

John Keane: Nadia, your forthcoming book is called *The Age of Populism*, in which you say “that populism much talked about in the present period, globally, is not only a contribution to the interpretation of democracy, but it’s a parasite on democracy”. What exactly do you mean when you say “it’s a parasite on democracy”?

Nadia Urbinati: John, I mean that populism is not a regime of its own. It doesn’t have an autonomous condition or structure so that we can say along with democracy, along with tyranny, along with despotism, there is also populism. Populism is not a regime of its own. And thus it depends on other regimes. In my view it is in-between democracy and fascism and sucks from democracy its lymph of the people as an entity that is not simply juridical but is very ideological and political, and on the principal of majority.

John Keane: You say that populism gives determinacy to democracy.

Nadia Urbinati: Exactly! So because democracy in its constitutional and representative form doesn’t have a ‘one people’, it has many contestations over the representation of the people, so we have several parties, several visions. Populism wants to unify all these different claims, and say these claims are the claims of the people, and thus it wants to put the people versus something that is not the people.

John Keane: And this incarnation of the people, this embodiment of the people is done through the leader and you say that the leader has a *fabulous* quality. What do you mean by fabulous quality?

Nadia Urbinati: It reminds me of the classical prophets in the tradition because, as we know, the prophet was considered to be not an imposter, in so far as it was believed. How can you believe a prophet that he is a real prophet when he does not speak with his own will, with his own intention but he is simply a vehicle and means for the voice of god to come to us. Thus, when the prophet was asleep, as Spinoza used to say, when he was even dreaming thus completely far away from his own consciousness, that was a good prophet that we can trust because he doesn’t manipulate. That is a little bit similar because the populist leader pretends or wants to tell us, and wants to convince us that it is not his own words that he wants to tell us, but he is simply the one who speaks for us; actually we speak through him.

John Keane: Narendra Modi attributed in a famous speech about his election in 2014 in India that he had Krishna, the God Krishna on his side.

Nadia Urbinati: Yes, also Peron “I am with you like Christ is with you, I am the people”. So it is a kind of declaration of the people that the people, since there are so many, many, many individuals, they find in one like him, the real prophet. So it’s also very important because the populist leader wants to convince us that he is one of us, he has all the vices and virtues of his people. For this reason, we were not, I mean not me because I wasn’t one of his voters but Berlusconi’s followers they were not bothered by the fact that he was a little bit immoral, a little bit drageur, because they were similar to him. So, this doesn’t disturb the people, it disturbs the people when the leader shows that he is different, for example upper class. That is the kind of leadership the people don’t like, according to this rendering of the people.

John Keane: And you say in the , drawing on one of your mentors and former colleagues Norberto Bobbio, you say that populism is a form of ‘merecracy’, this is a strange word in English, from ‘meros’, the part. That populism is a form of politics that gives determinacy to

the people that requires a great boss leader who is the incarnation of the people. But it's a type of politics, everything to do with democracy, that emphasises the powerful part. What did you mean?

Nadia Urbinati: Yes, it is the exultation of one part against another one, the good part versus the non-good part. Non-good, in relation to democracy, in relation because it is the minority versus the majority in terms of numbers. So it's not simply that there are many parts fighting for the number of seats in parliament or the presidency. But it is one part declaring to be the right one. This is very important, it does not pretend to express the whole people, *pars pro toto* in the classical tradition of representation. No, no, they don't want to say *pro toto*, they want to say for themselves, so it's *pars pro parte*, it's our part that is the best one, we don't want to represent the others and we don't want even to include the others.

John Keane: So, logically and in practice, populism functionally requires out-grouping. Once upon a time, for example, in the late 19th century it was the banks and railroad companies and Chinese immigrants, and today?

Nadia Urbinati: Today, the immigrants, because they are here coming "stealing **our** jobs, dirtying **our** cities, changing **our** lives", so it is a kind of threat that they want to take care of. And since the parties—democratic parties, traditional parties—they are not radical enough to do so because they are connected to the Euro crisis somehow, to the division of power, the limitation of powers, they don't trust, they are too civilised somehow and also too hypocritical. So they want to be an authentic defender of the people without any kind of second thought.

John Keane: Does your book follow through the thought that this involves violence, there is something of an aesthetic fascination with violence in populism?

Nadia Urbinati: Well, it cannot be directly violent because in this case we would be already in the domain of fascism or forms of totalitarian impositions through violence

John Keane: But in many speeches during Trump's campaign, you know, he would say, when hecklers tried to interrupt him, "Get them out of here!", "Punch him in the face!", "Knock the crap out of him!".

