

## **Monthly Review Interview: Akeel Bilgrami on Contemporary Populism**

Akeel Bilgrami is an Indian philosopher of international eminence and scholarship. He graduated from Elphinstone College, Bombay University, in 1970, and went to the Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar to study Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. Thereafter, he moved to the United States and earned a PhD in philosophy from the University of Chicago in 1983. He currently holds the Sidney Morgenbesser Chair in Philosophy at Columbia University, New York. Bilgrami was the chairman of the Philosophy Department from 1994 to 1998. He was the director of the Heyman Centre for the Humanities at Columbia from 2004 to 2011 and was the director of Columbia's South Asian Institute from 2013 to 2016.

Bilgrami's main intellectual interests are in the philosophy of mind and language, and in political philosophy and moral psychology. His PhD thesis, titled "Meaning as invariance", was on the subject of the indeterminacy of translation and issues concerning realism. Among his books on the philosophy of language and mind are *Belief and Meaning* (1992) and *Self-Knowledge and Resentment* (2006).

His writings in the other central area of his intellectual interests, political philosophy and moral psychology, have significantly influenced and continue to influence the public discourse on politics, ideology, religion, modernity, culture, history, and so on. It is Bilgrami who has exposed and provided high-ranging criticism of liberalism and its limitations as a political ideology in contemporary times. According to Bilgrami, liberalism and liberal politics have got their own limitations and could not save us from the savagery of capital. In this way, he intellectually provokes us to go beyond liberalism and reimagine an alternative political vocabulary. Here his philosophy rejects the ideology underlying capitalism and seeks to formulate an alternative. This alternative is, of course, left centric and socialistic in perspective, and he sympathizes with Left politics in his home country and others.

His writings and philosophical ideas on the themes of secularism, identity, modernity, Marxism and Gandhi have produced new perspectives on these subjects and significantly contributed to

intellectual debates. His highly influential essay “Gandhi the philosopher” provides a fresh reading of Mahatma Gandhi, and Bilgrami unearths the integrity in his ideas contrary to the popular notion Gandhi’s philosophy is independent of his political activism. As a philosopher, Bilgrami, despite being an atheist, does not completely reject the scope of religion in playing a critically instructive role in our times. He says: “Religion is not primarily a matter of belief and doctrine but about the sense of community and shared values that it can sometimes provide in contexts where other forms of solidarity—such as a strong labour movement—are missing, and it sometimes provides a moral perspective for a humane politics as it did in the liberation theology movement in Central America.”

Bilgrami’s attempt to provide a fresh look at modernity is also noteworthy. Pinpointing the basic weaknesses and Eurocentric nature of modernity and its domination by liberal politics, Bilgrami seeks to find a theoretical framework by which one can go past the constriction of possibilities that liberalism and the merely regulatory constraints of social democracy have forced on modern societies.

Bilgrami is influenced by thinkers such as Karl Marx, Bertrand Russell, Donald Davidson and Noam Chomsky. His important works in this area include a vast number of essays and the books *Secularism, Identity and Enchantment* (2014), *Marx, Gandhi and Modernity* (2014) and *Democratic Culture* (2011).

In this long interview with Jipson John and Jitheesh P.M., Akeel Bilgrami speaks with rigorous analytical length on contemporary populism.

*The term “populism” has attained much significance in the contemporary political landscape all over the world. Populist movements and politics are mushrooming on a large scale. There is the Donald Trump phenomenon, Brexit, the rise of Marine Le Pen’s National Front, the emergence of Left movements such as Podemos in Spain, the politics of Narendra Modi, and so on. These are widely considered to*

*be populist movements. From the point of view of the Right, even the welfare measures of various governments are labeled as populist measures in a negative connotation. How do you engage with the term populism, its emergence and its philosophical and political connotations?*

There is so much punditry on this subject that it is tempting to say that one should just put a moratorium on the term populism. But that would be an evasion. One can't ignore the important issues underlying the obsessive interest in the subject. Yet, it's not obvious what the best way to characterize those issues is. By "best way" I mean one that does not either trivialize them or distort them.

Dictionaries characterize populism as "the political effort of ordinary people to resist elites". This is also our intuitive understanding of the term. If that is so, a question arises. Populism in its widespread usage today has become a pejorative term (and I don't just mean that the elites use the term pejoratively, which they are bound to; many others do so as well). But how can it be a bad thing for ordinary people to resist domination by elites? Another closely related question is: in effect, democracy too amounts to the resistance by ordinary people of the elites, so then what is the difference between populism and democracy? These are both good questions. I'll come back to them at the end.

The first and most obvious thing we notice is how variously the term populism is used. And worse, as your own question points out, it is used to describe or denote quite contradictory things: Trump, [Sanders, Erdogan, Modi, Brexiteers, Corbyn, Le Pen, ... not to mention, Peronism in Argentina, the Narodniks in Russia, the agrarian movements of the late 19th century in the United States. If all these get counted as populist, then can there be said to be any common property or properties possessed by this disparate array of movements and ideologies that can be identified and analyzed and explained? Well, if by common properties we mean common contents in their political commitments, the answer will simply have to be "No".

Hence, for instance, if one had one's gaze on the metropole, you'll find that Trump and Brexiteers are, in some sense, against globalization. But shift your gaze further south to the periphery, and

you'll find Modi and Erdogan are quite the opposite; they are for globalization. Or again, Corbyn and Sanders are called left-wing populists, Le Pen and Trump right-wing populists. Or yet again, Narodniks and American populists (both existed in roughly the same period) valorized the peasantry, but Peronist populism valorized the urban working class. And so on.

Now, when you find such contradictory contents in their political commitments, you have two choices. a) Simply acknowledge that there is no uniform and consistent content to all the populisms and study them piecemeal, for instance, study left-wing populism as a phenomenon different from right-wing populism, study pro-globalization populisms as a phenomenon different from anti-globalization populisms. Or b), the other choice, frequently indulged in by commentators on populism, is to say: "If one is to find common properties in these diverse populisms, one will have to abstract away from the content of their political commitments, and find contentless common properties. I must say I don't really find myself very attracted by this second option. Perhaps it is a matter of taste, but in my view, that is to trivialize the subject of populism.

Thus, you constantly hear the talk of how populists, despite their contradictory commitments, all develop a psychological investment in a charismatic leader, etc., and that there is something in our culture and psychology that responds to charisma, etc. First of all, such cultural and psychological factors are in fact not uniformly present in all cases of populism. They may be true for Modi or Erdogan; they certainly are not true of Sanders or Corbyn. But, apart from this, I think there is a more fundamental reason to recoil from this way of proceeding. It may be a sort of theoretical prejudice of mine, but I am unimpressed by this general tendency among scholars to rush to cultural and psychological factors setting the agenda for discussion of concepts like populism. It changes the intellectual agenda in the wrong way, I feel, when these factors, important though they certainly are, are divorced from the context of politics and political economy. And that divorce is precisely what occurs when one focuses on those factors after declaring populism to be a contentless notion simply because different populisms have contradictory contents.

***So then would you say that there is no uniform phenomenon that the term describes?***

Perhaps there isn't, but that should not be said as a conversation-stopper; it should be a conversation-starter. It's really up to us to shape the conversation about populism in a way that is fruitful, not to reduce it to a trivial cultural or psychological phenomenon.

***Should one then choose the first option and just say that there are different populisms and analyze them differently?***

One could do that. That would be worthwhile. At least, it is not trivializing the concept by ignoring its content. But I think another somewhat more ambitious thing to do, theoretically speaking, than either a) or b) is something like this. Unlike a) continue to look for something in common between the different populisms, and unlike b), instead of seeking trivial common properties that leave out all mention of their content (because the contents are contradictory), one might rather keep the contradictory contents in view and seek a common cause or causal condition that prompts people to adopt one or other of those contradictory contents. Identifying this common cause of differential and contradictory contents of populism would identify something rather deep in a social or political phenomenon, whereas going on in one's analysis of populism about how all populisms psychologically invest in a charismatic leader or how our popular culture erects him into a notoriously iconic status, etc. does not identify anything deep, and as I said, these properties are in any case not shared by all populisms.

So, to repeat, what I am proposing is that one should not declare it to be contentless but keep sight of the contents (even if contradictory) and step back and look to how the deeper and underlying causes of these contentful populisms are a broadly similar or common condition. And once one identifies that causal condition or conditions that are shared by all populisms, then one can give further differential analyses of why the populisms they cause go in divergent, even contradictory, directions.

