case. But is it okay to prefer Italians to Africans? Europeans are less comfortable answering "yes" to that question. When a boatload of migrants steams into a Sicilian harbor, and the law calls for them to be sent back to Libya, and thence to Chad or Niger, and they sue to stay, politicians who assert European values begin to hem and haw. But if one cannot argue against interlopers on behalf of fellow citizens, then the long history of Italy will soon come to an end. At least that is how the populists see it.

Class and Competition

THE ESTABLISHMENT VIEW REFLECTS A difference not just of ideology but also of class. Perhaps because he is yet a political novice, Macron has been vocal on the subject of human inequality. He is in favor of it. The president's role in French life should be "Jupiterian," he argued, while describing those who collected welfare as "illiterates" (*illettrés*) and "freeloaders" (*fainéants*). Like Matteo Renzi, the pro-business former prime minister whose center-left party was ousted by Italy's populist coalition, Macron has behaved as if business were all: entrepreneurs and captains of industry are the only modern heroes. Cutting taxes, delaying retirements, and permitting Sunday shopping are the highest achievements to which a sensible politician could aspire. At the opening of Station F, a clearinghouse for high-tech start-ups, Macron found the name appropriate, because this would be the place that determined the entrepreneurs' worth. "A station," he said, meaning a railway station, "is a place where you run into people who succeed and people who are nothing."

It was in this vein that historian Anne Applebaum, writing in the *Atlantic*, lamented the rise of two populist parties in Central Europe: Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary, and Jaroslaw Kaczyński's Law and Justice party (PiS) in Poland. Applebaum, attentive and logical in



all her books about Eastern Europe, showed little perspective or sense of context in writing about contemporary political clashes. She denounced the Polish and Hungarian upstarts as a threat to democracy, comparing them to Lenin's Bolsheviks, Hitler's Germany, and Apartheid South Africa.

The anti-immigration bent of Poland's ruling party she described as a sort of collective delusion: "The refugee wave that has hit other European countries has not been felt here at all," she wrote. But this is wrong. The refugee wave was felt in September 2015 when a government led by Ewa Kopacz of Poland's Civic Platform (P.O.) party broke from the common position it had agreed with Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, and cast the deciding vote to approve a European Union plan to distribute Merkel's refugees Europe-wide, including into Poland. A headline in the weekly magazine *wSieci* showed Kopacz dressed in a burqa, alongside a headline reading: "Ewa Kopacz will follow Germany's orders and ensure we live in hell." At elections a month later, P.O. lost a third of its seats. Its despised rivals, the PiS, were given an absolute majority on the strength of a promise (thus far kept) to resist plans for the importation of Germany's migrants into Poland. Orbán, similarly, holds great power in Hungary not because he "respects no restraints of any kind," as Applebaum would have it, but because he has won three consecutive democratic elections by wide margins, including a historic rout in 2010 that provided him with a legislative majority large enough to rewrite the constitution. If the rise of the PiS and of Fidesz is a problem, it is a problem of democracy, not for democracy.

Those who succeed in the freewheeling, global-capitalist economy are understandably eager to import its rules into republican politics, where they can be illogical and corrosive. Applebaum's mistake was to misapply the word "democracy" to a set of capitalist virtues that relate to democracy only incidentally: "In modern Western democracies," she wrote, "the right to rule is granted, at least in theory, by different forms of competition: campaigning and voting, meritocratic tests that determine access to higher education and the civil service, free markets." She is right about the voting. But the rest of her description, while it describes a variety of successful and unsuccessful regimes, has little to do with democracy. Neither success in the free market nor good exam results grants one the "right to rule." But it was easy to wish they did, because if they did, then the crude, uncredentialed people walking the halls of power in Warsaw and Budapest were not just unedifying but illegitimate.

Ceding Authority

All across the west, the intelligent, credentialed people who held the commanding heights of the economy were making the same mistake. They viewed the rise of populism as a misunderstanding or a glitch. Ashoka Mody, a gifted macroeconomist at the International Monetary Fund, cautioned against reading too much into the 2016 referendum on which Renzi had staked his political career: "Italians rejected the changes to the electoral system," Mody wrote, "not because they had thought very deeply about the changes proposed but, rather, because the referendum gave them an opportunity to vent their economic and political frustrations."