## ***Can you say what you mean by a common underlying cause of different populisms today?***

Yes, sure. Let me state the punch line or conclusion right away and present my reasons for it by looking at some of the particular cases of populism that you mention in your opening question. I think any serious analysis of the deepest, most underlying, causal condition for the rise of different, even sometimes contradictory, populisms in recent years is a combination of two things: the chronic hardships imposed on ordinary people by capitalism in the last three decades and the complete inability of the spectrum of political positions that are allowed to surface in the arena of politics to address or even to properly develop a discourse with which to understand and criticize it. This last point I am emphasizing is of the utmost importance. Many people who make the first point about contemporary capitalism as an underlying cause don't see this last vital point. And, moreover, I don't think we can really understand this last very important point if we don't also see that the prevalent liberal anti-populist responses are fraudulent.

## ***What do you mean by that?***

Liberalism, despite its shrill opposition to populism, is in fact complicit with the worst aspects of populism that have made it a pejorative term. If populism is irrational today, almost all those who write against it are implicitly irrational as well, even if their irrationality does not take the same surface form. There is a superficiality, even dishonesty, about people who keep stressing the irrationality of populism and who don't in the very same breath point out that that irrationality owes substantially to the (more hidden) irrationality of the whole liberal orthodoxy that despises it.

Until one sees through liberalism and its thicket of shallow criticism of populism to this crucial point, one will not see the extent to which liberalism as a political doctrine and position has been the constant bedfellow in these last few decades of neoliberal political economies, and how it, therefore, is an essential part of the underlying causes that give rise to the contemporary populism today that we are trying to analyze.

In fact, in my view it is the deepest part, it is the deepest enemy of the Left, in the sense that it is the most submerged, submerged under its own self-proclaimed moral high ground and, therefore, the hardest to unearth.

Many people might see that the (globalized finance) capitalism of our times is the underlying causal condition that gives rise to the populisms of our times, but they don't see that the essential element that makes some of these populisms "irrational" is the role played by liberalism in circumscribing and limiting what surfaces in the political arena as a response to globalization.

***Can you say a little bit more about what you mean by that?***

Let's start with a typical example. If you open *Financial Times* on virtually any day, you'll find an anti-populist screed by Edward Luce. He is only one example; liberal commentators like him are everywhere in the mainstream press. Luce, reporting on Trump's inaugural, said: "Obama's inaugural in 2008 radiated hope, Trump's inaugural channeled rage." But not once in the article did he point out that the rage might be due to the hopes invested in [Barack] Obama being unfulfilled.

The contrast with Obama was intended by Luce entirely as a way of elevating the latter to heroic status and lamenting the impending death of liberalism in the face of Trump's right-wing nationalism, a nationalism that is said to be killing off liberalism in European nations as well. But there is no question of liberalism dying. It's everywhere waiting in the wings to return to power should Trump fail in the next elections. It (represented by the Democratic party's national committee, the DNC, as it is called) is everywhere poised to once again undermine the chances of any success in the political field of the social democratic positions taken by Bernie Sanders during his primaries campaign. It's not just people like Luce who think and write this way. Paul Krugman, who claims status as a progressive economist, supported Hillary Clinton against Sanders in the primaries. Indeed, even *Rolling Stone* magazine, which is supposed to represent youthful aspirations, endorsed Clinton over Sanders. American youth itself, suffering under crippling higher education debt,

rallied around Sanders; it's just the supposedly progressive liberal punditry of *Rolling Stone*, supposedly speaking for their interests, which refused to support him.

In saying all this, I am not denying that Hillary Clinton would have been better than Trump. As I said somewhere before, it goes without saying that she would have been better than Trump. But if it goes without saying, then don't say it because to constantly say it might give the impression that the liberal orthodoxy of the Democratic Party has some intrinsic merit. It does not.

Through the eight years of Obama's government, it is responsible for the stagnation of the wages of working people, for failing to improve the conditions of African Americans (in fact if you remember it was under Bill Clinton that the assault on their welfare provisions began) or to improve the hideous racialism of the incarceration regime they continue to suffer from, for letting the bankers who created the financial crisis (by policies pursued earlier during the years of Democratic rule under Bill Clinton) off the hook while ignoring the poor whose homes were foreclosed and suffered the most in the crisis, for ignoring the problem of rising student debt.... Indeed, even on the subject of immigration on which Trump's stand is rightly said by liberals to be deplorable, we shouldn't forget that in the 2008 election campaign it was Obama who took a far worse stance on immigration than his Republican rival [John] McCain.

I'm not suggesting that Sanders would have been some kind of ultimate saviour. Even if one supported him, it would be foolish to think his mildly social-democratic commitments would have succeeded in completely or seriously undermining the sway of contemporary capitalism.

But it is a sign of what liberalism has come to mean that people speaking in its name on the entire spectrum from Edward Luce to Paul Krugman view Sanders as anathema. So, what I am stressing is that liberal orthodoxy is not dying at all. It is everywhere flourishing, and its chief work while in opposition is to make sure that there are no conceptual and critical resources that surface in the political zeitgeist by which to oppose the right-wing populists except those offered by the liberal orthodoxy itself. It thus disdains people like Sanders or Corbyn as "populists" as well and declares them to be unelectable.



But let me just step back a bit and come back to this critique of liberalism a little later. The prior and plain fact that we all know well is that ever since the 1980s, there was a rolling back all over the West (what is now called “the North”) of policies that were intended to benefit labour, and it is this that has produced the conditions that makes working people so highly mobilizable today in populist upsurges that give rise to Trump and Brexit and...

### ***Yes, will you say something about Brexit too?***

A great deal has been said about Brexit along the lines I just mentioned about how it was prompted primarily by the dissatisfaction of working people in England (let me just talk about England and not the rest of Britain so as to not complicate the question with devolutionary issues), especially outside the city of London. London boomed grotesquely at the expense of the deindustrialised regions of the Midlands and the North through the Blairite period and subsequent [David] Cameron years, years in which there was essentially a continuation of Thatcherite domestic policies with a far more insistent globalized and “Europeanized” set of economic commitments. In fact, [Margaret] Thatcher openly said that her greatest achievement was the creation of New Labour, which is to say the arrangement of a divorce between Labour and labour. (Similarly, in the same period, [Ronald] Reagan’s greatest achievement was the creation of a Clintonite Democratic party consolidated by Obama, completely in thrall to the pursuit of a globalized neoliberal agenda, also divorcing the party from its traditional base.)

But let me just add two or three things to these familiar points about regional working-class dissatisfaction prompting Brexit.

First, it is worth noting that in all the sleekly contemptuous liberal punditry against the nationalistic trend exhibited by Brexit, there is unanimity in thinking that it was a big mistake on Cameron’s part to call a referendum. In fact, umpteen essays have been written on how democracy should be restricted to the routines of the quadrennial or quintennial clock at the electoral ballot to deliver representation on a package of issues and policy matters without intrusively appealing to the people with the dangerous ultra-democratic weapon of

referendums on single issues. But the fact is that the consensus between Blairite Labour and post-Thatcher Conservatives is so hegemonic, and this consensus pursued the neoliberal form of globalization with such zest and with such deleterious effects on the working population that the latter's participation in the routine clock of elections was conspicuously dwindling. They simply felt they could not make a difference, so why bother to vote. And the referendum by contrast in fact gave them a visible opportunity to feel that they could make a difference, so they came out and voted.

A second point worth noting is that the vote for Brexit may have been much larger than it was. I suspect many on the Left of British politics were inhibited in voting for Brexit because the Leave campaign was so infused with the xenophobia of UKIP [UK Independence Party] and other groups.

Finally, third, there is a point of contrast between England's regional resentment against London's boom and similar anti-metropolitan resentments in the heartlands of the new world (the U.S. particularly) and perhaps in settler colonial lands quite generally. I think this divide between attitudes of the regions versus those of the major metropolises is somewhat different in these places from what they are in England and the old world. In the U.S., there is, as you know, a general antagonism in the heartland against the coastal metropolises. And this has a long and interesting history and intellectual history that is woven in with the history. It really goes back to John Locke's remarks in his chapter on property in *Second Treatise of Government* about America as the paradigm of the privatization of land for (what we would now call) "development" and also to a whole line of thought in America represented by Frederick Turner's "frontier" thesis. These texts make clear the extent to which America was conceived as a place where wealth was quintessentially the result of honest labour brought to the soil by proprietors of land, thereby improving the lives of all, which was basically Locke's justification of the very idea of privatization as a form of Pareto-improvement.

In England, privatization of the commons happened by brute force with the enclosures, and then Locke came along and presented this argument in that *Second Treatise* to claim that what was happening by brute force was in fact a rational political and moral achievement.

Since England existed for centuries before all this, Locke had to devise a theoretical fiction, a thought experiment of a “social contract” that made for this scenario of Pareto-improvement out of a theoretically imagined “state of nature”. However, he declared America to be that vast expanse of the state of nature, for which there was no artifice of a theoretical device needed to philosophically consolidate an ongoing practice of enclosures. The very idea of America both for Locke and Turner (summarizing a whole outlook) was founded on the ideal of privatized land as the source of genuine wealth. Thus, as commentators have noticed, American populisms today may even be atavistically tapping a quite traditional suspicion of other more arriviste forms of wealth that were generated in the emerging metropolises on the coasts, such as “New Amsterdam” (now New York), by bankers, lawyers, etc., disdained as shysters. This suspicion and hostility has surfaced again and again, both in the religious Right and in the smaller town working people, who now support Trump. And this feeling for the land as the source of genuine wealth and distrust of the big metropolitan centres as late-coming, fly-by-night generators of wealth are generally true of settler colonialisms. And that is why you find the capitals of these countries were set up not in the large cities but in smaller towns: Ottawa not Toronto, Pretoria not Johannesburg, Canberra not Melbourne, etc. (even in the regional states, Albany, not New York, Springfield, not Chicago, etc.). But I don’t think it would be plausible to say anything like this long-standing history of hostility is being tapped in England or the old world generally.

All right, so let’s, then, look at England and the populist support of Brexit. Let me not repeat the familiar analyses of the Brexit vote as one owing to the working class in the neglected, deindustrialised regions of England wanting their nation to pull out of a supra-nation that favoured only the development of the financialized city of London. What has been less explored is why any working person should ever have supported his nation’s joining a supra-nation, in the first place. Ever since the end of the Second World War, every good thing that was available to a working person was made available by policies regarding health, housing, education, pensions for old age, job-seeking allowances, etc., that were devised and implemented at the site of the nation. Nobody knows or has clearly elaborated on

what mechanisms for dispensing such policies would even so much as look like at the site of the supra-nation.

This is a point of greater generality than the issues underlying the working-class vote for Brexit. Britain, of course, has its own currency, but you can ask a similar question about the Eurozone as well. The Right and Left populisms in Europe prompted by working-class dissatisfaction should also prompt a prior question: Why was a relatively well-functioning Common Market transformed into the Eurozone? What were the economic motivations for it? I keep asking economists about this but never get a clear answer. One keeps reading of the lofty cultural and political motivations: to create a more cosmopolitan and less parochial Europe, to create peace after two highly destructive and internecine world wars. But, given how things turned out for the utterly helpless working people of Greece, Spain, Portugal, even Italy, has anyone ever fully analyzed what economic motivations there were behind it, what role the banking and corporate elites in Europe played in setting up an arrangement without any governance mechanisms to ensure the usual safety nets for working people? In fact, since it is hard to even imagine with what mechanisms such safety nets could be provided at the supranational site, given the patchwork form of governance that is allowed by financial globalization, one can't help thinking conspiratorially that the whole supranational ideal of "Europe" is a plot of bankers and corporate elites to slowly undermine the humane policies that were set up on national sites immediately after the Second World War. I'm not suggesting that I have any evidence of such a plot. But I am saying that the origins of the supra-nation of Europe are shrouded in obscurity regarding the economic motivations for it, and it is very hard to get a clear story about what these motivations were from historians and economists. And given how things turned out, it is tempting to fall into these conjectures which are worth inquiring into in order to understand the origins of an idea that was prematurely put forth and erected without any institutions of governance to make sure things turn out differently.

***Recently, Prabhat Patnaik said that the European Left and the Left in the West in general are not***

***willing to attack globalization because they think the only alternative to it is right-wing nationalism.***

Yes, that is very plausible. It is the echo in the contemporary European Left of what I was saying earlier was the standard story that was given in the first place to motivate a European Union. That narrative says: “Two extended destructive wars were fought by nations against each other in Europe on the basis of nationalistic feeling, minorities were slaughtered in the millions within nations in Europe on the basis of nationalistic feeling, only a union will overcome these parochial sentiments.” As I said, all very lofty and right but also burying the economic motivations that need to be exposed and about which there is no clarity or explicitness. And now, as Patnaik says, the European Left is similarly inhibited from criticizing the very idea of the union for fear of a return to that ugly nationalism and parochialism.

***So, are you saying that what is needed is to separate out the economic from the political/cultural aspects of globalization?***

Yes, quite so, that is the crucial point and that is a very complex business and one has to be careful about the issues at stake. However, I’m not sure “separation” is the right word for what is needed, and that is part of the complexity. But before making a stab (and only a very preliminary stab) at addressing those complex issues, I should add that there is something a little hypocritical about the European Left’s lofty cosmopolitan attitudes on this score, given how some of them have responded to the issues around refugees and migration that have recently arisen in Europe.

So, take, for example, Slavoj Žižek in an essay during the refugee crisis spawned by the massive dislocation of populations as a result of the civil wars and Western invasions of different regions in the Middle East [West Asia]. I think the essay is called “The Non-Existence of Norway” and it was in *London Review of Books* about three years ago. He starts off impeccably by blaming Western military misadventures for a lot of this dislocation, and he, therefore, supports a generous policy of hospitality that should be shown by European nations to the desperate plight of refugees seeking some permanent

station in their flight. And then he says something like this. “But if they come they must live by our rules which privilege the Western European way of life. That is the price to be paid for European hospitality. These rules should be clearly stated and enforced, by repressive measures—against foreign fundamentalists as well as our own racists—wherever and whenever necessary.”

Now, it shows no hostility on my part to “the Western European way of life” to observe that far from providing a solution to the refugee problem this proposal and the attitude it expresses will only continue the hostilities and the terrorist backlashes that created the refugee problem in the first place. In fact, I would think, the proposal debases such merit as there is in “the Western European way of life”. In short, I think that pronouncements like this reflect a closet parochialism on Zizek’s part not all that different from the parochialism that he and the European Left are claiming to shun when they (quite rightly) eschew right-wing nationalism. The plain fact is that though secularism and liberal rights and all that are certainly very admirable things, they can become a tribal weapon, a parochial weapon, in pronouncements of this kind against migrant communities. On this score, Zizek, as a leading European leftist, is indistinguishable from people whom he strongly disagrees with such as European liberals like Bernard Henry-Levy.

***But since you agree that there are some very bad aspects to the working-class populism that supports Trump and Brexit such as its xenophobia, how would you relate this to your sympathy for the working people who join these populist movements?***

Right, this is not unrelated to the question you raised about separating globalization’s cultural aspects from its economic aspects. So, let’s begin to address some of these complex issues. As I said, one can probably only skim the surface in a short interview, but still there are some obvious things to say and they are worth saying.

The first thing to say is that we should be very sceptical of and, in fact, we should really counter the tendency among liberal commentators to keep attributing Trump’s victory to the xenophobia

or racism or misogyny in his largest constituency of support, the white working class. The evidence is simply against this view, and liberals don't like to admit this. Many among those who voted for Trump dislike his racism and misogyny. They also openly acknowledge his mendacity. And some of the honest reporting by analysts after his victory, after a careful set of surveys, pointed out that he won despite people who voted for him saying that he was not a "decent" sort. And, since he won the presidential election by a narrow margin, if these among his supporters had voted for his opponent, Hillary Clinton, he would not have won. In fact, this suggests that had the contest been between Trump and Sanders, Trump might well have lost. So, the real thing to be analyzed is why, despite this fact of acknowledging him to be less than ideal in all the respects I mentioned, many voted for him anyway, rather than Hillary Clinton. If you put what needs to be explained that way, it becomes much clearer where to look for the right explanation. But, of course, the liberal commentators don't think of either the explanandum or the explanans along these lines.

And what I'm saying here does not really even mean that there exists no xenophobia in that segment of the electorate that voted for him. No doubt it exists. But it is not what primarily prompted them to vote for him. That is all I am insisting on, and I do so on the basis of a fairly extensive reading of the surveys and reports of the election.

Ok, so having said all that, the next thing to say about the xenophobia among the people, where it does exist, is that it is not at all obvious that it is the people who should be blamed for it. This may sound perverse, but just think about it. Where do working people primarily get their attitudes and ideas and information from? From the mainstream media (tabloids, talk radio from local radio stations and television channels) and from the political class during electioneering. (No doubt, they sometimes get it from their homes and upbringing too but that just pushes the question further back about an earlier generation.) Just look at the tabloid media in Britain and the U.S. and how frequently they print and broadcast brazenly xenophobic attitudes.

As for the political class, I don't just mean Trump himself or Nigel Farage. I also mean the political class of the orthodox consensus in these two countries. Take a look at the speeches for the Remain

campaign that were made by Cameron; he was doing his best to compete with the right-wing Brexiteers on the subject of immigration. And I've already pointed to Obama's speeches on immigration when he was campaigning in 2008 and how they were far worse than McCain's. Now, you can say, as many do: "People deserve the leaders (or the media) they get!" But I don't think the Left can say that. This is one of the things that distinguishes the liberals from the genuine Left. The Left by and large looks to the institutions that are generating a harm of this kind and does not find the source in the people themselves. Is this to romanticize, to sentimentally erect a mythically good category of "the people"? I think it is much more a case of just simply believing in democracy.