If such votes are only a "venting of frustrations," then they don't mean anything, and they certainly contain no specific instructions that deserve to be heeded. Last June, when Salvini began to change Italy's immigration policies, Carlotta Sami, spokeswoman for the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, voiced her objections:

When conservative governments come to power, the judiciary joins the opposition.

"Using migration in an instrumental way for a political objective is irresponsible," she said in an interview, "because this reflects immediately not only on the lives of migrant and refugees, but also on the lives of the hosting communities of the Italians, pitting the one against the others."

The verb "instrumentalize," meaning "to make a political issue of," is multinational shop talk. It is used to mark off an area of policy where public opinion has no legitimate role, and is therefore unwelcome. The duly elected constitutional government of Italy should step aside from making policy for Italy—Mrs. Sami will handle it! One might predict that no one would put up with such eponymy. In fact most people are willing to cede authority to judges and multinational bodies for as long as things are going well.

Where does this willingness to cede authority come from? Its sources run deep. Sociologist Norbert Elias, in his 1965 study *The Established and the Outsiders*, described the "monopoly on the means of orientation" that Brahmins in India held, just by virtue of be-

ing Brahmins. Most elitism is like this. To say that progressive elites control things is not a conspiracy theory, it is a tautology—they control the culture by definition.

Similarly, populists are *wrong* by definition. They usually internalize the idea of their inferiority and immorality. An establishment, as Elias sees it, always offers an alternative that the public can passively fall back on. Outsiders and populists do not. They will be subject to a "paralyzing apathy" unless a leader is there to light a fire under them.

The challenge is keeping it lit. Hence the importance of Salvini's social media videos and Donald Trump's tweets. Constant motion is of the essence. One can see the difference between successful populist governments (such as Salvini's) that act quickly, bringing rapid change; and unsuccessful ones (such as Trump's over his first year-and-a-half) that do not, permitting all the playing pieces to roll back down the unlevel board into their pre-election positions.

A Democracy Movement

Margaret Canovan, one of the most sensitive academic analysts of populism, has described it as something that "haunts even the most firmly established democracies." It would be more accurate to say that populism haunts *especially* the most firmly established democracies. It arises in democracies that are so built-out and specialized that a class of sophisticated political initiators is required to run them effectively. Any such class will be tempted to nudge the system to produce results more in line with what it sees as society's needs. These "needs" may grow hard to distinguish from that class's "values."

Americans, living in the home of modern judicial review, will understand that judges are often guilty of trying to correct electoral results that don't correspond to insider thinking.

The civil rights laws of the 1960s, for example, have been interpreted to require transgender bathrooms, regardless of how democratic majorities might feel about them. Certain western European democracies work under analogous constraints. In Italy, both investigative magistrates (the equivalent of federal prosecutors) and adjudicative magistrates (the equivalent of federal judges) are members of the judiciary branch, and the bench, for the most part, operates as a self-perpetuating guild. Judges, not legislators or executives, appoint and approve judicial hires. Like Americans, Italians had plausible 20th-century reasons for enhancing the prerogatives of judges. Americans wanted to smash segregation. Italians wanted to en-



sure—in the wake of Mussolini, fascism, and defeat—that no prosecutor working on behalf of a strongman would use his office to throw political opponents in jail.

As it turned out, allowing the judiciary to be “independent” in this way was an even bigger risk. For, in Italy as in the United States, the judiciary is both a powerful regulatory body and a subset of what we now call the One Percent. Italian lawyers and judges, like our own, have a cultural affinity with intellectuals and progressive politicians. The result is that, when conservative governments come to power, the judiciary joins the opposition. Silvio Berlusconi, the madcap media billionaire who after 1994 became the longest-serving postwar Italian prime minister, was in and out of courtrooms for long-ago business irregularities for the whole two decades he was in or near power. He was convicted of tax fraud in 2013 and banned from politics for six years, until 2019.

Since the new League-Five Star coalition took power in mid-2018, Italy’s situation has paralleled that of the United States even more closely, with judges seeking ingenious ways to thwart a government they oppose on ideological grounds. A Genovese judge threatened to seize the League’s entire €49-million treasury, for an embezzlement case that antedates Salvini’s takeover of the party. After Salvini delayed the disembarkation of 177 Eritreans

who had arrived aboard the Italian Coast Guard boat *Diciotti*, a prosecutor in Agrigento indicted him for kidnapping.