***What do you mean by that?***

I mean you can't believe in democracy and hate the electorate or dismiss them as unredeemably heinous or cretinous, which I have heard many high-minded liberals often do. It makes them feel comfortable; they then don't have to criticize the institutions and leaders they often support; in other words, they don't have to criticize themselves.

[Winston] Churchill was one such, and it was his reason for making his celebrated remark about how "Democracy is a terrible form of government but all other forms of government are more terrible". Well, Churchill's thinking on all matters except military ones was feeble; why on earth would I believe in democracy if I thought the electorate was heinous and cretinous and I thought you were a person of great wisdom and judgement. I would much rather believe in monarchy and want to make you the king. So, you cannot believe in democracy without putting trust in the judgement of ordinary people. But the success of democracy turns on ordinary people, the electorate, having a cognitive background of information and knowledge and political analysis; in other words it turns on what the electorate knows, and so the underlying question in a functioning democratic polity is what ought people to know? What they do, how they vote, how they live, are what we scrutinize most, but those are all questions that are subsequent to that prior more background question about what they know.



Now, here, one might think, “Well, we live in a time when all the information is available on the Web if you look hard enough for it and learn to discriminate the spin from the genuine information”; and though this is certainly becoming true, the plain fact is that ordinary working people who work eight hours a day to support a family have hardly any time for anything but a glance at a local tabloid or the television evening news or the radio while driving long distances to work. Not everybody is as privileged as we academics are with hours to seek out all sorts of sources of information on the Web.

In fact, I would much more strongly criticize my colleague (of course, an impeccable liberal) at Columbia University who said to me, justifying the invasion of Afghanistan, “The United States had to do something after 9/11” than I would criticize the working-class white male who voted for Trump’s xenophobic policies on immigration. My colleague who spends only three or four hours per week in a classroom and has almost five months of vacation each year has all the time and the privilege to hunt down information about all the decades of wrongdoing of the U.S. government in Muslim-populated nations and to predict the disastrous consequences of a bombing spree (including cluster bombs) that killed thousands of people and reduced Kabul to rubble in a few days.

Where is the Trump supporter, working long hours each day, earning \$40,000 a year without any benefits, with a spouse and three children to support on it, going to find the time to seek out the information and acquire the cognitive wherewithal to come to an analysis whereby he can see that immigration can in fact be a source of strength for the political economy rather than a threat to him and his job and his future? I would think she had much more of an obligation to know what “ought to be known” and, therefore, was much the more culpable for not knowing it than the Trump supporter’s failures to know.

*So, would you say that this underlying point about knowledge mitigates the bad elements and the xenophobic element in populism?*

I don’t think it is a matter of mitigating it. The point is in fact deeper than that. I think when we focus on their xenophobia (and it is

perfectly all right to do so and to find it deplorable), we have to identify another flaw in their xenophobic assertions over and above the wrongness of the xenophobia, a much more subtle flaw a contemporary populism I started with: the effects of neoliberal capitalism on the lives of working people and the constriction by liberalism of the possibilities of response to such effects on their lives. Let me spell it out patiently.

In an op-ed that I wrote recently, which you may have read, I wrote very briefly about how certain “failures of inference” today are highly revealing of the extraordinarily deep reach of the harms that flow from the kind of capitalism that frameworks our lives in the current period. What do I mean by “failures of inference”? Let’s stick with discussion of Brexit. (It is not hard to extend to other cases with slight revisions of context.) The way to understand the working-class support of Brexit is to notice first of all, as I said, that it is based on a very well-grounded, even if instinctive, scepticism about the effects of economic globalization generally and this ideal of supranational economic affiliation in particular. It is a shrewd and well-grounded scepticism in the sense that the supra-nation seems to working people to be the wrong affiliation to have, when all the good things they have known for well over half a century were formulated and implemented on the national site. But from this sound scepticism, they draw the wrong inference, a xenophobic one about how immigration is undermining their chances in life (to say nothing of their centuries-old national culture). So, they have sound instincts from which they infer unsound anxieties. A failure of inference.

### ***What does it reveal?***

Before I answer that let’s look at another deplorable aspect of contemporary populism, shifting now more to supporters of Trump where it is most explicit. This is the brazen denial of climate change in the face of all the scientific evidence for it. (Here too, this may partly be attributed to the millions spent by corporations to propagandize in the media against the scientific claims, but I am not now stressing what you called the “mitigating” factor of what knowledge is made available to the public, I’m making a different point.) Let us just put it on record that this denial is completely irrational given the evidence.

And, of course, there is widespread liberal contempt for this irrational denial of climate change, just as there is for the xenophobia.

But now, let's consider the fact that every serious and honest analysis of climate change makes clear that the problem is never going to be seriously addressed unless we put such enormous constraints on the very fundamentals of a capitalist political economy that it may well amount to a terminus of capitalism as we know it. All else is ineffectual tinkering, nothing short of this will bring about what is needed to avert the environmental disaster we face. But no liberal who is appalled by the populist denial of climate change is prepared to draw this inference about the need to make an absolutely fundamental critique of capital in order to address climate change effectively. And liberal climate change pundits usually deflect this blindness on the liberal's part by saying that even the Soviet Union massively contributed to climate change, and though that is certainly true, it completely misses the point, which is that harmful environmental effects are endemic to capitalism but not to socialism.

Anyway, returning to the point I am making, what I want to emphasize here is that once again there is a failure of inference, but this time not on the part of the populist but on the part of the liberal responding to populism. The evidence for the fact of an environmental crisis of the proportions one faces and the evidence of the role of capital in generating it should suggest to the liberal that he can't just stop at insisting against the populist that the fact of the crisis, given the evidence, is undeniable but must equally infer, again from the plain evidence, that we need to fundamentally seek to transcend the long-standing tendencies of capital if we are going to satisfactorily address the crisis. (You will recall that [Evo] Morales had the Latin American contingent walk out of the Copenhagen climate meet, saying that nobody around the conference tables was prepared to speak openly about the absolutely central role of capitalism in causing climate change.)

So, I ask you, Why, then, is the liberal position on climate change any more rational than the populist's? If "p entails q" (where what substitutes for p is "there is an environmental crisis" and what substitutes for q is "the only sufficient response to it may well be to usher out capitalism as we know it"), why is it any more irrational to

deny “p” as the populist does than it is to deny “p entails q” as the liberal does?

***So you are suggesting, then, that the liberal is also irrational, not in denying climate change as the Trump populist position but in failing to draw the right inference from climate change.***

Yes, there is this constant talk one keeps hearing of the “irrationality” and “unreason” of right-wing nationalism. But why is this not equally irrational? It is equally a refusal to look at evidence. And unless one keeps exposing this, one will not get to the eventual and hardest enemy or target that the radical Left faces. One will speak only of the immediate and the easier target: the Trumps, the Farages.... And that suits the liberals because that is exactly how they wish to exhaust the options, the liberal consensus versus the irrational populists. So, the liberal complicity in the irrationality is never exposed.

Let me explore this a little more and make more explicit what both these failures of inference that I have outlined reveal. The point is not just to catch the liberal out in a failure of inference to match the failure of inference on the part of the populist. The point is to show that it reveals something very significant about what causes the populisms that fill us with so much concern today.

Let me put the two failures of inference schematically.

Sound scepticism about the European Union→ xenophobia

Climate change is a serious problem→no acknowledgement that capital must be undermined.

In the one case, the populist draws a bad xenophobic conclusion from a good premise of a sensible scepticism about the inadequacies of what can be delivered by supranational banking and financial elites. In the other, the liberal fails to draw the right conclusion from his own perfectly correct disdain for the populist’s denial of climate change.

The revealing thing is that regarding the first of these, the liberal never focuses on the bad inference but only on the populist’s bad conclusion (xenophobia). And regarding the second of these, the

liberal never focuses on his own failure to draw the right inference but instead only on the populists' denial of the true premise (i.e., the denial of the problem of climate change). No doubt, the populist is wrong to be xenophobic and to deny climate change. But we need to diagnose even so why the liberal only focuses on that wrong and nowhere notices that in the first case the populist has something right in the premise (the sound scepticism of the European Union) nor, in the second case, does he notice that he himself has something wrong in failing to draw the right conclusion. Why does he fail to notice both of these things? The answer is perfectly clear. He does not notice either because each of them would involve a fundamental and radical questioning of contemporary capitalism.

The lesson to be drawn from this exercise I have indulged in is quite straightforward. Liberalism is indirectly complicit in generating the crisis of contemporary populism even though it fraudulently affects a disdain and disgust of the populism it generates.

### ***What do you mean exactly by “indirectly complicit”?***

Yes, that is just the right thing to ask and get clear about. It is the heart of the problem today about the causes of contemporary populism.

I think it has become the function of liberalism in both the U.S. and Britain to ensure that there is a drumbeat of sufficiently superficial hysteria against Trump and the right-wing nationalist Brexiteer so that a return to the orthodoxies of the Obama-Clinton party or Blairite Labour seem to be the only realistically serious, electable, options on the Left. Nothing else must be allowed to surface in the political zeitgeist without being dismissed as disdainable populisms, even the mild New Deal ideals of Sanders and social-democratic ideals of Corbyn, for example. To this day, younger progressive candidates in the electoral field in the midterm elections who had cut their teeth under Sanders in his campaign during the primaries were constantly being undermined by the party's powerful orthodoxy. If they win an election or two here and there, it is not because of the wholehearted support of their party high command but because of the overwhelming dissatisfaction among working people and the youth with their current conditions and the failure of orthodox consensual

politics, “politics as usual”, to address it. But it is an uphill task for them because they have to fight not only the more conservative party, the Republicans, but their own party’s pervasively liberal orthodoxy.

By the way, this is only a contemporary surfacing of a long-standing feature of liberal politics. It goes back to a long tradition of a spook that liberalism feels about mass politics, ever since the Jacobin aftermath of the French Revolution. In fact, it goes back even earlier to the anxieties felt by liberals in the last few decades of the 17th century in England, when they were spooked by memories of the remarkable revolutionary activism of the Puritan radicals of the mid century. And these radicals were far more democratic and humane than the Jacobins, so what I am emphasizing is that liberals at the deepest level don’t just have an anxiety about the tyrannical element but the mass element in such politics. In post-Restoration England (in fact even in the Cromwell interregnum), there was concerted early liberal wilfulness to keep all such mass politics out of the arena. The outcome in 1688, of which British liberal thought is so proud, is a result of that anxiety and will. So, there is nothing new about this aspect of contemporary liberalism. It is, from the earliest of days, the essence of the doctrine and the political outlook. But we have to dig deeper than just observing the liberal anxiety about mass politics. The anxiety is about something more basic than that. So, what I am trying to say is that today, this anxiety and wilfulness are not just about the populism we are witnessing but about how to deflect a proper understanding of what gives rise to it and what would be needed to understand it and address it.

It is because liberalism is wilfully, conscientiously, assertively, blind (you might wonder can one be wilfully blind? yes you can, that is what the “ostrich” metaphor has always meant to convey) to the fundamental transformations that are needed in contemporary society, its explicit and self-conscious function has become (perhaps always was) to fail to allow into the political arena of democracies the conceptual wherewithal to even so much as raise fundamental questions about how to seriously constrain (to the point of perhaps even undermining) capital. As a result, ordinary working people have no recourse to anything available in the political zeitgeist to address their deeply felt dissatisfactions. It is small wonder that they turn

haplessly to what is available to them, grotesque forms of nationalistic, fascistic demagoguery which promise a fabulously different zeitgeist. When they feel the whole game is rigged, they want to upturn the whole board on which the game is being played, even if that means voting for extremist forms of nationalism bordering on fascism.

So, through this elaborate exercise of working through these failures of inferences, the conclusion I want to derive is this: One has to understand that populism comes not just from a material desperation of a decades-long working-class wage-stagnation, if not chronic unemployment. That such material causes are in play is obvious and has been widely noted. What is much less recorded is that populism also comes from an unavailability (to ordinary people affected in these material ways) in the political culture of any conceptual sources to fully understand and criticize and thereby politically oppose the sway of capitalism in the current neoliberal financially globalized phase.

Frederic Jameson once said, in a different context, something like “We can more easily conceive the end of the world than we can conceive the end of capitalism”. A combination of that fact, a fact for which I think the predominance of liberalism bears the brunt of the responsibility, and the chronic suffering that is caused in working people under capitalism, is the causal backdrop that gives rise to populisms we are witnessing and which fill us with alarm.

***Would you say that this effectiveness of liberalism in keeping out of the political culture any fundamental critique of capitalism is the success of what Marx called “ideology”?***

Yes, that’s right it is a very specific manifestation of ideology in our present time, and it can’t be left out of the causal explanation of the populisms today. What is striking today, perhaps more than in previous times, is that in these liberal manifestations of “ideology”, there is an explicitly shrill criticism of the very phenomenon (populism) that the ideological role of liberalism gives rise to. That is the sleight of hand that I’m trying to analyze in the remarks that I’ve just made at some length.

As I think we discussed in an earlier interview, not just Marx but also Gandhi saw through liberalism's ideological role. That is why, looking back now, after studying Gandhi, I don't quite understand the hostility to Gandhi in so much of the Left. I have to confess to having myself taken such anti-Gandhi stances in my youth. But, at least in India, that has been changing in Left thinking.

Incidentally, I should add that I think another interesting philosopher, much disapproved of by the Left, who was very perceptive in seeing through liberalism's ideological effects, is [Michel] Foucault. Like Gandhi, Foucault, of course, was not a socialist. In fact, I have no idea what Foucault's politics actually were.

When you turn from his quite penetrating analyses of the liberal Enlightenment's disciplinary effects (that term, "disciplinary" is a technical word in Foucault to describe the grip that capitalist modernity has over our mentalities, something that was the main theme of Gandhi's Hind Swaraj as well), to what political position or views he himself favoured, it is very hard to figure it out. There are occasional remarks about [the Marquis] De Sade or the Iranian revolution, none of which are coherently made. Apart from having no politics (at least none that I can discern), some of Foucault's devotees have not served him well by elevating the analysis of discourse to an obsessively central role, ushering out material explanations. And all this is partly I think why the Left finds him so alien.

But there is no denying that Foucault was insightful in stressing the discursive field and the liberal Enlightenment's role in it. An importance that I am saying is evident in explaining the phenomenon of populism that we are discussing, whereby conceptual resources for a fundamental critique of capitalism are kept out of the political culture. Why this should be thought to be incompatible with material explanations, or thought to be a way of eschewing material explanations, is something I don't understand.

That is why I was saying earlier that it is not a matter of separating out economic issues from cultural ones but rather one of noticing that in a capitalist economic formation the economic determinants, in the end, often rely on the conceptual and cultural aspects of human society in the determinations they effect.



Marx would be the first to have said so.

***You have pointed out the role of liberalism in keeping out the New Deal and the social democratic ideals of [Bernie] Sanders and [Jeremy] Corbyn. And you were highly critical of liberalism for that reason. You also said that liberalism is ensuring that nothing in the political arena is conceptually available for a fundamental transformation of society. But you are not equating social democracy with a fundamental transformation of society, are you? We know, from your writings, that you believe that social democracy does not amount to a radical critique of capitalism. So, then, can you explain what you have in mind exactly?***

That raises a whole range of very familiar and long-standing issues that have afflicted the Left, leading to debates in India (and no doubt in other places as well) between the organized Left and what has come to be called the “ultra-Left” and the insurgent Left.

I think that what is true and what everybody knows is that liberalism in the 20th century has, as I’ve put it in some of my writing, “taken social democracy in its stride”, that is, taken in its stride the social-democratic constraints that had been put on capitalism after the end of the Second World War. But the point of the expression “take in its stride” should not be seen as *merely* saying that liberalism is able to *accommodate* these constraints in its doctrinal framework because they don’t constitute a fundamental critique of capitalism. What more is connoted by “take in its stride” is very important, in fact absolutely crucial, in understanding capitalism today and the ideological role of liberalism and the exact *nature of the accommodation*.

***So, what would be this “more” you would add to the nature of the accommodation?***

It is this. Liberalism takes social democracy in its stride not only by accommodating social democracy but also by making sure that

the *accommodation is always constantly being undermined, even as it is allowed to be there*. In other words, social democracy should not be allowed an equilibrium (leave alone strengthening) within its accommodated status. That is the point of liberalism and it recurs everywhere. Even the Scandinavian countries are subject to it, though, of course, being more peripheral than the main belt of capitalism, social democracy there has not been so recurrently subject to this disequilibrium and instability in its status as in other parts of the capitalist world. So, when one says liberalism accommodates social democracy, we must be absolutely clear that that accommodation is never stable and is *never going to be allowed to be stable*.

Though he does not speak of the crucial role of *liberalism* in maintaining this constant undermining pressure and disequilibrium, Prabhat Patnaik has made a related point about capitalism today in a very sharp and illuminating way. What he has said is that “the spontaneous tendencies of capitalism” simply do not allow constraints upon capital to be *permanent*. I am really relying on that fundamental point he makes. I’m taking it for granted.

It is worth getting clear about what exactly he means. Here is what I think he has in mind by this rather deep theoretical point in his analysis of capitalism.