Where the United States is unloved among European populists, it is sometimes as the source of such judicial chicanery. American forces wrote or inspired a number of postwar constitutions, including the German Grundgesetz, which contains guarantees that many blame for the country’s impending “dissolution” by migration. “It is high time,” writes Frank Böckelmann, “for a constitution that is of the German people and for the German people.” For another thing, the United States tax code provides the model for various activist foundations that have left governments feeling surveilled and threatened in their sovereignty. That has been particularly so in Hungary, which in recent months has moved to close the Hungarian-born billionaire George Soros’s charities and to shutter a university he founded.

Orbán’s philosophy has been described in Western headlines as an attack on democracy. It is more accurately described as a passionate defense of his own vision of democracy. Orbán’s vision is different from the one that prevails in the West today. It is closer to the understanding of democracy that prevailed in the United States 60 years ago. For Orbán, democracy is when a sovereign people votes

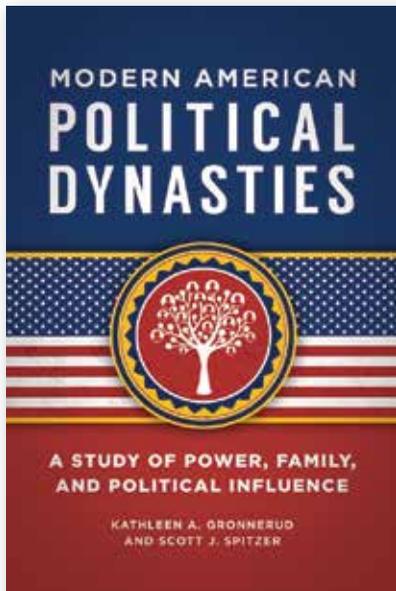
and chooses its destiny. Period. A democratic republic need not be liberal, or neutral as to values. It can favor Christianity or patriotism, if it so chooses, and it can even proudly call such choices “illiberal,” as Orbán did in a 2014 speech.

The detractors of Orbán-style democracy consider democracy a set of progressive outcomes that democracies tend to choose, and may even have chosen at some time in the past. If a progressive law or judicial ruling or executive order coincides with the “values” of experts, a kind of mystical ratification results, and the outcome is what the builders of the European Union call an *acquis*—something permanent, unassailable, and constitutional-seeming. If a democratic majority were to overturn, say, a country’s membership in the European Union, or a state’s laws establishing gay marriage, that outcome would be called “undemocratic.” Of course it would be no such thing. What would be threatened in this case would be somebody’s values, not everyone’s democracy.

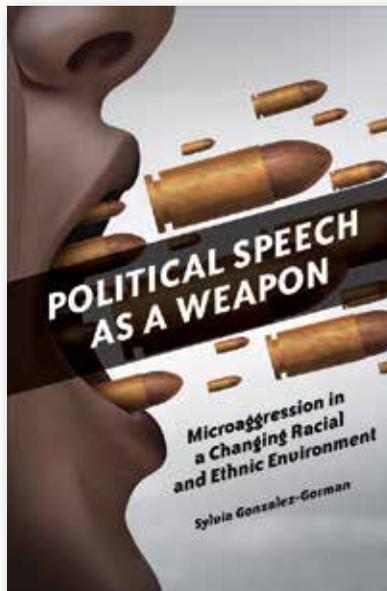
That is our problem. Liberalism and democracy have come into conflict. “Populist” is what those loyal to the former call those loyal to the latter.

Christopher Caldwell, a national correspondent at the Weekly Standard, is at work on a book about the rise and fall of the post-1960s political order.

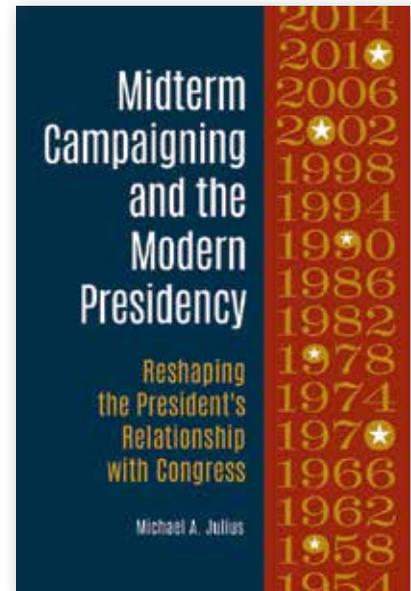
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