The word “spontaneous” to describe these tendencies, an expression that Patnaik takes from [the Polish economist] Oskar Lange, is a little startling here because it is standardly used by philosophers (Immanuel Kant, for instance) to be synonymous with “freedom”, whereas Patnaik is talking about the opposite of freedom, the deterministic tendencies of capital. But it is not that hard to sort out what is going on. What he means is that *our* freedom to put abiding constraints on capital does not exist because capitalism is a deterministic force. Or to put it differently, in a way that explains why they are called the “spontaneous” tendencies of capital: in capitalism, the only thing that possesses freedom or spontaneity is *capital*. We don’t possess the freedom to constrain capital (at least not permanently). It is in the nature of these tendencies, and therefore in the nature of capital, to refuse to tolerate more than temporary constraints upon itself. And, if this is right, I am saying that what we

are seeing today is liberalism's essential role in facilitating these tendencies. All this has interesting consequences for how to think about the standard debates that I mentioned earlier.

Another way to elaborate Patnaik's point is in terms of a disjunction. As he says, what follows from this point about the tendencies of capitalism to eventually undermine constraints on it, is that EITHER you transcend capitalism OR capitalism will undermine you (that is, undermine the constraints you bring to it, to capital). So, we, as human subjects in the modern period with its unique economic formation, are *determined* in the sense that we cannot constrain that formation, but we are also *free*, free to *transcend* the formation. That is where our freedom lies. It does not lie in establishing a stable, permanent, set of social-democratic constraints on capital since the deterministic tendencies of capital will never permit such constraints anything more than a temporary status.

The relevance of this to the debates I mentioned is that there is a position (call it ultra-Left if you like, I don't care about labels, perhaps real world ultra-leftists will reject what I am attributing to them) which says the following: Because capitalism so completely dominates the political arena and its institutions, including parliamentary politics, the latter must be held in suspicion; what is to be sought is to overcome and transcend capital by some other, perhaps more direct, means. And I think the other position (call it the position of the organized Left, again labels are neither here nor there) is to say that the political path to transcendence comes from first establishing social democratic constraints via parliamentary politics (under the full awareness that there will be no stable accommodation of them within capitalism and the liberal ideologies that prop it up) and then *proceed to build on these constraints so as to eventually transcend capital*. This is not the place to discuss these options in detail.

What I really meant to stress is that contemporary populism surfaces everywhere today because ordinary working people have not been allowed by the twin causal conditions I outlined earlier to even so much as configure conceptually what such a transcendence would mean, leave alone to see their way to a path to politically achieve it.

***Can you give a more concrete example to explain what you have in mind when you talk of “meaning” here and your references earlier to how ordinary people do not even have available in their political zeitgeist the “conceptual vocabulary” to make a radical critique of capitalism and seek thereby a path to overcoming and transcending it? How does this lack have specific or concrete consequences? Can you explain?***

Yes, sure. Let’s look at the first failure of inference, the one I attributed to ordinary working people who have a sound scepticism about globalization and the supra-nation of Europe but who draw the wrong inference from it when they express their xenophobic opposition to immigration.

The point here is that within a certain framework of thinking (the one, for example, shared by a liberal consensus between Blairite Labour thinking and Tory thinking which dominated British political culture through the neoliberal period; actually Labour thinking on this goes back further, if you recall the early [James] Callaghan talk of austerity), *there are no conceptual resources available by which you could actually establish that immigration could be an asset for the economy*. To get to that alternative framework of thought whereby you could establish that, you’d have to push in a certain direction the scepticism about globalization and Europe that is expressed in the populist’s sound premise, but people just don’t have the conceptual resources to push in that direction. It’s just simply not among the options that are conceptualized in the politics frameworked by the liberal consensus. That’s what makes liberalism the deepest enemy of a genuine Left. Marx saw this in the celebrated essay “On the Jewish Question”, and we have talked about this more philosophically in an earlier interview.

You know, conservatism is an easy target. When I say that, I am not denying that conservatism (whether it is the Tories or the Republicans in the two countries we have focused on in the discussion) is very often the more immediate danger, nor am I denying that wherever it wins elections, life gets harder for working

people. But speaking more theoretically, the *eventual* obstacles are the role played by liberalism in making sure that Conservatives are the only alternative to a Blairite Labour or Clintonite Democratic position. And not only must it, for this reason, be the eventual target for a genuinely radical position, but it is also the more difficult target because liberalism always claims the *moral high ground* by opposing the unsavoury populisms of the extreme Right (while, of course, at the same time constantly sneering at Sanders and Corbyn as unelectable “populisms” too). Thus, my point is that they have no right to blame the xenophobia because they are partly responsible for there not being conceptually available to working people any resources to construct upon their instinctively insightful scepticism about globalization and Europe, an alternative framework within which they could have a different view of immigration. It is this that lies behind the point I was making earlier that you can’t blame people for something that the cognitive resources are not there for them in the political options that have been conceptualized. It is undemocratic to blame them. We should be blaming those who are responsible for that cognitive deficit in the political culture. And that is what I hold liberalism responsible for and that is why I think that they are, in the end, the deepest enemy.

All this is really just bringing out in more concrete terms by a discussion of Brexit in particular, what I was saying in a much more philosophical vein in an earlier interview with you while discussing Marx’s essay on the Jewish question and [Mahatma] Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj*. And you know this is echoed everywhere in our culture, not just in the political arena but in the academy as well.

Take economics departments in virtually any university in the United States, which is where I know universities best. Suppose by some miracle a radical socialist economist got tenure in an economics department at a standard university in America. The liberal consensus in the discipline would completely marginalize her. It’s not as if they would censor her or dictate to her what she can or cannot say or write (oh no, that would mean liberalism would lose its moral high ground). No, they would just make her irrelevant with pity: “Poor thing, she is 50 years out of date.” And in that ethos, most people, out of careerist anxiety, just adjust and shed their radically alternative

conceptual frameworks in the discipline. If this happens pervasively in universities where capital has much less direct influence, you can imagine how much more it happens in the journalistic arena and, of course, in the political arena, which is what we have been discussing in this elaboration of the causal conditions that give rise to contemporary populisms.

***So, what would you say is the solution? You say it is hard to envisage the end of capitalism, and you have shown sympathy for the instinctive scepticism about globalization on the part of populism, despite people drawing wrong inferences from it, so would you agree with Samir Amin and Prabhat Patnaik that there should be a delinking of nations from globalization, whether it be Brexit-like departures from Europe or more generally from the global economy that comprises contemporary neoliberal capitalism?***

That is a very large question. And there should be much more discussion of it than there has hitherto been. It does seem as if something like that is inevitably going to be required as an initial step in the resistance to the ill effects of capitalism we have been discussing. But it is interesting that both the Marxist theorists you mention who have proposed this are from the *South*. It is just not on the horizon of Left thinking in Europe, at any rate any thinking that has any actual influence in politics. This is evident even in [Yanis] Varoufakis' pronouncements and writings, despite his walking out of the Greek left-wing government. He will simply not countenance full national sovereignty over one's own economy even as he rails against the establishment in Brussels and Frankfurt.

However, I do think it is just possible that Corbyn is a closet Brexiteer unable to name his position openly. The situation is extremely difficult for him for obvious reasons. There is going to be a lot of hardship that people will initially face in the short run if there is delinking, wherever it may be; any government which leads such a move will have huge problems to cope with and will have to work very hard at public

education of the country's population to present a long-term (and midterm) programme that carries conviction.

There will be a great temptation to resort to the path of austerity again, which must be resisted. There will have to be a fearless resolve to tax wealth and to tax the corporations to generate the revenues needed to avoid taking that path. In fact, something like this was the resolve in that leaked Corbyn Labour manifesto that fetched him such notoriety. All the man and the Momentum group in the party behind him was trying to propose for the post-Brexit period was to make electoral politics about something other than immigration and all it got him was notoriety, spearheaded by the sneering once again by the liberal pundits in the mainstream press, though it did consolidate his popularity among his own base. An alternative model of growth implemented through the exercise of national sovereignty over one's own economy would have to not only be devised but made part of the agenda for educating the national public to accept it after years of having been brainwashed by propaganda (still zestfully pursued by a liberal consensus between the Tories and Blairite Labour) about the only path to growth being globalization. Working-class' instinctive anti-globalization stance will not suffice. If a humane politics and political economy is sought over the middle and long run, that instinctive perceptiveness will have to be given a framework that provides an alternative form of thinking about the fundamental issues of political economy, and the concepts on which that thinking is constructed will have to become a familiar part of the political culture and zeitgeist through public education into the concepts.

As for countries of the South, were there to be delinking to regain national sovereignty over one's economy, I think there is a simple thought experiment that economists should debate about by asking a question in the subjunctive: Would such a delinking have the effect of making the countries of the South better off than they have hitherto been and the countries of the North worse off? These things need to be debated by economists. I realize that "better off and worse off" are often themselves ideologically constituted measures, but assuming one can get over those ideological filters to agree on a neutral understanding of those terms, it would be a worthwhile debate to have among economists.

In fact, if you read the exchange between David Harvey and the Patnaiks over imperialism in the new book by the Patnaiks on the subject [*A Theory of Imperialism* by Utsa Patnaik and Prabhat Patnaik, November 2016], this debate has already begun in a preliminary way. It needs to be pursued further. But it is very interesting to me that the only economists to be taking this line of delinking are from the South. It just shows how far globalization has gone into shaping the thinking of even Marxist economists in the North.

If even Marxist economists of the North are opposed to delinking, it is hardly surprising that [Francis] Fukuyama summarized a whole range of Northern thinking about the current period's political economy as constituting the "end of history". He is just saying what I cited earlier from Frederic Jameson but with the attitude of applauding it, while Jameson was lamenting it. (Actually, in this they were both—in a remote but not by any means fanciful way—anticipated, with neither applause nor lament, in a clinically brilliant reading of Hegel by [Alexandre] Kojève in lectures that were very influential in the European philosophy of the last century.)

I should make clear, what should be obvious anyway, that I am not equating Left theorists and economists in Europe with Fukuyama. Not at all. I am only saying that except for a very few economists in the South there is a pervasive embrace of the inevitability of globalization and some vague, mostly unelaborated, hunch that a radical Left transformation is possible within globalization—captured in some slogans of eminent Left economists such as: "Making globalization work". In a recent article in *New Left Review*, analyzing Trump's America, Perry Anderson says in passing that the Left should be seeking a "genuinely alternative international platform". He does not say a word to elaborate on it. I have no idea what he has in mind.

Mind you, it is not as if delinking for countries of the South would not come with problems of its own. The smaller economies will be at a disadvantage compared with the large countries with diverse natural resources, and so there would have to be South-South links that would have to be formed to protect the smaller nations. This would be a quite different form of relinking than BRICS [Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa].



And there is another kind of problem that often comes up in discussions these days regarding these issues. There is beginning to be a tendency to say that since countries like China (and even India to some extent) are making their economic presence felt in Africa and Latin America, there are new imperialisms emerging, and my thought-experimental question is not acknowledging these new Southern power centres and so it cannot just be a matter of the North's domination over the South. Well, maybe.

But I think those are only complicating factors. I think we can count those factors in and hold those variables steady and still pose my thought-experimental question for economists to discuss, and if the outcome of this discussion is that indeed the South will be better off and the North worse off, it will bring out the extent to which economic imperialism by the advanced capitalist nations of the North over Southern nations has continued to exist since the political decolonization that took place roughly the middle of the last century and especially accelerated via financial globalization from the 1980s on. And that will obviously make a strong case for countries of the South to delink from global finance.

***Will it not be very hard for the Left in countries of the South to get their governments to embrace delinking policies, given the fact that these governments are dominated by the corporate elites in their own countries?***

You are certainly right about it being very hard these days. Left movements within nations are very weak for reasons widely known, having to do with how neoliberalism has steadily undermined the bargaining power of labour in the last quarter century both in India and everywhere else. This is, of course, partly due to the creation of a form of employment that is impermanent and part-time and contractualized. And there is also the standard "reserve army" effect that allows employers to squash the bargaining power of employed labour. In fact, the two are linked since the reserve army effect is partly to create that kind of casual form of employment. All this is undeniable. The task is deeply uphill.

But what is the alternative? Just consider, by contrast, what resistance there would be at the international level? What does it even mean? Ever since the Bretton Woods institutions were remantled, we have witnessed a kind of unleashing of capital mobility that has, as we have been saying, deprived nation states of sovereignty over their own economies because of anxieties about capital flight. But its effect on movements of resistance is equally alarming. So, take, for instance, Lula's initial success in coming to power [in Brazil]. He came to power on the wave of a tremendous working-class movement with an impressively progressive manifesto. But how much could he do, how much could he implement given the fear of capital flight while the economy is linked to global finance? Given the link, it would have been irresponsible to implement it since capital flight would have, among other things, resulted in massive unemployment.

And so, if there is to be effectiveness of resistance under globalization, there would have to be movements waiting at whichever place capital flies to. What sort of international solidarities would that require? Can we even imagine such a thing? [Michael] Hardt and [Antonio] Negri talk of "multitude" as a kind of "de-territorialized" resistance. Have they or anyone else ever made clear what that is apart from a fantasy? Even just within Europe, Podemos failed to come through with any support of Greece during its recent trials with the European banking establishment.

So, difficult as it is, there is only real scope for resistance at the national level. In Left commentary in India on the large September 5 [2018] worker-peasant (including agricultural labourers) rally, it was pointed out how significant it was that solidarity was shown between these two groups despite distinct and conflicting interests (after all, peasants want higher prices for what they produce, but that hurts the worker in the city who purchases, say, foodgrains). That is just the kind of solidarity that it is so hard to even imagine at a global level. What sort of similar solidarity could possibly be envisaged between peasants in India and whoever consumes the exported basmati in metropolises abroad? Or take perhaps a more realistic example.

These commentaries I mentioned explain the solidarity between urban labourer and peasant as follows. Low procurement prices for

foodgrains creates destitution among the peasantry and forces their migration to the cities, which then, in turn, creates hardship among labourers in the city due to the “reserve army” effect of that migration. So it is not just in the interests of the peasantry to demand higher prices but the labourer in the city to support this. And that was partly what was so encouraging about that rally. But now can you imagine anything like this solidarity emerging in the present frameworks of political culture between white workers in the cities in the U.S. bordering Mexico and the potentially displaced migrant from Mexico to these cities? Trump’s entire support base has emerged precisely because of such solidarity being *out of the question*.

So the only feasible solidarities among different sectors of working (and workless) people are really on or within the site of the nation. You can have flash events like Seattle a few years ago and a few other things like that; you can have the World Social Forum annual meetings, but admirable though these things certainly are, they do not constitute sustained movements of the sort that puts any serious pressure on the light patchwork form of international governance that global finance allows. Real change will come through movements on national sites, and parliamentary political parties in specific nations will have to be alert to what these movements are demanding and formulate their electoral platforms in accord with the interests articulated in these movements. This last point is what Sanders and Corbyn understood in their intra-party parliamentary campaigns, and such success as they have had in enlivening their respective moribund Clintonite and Blairite parties has been due to precisely this alertness on their part. But in countries of the South, pretty much all the causes that surface in these movements (with very few exceptions) are eventually pursuable only within delinked political economies. To pursue them within a neoliberal framework of globalization makes them hostage to the anxieties about capital flight. In Europe too, as the experience of Greece has shown, there is only heartache and frustration for the Left if it seeks to have it both ways.

***We have explored a lot of different themes around populism, including the realistic ways to think about alternatives and solutions to globalization.***

***Can you say something by way of summary about your line of thinking and argument on the subject?***

My dialectic has been something like this. I started out by saying that the fact that there are very different and even contradictory contents to populisms should not make us regard populism as a contentless phenomenon and look to trivial (contentless) features of it that are in common (such as the charisma of populist leaders), even if there were such trivial features in common (which I doubt there are; Corbyn is hardly charismatic). Rather, we should look for something substantial and non-trivial that is in common, and I proposed that we should look at the common *causal conditions* that give rise to populisms with different, even contradictory, contents and show why they do. I then focused on the right-wing populisms in Britain and the U.S. (speaking occasionally as well to the left-wing populisms in both places of Corbyn and Sanders). And I tried to diagnose the twin causal conditions that prompted these populisms. In doing so, I stressed not merely globalization, which is an obvious causal condition, but the role of liberalism and its responses to populism as forming an *essential* part of the causal explanation of these populisms. It would be important to extend this analysis to other places, including to India under Narendra Modi.

Let me just conclude by saying a very brief word to tie up all this lengthy analysis with the two initial questions I posed.

The first question was how has “populism”, which is defined by dictionaries as “the opposition to elites by ordinary people” (surely a good thing) become a pejorative term? The points I made around what I called the “failure of inference” were intended as accounting for that. The failure of inference among populists reveal that populism arises from a mix of insight and failure to draw the right lessons from the insight due to the discursive restrictions imposed by the pervasive influence of liberalism. The pejorative use of the term really targets the failure to draw the right lessons (or better, targets the wrong lessons that are drawn by the populists --the xenophobia, etc) but *never explains* them by targeting liberalism.

But what of the other question, what is the difference between populism as a way of combating elites and democracy? After all,

democracy is intended to give ordinary people a chance to counter elites through representative politics. That is to say, if democracy calibrates representation with numbers and if we assume—surely, a safe assumption—that ordinary people outnumber elites, then willy-nilly democracy is going to provide a political mechanism for opposing elites. But then what is the difference between these two ways of opposing the elites, and why is populism even necessary when you already have democracy?

Well, obviously, the answer lies in the insufficiencies of formal representative democracy. There is a great deal of literature on these deficiencies in democratic polities, but one point that is immediately relevant to this second question is that, unlike (liberal) democracy, populism also seeks (mostly incoherently, after all what I called a “failure of inference” is a symptom of incoherence) to oppose something that democracy, it seems, has been powerless to oppose: the power of *unelected* officials with specific economic interests to dominate the formation of policies. The general powerlessness of democracy to prevent this is present in the fact that this domination exists with the general *acquiescence* of the *elected* representatives.

### ***What do you mean by “unelected officials with specific economic interests”?***

Just take a look at the roll call of support for both the Remain campaign in Britain and for [Hillary] Clinton in the primaries against Sanders (as well as in the presidential elections against Trump). It ranged from the IMF, Wall Street, the OECD, and [George] Soros, to the Governor of the Bank of England. This shows the extent to which what *underlies* the political class that surfaces in mainstream democratic politics is a parade of corporate and banking elites. And if that is the underlying power centre in actually existing liberal *democracy*, then *populism* is bound to differentiate itself from this political class by whatever means (often incoherent, often by turning alarmingly close to fascist ideologies) that are available for it in a very constricted political culture, the sources of whose constriction I tried to present.

So, just to be clear, I want to stress two things that distinguish populism from actually existing democracy as we know it. *First*,

because such democracy is dominated by the liberal frameworks of thought I've been describing, populism is to be distinguished from democracy by the fact that it is opposing an entire consensual orthodox political class (the legislatures and executive branches of these democracies) which has acquiesced in actually existing democracies to the policy-shaping control exercised by unelected representatives of the corporate and banking elites. But, *second*, that opposition is only instinctive and inchoate; it is often confused, and often in thrall to leaders who merely mouth that opposition while working to make the class represented by these unelected officials even more entrenched in their control. Both these points are essential to the diagnostic condition of right-wing populisms that we witness today. Populism is distinct from democracy in opposing something that democracy (in its pervasively liberal form that is present in actually existing democracies) is powerless to oppose, but the opposition it provides is often and mostly under-theorized and instinctive and largely counterproductive.

***You have distinguished between populism and democracy. What about the difference between populism and class politics?***

You are right to raise that point too. Populism has emerged as a renewed phenomenon in our times not only because of the limitations of actually existing democracy but because in the past many years class politics has been superseded. Two factors lie behind this latter phenomenon. First, old notions of class have broken down (for the reasons we traversed when outlining the loss of bargaining power of labour), and second, all sorts of special interests making demands on the state have emerged as a result of other groups (not defined in class terms) gaining benefits from state policies. (In India, Mandal provides the most obvious example, but there are diverse other examples.) These two factors make it necessary to introduce a new category of populism to understand what often goes on in the politics of resistance. Thus, for example, Sanders was trying to bring together many different special interests; his was not just an older form of class politics, though of course he did mobilize people suffering from unemployment and wage stagnation, but he also mobilized youth with crippling education debts, the elderly population marginalized without

proper health insurance, incarcerated black populations ignored by the first black President in U.S. history, etc.

***So you are saying that populism defined as “opposition to elites” is a concept that gets its point and rationale when we make both these differentiations from other forms of opposition to the elites by ordinary people: conventional democratic politics and conventional class politics.***

Just so.

***You have said a lot about populism, would you like to say something about fascism since that is a word now widely in currency to describe the right-wing populisms?***

No, I wouldn't, really. I find that to do so is a thankless enterprise. It just gets one into pointless scholastic debates about whether the situation in India or Hungary today is exactly like it was in Europe (Germany and Italy) in the 1930s and 1940s. These quibbles are tiresome and are not well motivated, theoretically nor, indeed, politically.

I have some sympathy for seeing the matter in the following way. (I am just going to state it and then walk away because I don't really see that it is fruitful to discuss it in detail. I have no major investment in seeing it this way, so I don't particularly want to defend it. I just think it is one sensible way to see it.)

If you put aside mathematics and perhaps the neologisms that natural science sometimes coins in its strict taxonomies, there are no definitions of concepts and terms. Interesting concepts simply don't have strict definitions. Only trivial concepts do. Recall that Socrates said at the end of his life that the only thing he had managed to define ever was the term that we translate in English as “mud”. (He defined it as a mixture of soil and water, in case you are interested.) So, when you have a term like fascism, which had emerged in a specific historical context with certain features and with a loaded doctrinal connotation, you obviously can't give any strict analytic definition of it.

You have to just see if there is enough reason to think that those historical features are being replicated so as to prompt its appropriate use again. But now, again obviously, “replicated” is too strong. So, we would have to require something weaker. Let’s say, “approximated”. (Incidentally, that is why Wittgenstein once said that concepts should be thought of not in terms of definitions but in terms of “family resemblances”.)

If you recall in a previous interview with you, I had said that that is the reason why I don’t think that “secularism”, which had its origins in a European historical context, really applied to anything happening in India until after Independence (it played no serious role for Gandhi nor even Nehru till then), and indeed it only became to be seriously relevant in India after the 1980s when the European context for it was being replicated or approximated in India. So, we have to ask the same about fascism when applying it to India today or to Hungary or....

If we are talking about India, you then have to decide. Does the following amount to an approximation of what was happening in Germany and Italy in that fascist period? a) The existence of a vitally influential paramilitary organization like the RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh] working behind and influencing the state. b) The entire talk of “purity” in the Brahmanism that underlies the Hindutva outlook, mimicking talk of racial purity. c) The invoking of both the state’s police and Home Ministry apparatus as well as the invoking of “the nation”, “the people” (*volk*), etc. to stifle individual dissent and to undermine the institutions that would protect dissent from the state bearing down on it. d) The appeal to a glorious past of the superiority of a people being debased by the namby-pamby secular accommodation of despised outsiders and enemies within the nation (Jews then, Muslims now). e) Above all, the dispersing of these attitudes into the mentalities of the people by propaganda and by the sanction that some of them begin to feel is given to them by the state for brazenly criminal acts of lynching and other forms of brutality against minorities and Dalits. f) The role of the ABVP [Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad], mimicking the Balillas in Italy, tormenting dissident students on campuses across the nation. And finally, of course, g) the fusion of state and corporations, to use



[Benito] Mussolini's term, as is emerging in Modi's economic ideal for the nation.

Well, everybody should decide for themselves if a) to g) amounts to a family resemblance to Europe in the 1930s. What else is there to say? If someone decides "no, it does not", all you can do is just quarrel about their judgement or perhaps their taste. But there is no knockdown argument on either side. That is why I am really quite happy not to talk of fascism and talk merely of a pathological authoritarianism. For that I think *we do have something like a theoretical argument* and not just an appeal to a family resemblance. Here is how I've consistently presented that argument. I'll repeat it here.

The state in polities broadly described as liberal democracies with political economies broadly described as capitalist are sometimes characterized by a feature that [Antonio] Gramsci called hegemony. This is a technical term, not to be confused with the casual use of that term to connote "power and domination over another". In Gramsci's special sense, hegemony means that a class gets to be the ruling class by convincing all other classes that *its* interests are the interests of *all other classes*. It is because of this feature that such states (which represents such a class) can avoid being authoritarian. Authoritarian states need to be authoritarian precisely because there is no Gramscian hegemony. It would follow from this that if a state that does possess hegemony in this sense is authoritarian, there is something compulsive about its authoritarianism. Now, what is interesting is that the present government in India keeps boastfully proclaiming that it possesses hegemony in this sense, that it has all the classes convinced that its policies are to their benefit. If so, one can only conclude that its widely recorded authoritarianism, therefore, is pathological.

This doesn't mention fascism; it only mentions a pathology (though you might observe that Nazism has been frequently described as a pathology). And, moreover, nothing I have said *explains* the pathology. The argument merely establishes that it is a pathology and leaves it unexplained. And I think on the Left, one finds that this is generally true of fascism too. You see fascism is particularly vexing to the Left because the Left can't take it within its explanatory stride. In

this it is unlike imperialism. I think it is very plausible to say that imperialism is *built into* the tendencies of capitalism, so we can explain it more easily within a framework we can construct for the analysis of capitalism. But I don't believe we have anything like an explanation of fascism that subsumes it to the outcomes of the tendencies of capital. It is not that we cannot have any explanation of fascism; it is not a *mysterium*, it is not even *sui generis*, but unlike imperialism, fascism is *prima facie* mysterious because any explanation that Left theorists devise for it will have to look at factors that go beyond the tendencies of capitalism. Certainly, capitalism and the crises it generates are the prompting conditions for fascism (and other approximate pathologically authoritarian states), but they do not suffice to explain it.