Nadia Urbinati: Absolutely. So **linguistic** use of violence, yes, which means that populism, if it persists this situation, perhaps would be capable of changing the tenor, the style of our public discourse—more intolerant, more violent—in terms of language not in terms of physical violence. Yes, this is an important quality...

John Keane: Don't you think as well—last point about how we understand populism—that coded into populism is a territorial mentality. It's not accidental, is it, that populism is preoccupied with borders, with strengthening borders?

Nadia Urbinati: Yes, because it takes very seriously the nation state foundation of democracy which is not a borderless democracy and the people is defined as the collective sovereign within those borders. So, I think it is a reaffirmation of a space-based foundation of modern democracy.

John Keane: Could we turn to the positive effects of populism in action? It's not commonplace to pay attention to these positive effects but given that in this book you see populism as having everything to do with democracy, feeding upon it, somehow reinforcing it. In what way would you say there are positive consequences that are likely or probable in this age of populism?

Nadia Urbinati: Well, as you know in the past when there was not yet a structural democracy with the inclusion of all the women and men, all the 'people', populism played the role of stimulating these inclusions. So, today that the inclusion is achieved more or less, because there are always exclusionary forces as we know, but the majority of the people **are** inside, what can be the positive function of populism? Perhaps it is an important bell that rings in our mind that we should take care of. One: the dignity and 'dignification' of the people. They cannot continue to feel to be dispossessed of their ability of having a decent life. So the question of material life of everyday life of the people is crucial. And the other important one, in my view, is that the establishment as it is today—and we use this word because also democrats can use this word—is sometimes a disgrace, because it is a kind of memento that there are people who are benefiting from the condition of subordination of other people.

John Keane: Which is why you say that one of the features of populism is that it's a constellation, a linguistic constellation of anti: anti-elitism, anti-party, anti-partisanship, anti-intellectualism.

Nadia Urbinati: Yes, it's an anti. It's an anti, because it doesn't have in itself to offer democracy, there is already democracy. It needs to offer all the negativity that in democracy may be produced in order to clean up the floor and to be more restorative of a genuine democracy—we may believe it or not, because perhaps this is not what we have, I don't know—but certainly it is not necessarily bad that we are reminded sometimes that we are stretching too much the inequality condition of equal political citizens.

John Keane: And you say that it's not anti-money or anti-capitalist.

Nadia Urbinati: No necessarily, as I said, think about Fujimori, or Berlusconi, or Trump, they're rich people. So it's not the problem of money, because we want—in a market open democracy—to be rich, we don't want to be poor. But this is not the question. Indeed, the populist leader has the same vices and defects that we have. The question is, those who occupy state positions and those who make laws that we have to obey, who are these people, what kind of character do these people have? They don't produce anything in particular. They don't have any kind of professionalism. They live at our expense. So we are against that kind of elite, not **any** kind of elite, the political elite, not the social or economic elite.

John Keane: Isn't there also a tactical consideration here, which is that in order to get elected, in order to campaign and to get elected, this all requires money and it requires also being on good terms with rich elites and so the tactical dynamic is evident in Trump's promise to drain the swamp who then appoints a cabinet with the highest concentration of millionaires and billionaires in the history of the republic.

Nadia Urbinati: Right, because after all the U.S. never demonized money, never demonized rich people who 'made it', never demonized people who try to find the loopholes not to pay taxes. There is not a problem with that. In fact it is part of the imaginary of the country, so I don't see any kind of discrepancy in relation to this. What may be a very damaging moment,

in my view, of Trump is the fact that he is occupying the institutions with people and according to strategies that can damage the ethos and the moral of the very institutions.

John Keane: Yes. Just to finish our discussion about the possible positive effects of populism. You've emphasized the importance of calling into question establishment, established parties and the way elites breed the feeling of exclusion among millions of citizens. Could it be also that populism because of its dependence upon the great leader, is forcing or will force public discussion of what counts as good leadership under democratic conditions?

Nadia Urbinati: Well, this is an interesting point. So democracy, since its ancient origins doesn't have a particular attention for virtues and characters, this is a republican argument more than a democratic one, because everyone can attempt to make it in politics and to enter in politics. So there is no exclusion or selection in relation to character. But certainly, in a situation like ours in which we have a free market, free competition and the attempt to use political power in order to facilitate those who are socially more privileged than others, at this point, yes, it necessarily becomes an issue of character, of quality of their leadership. So there is, inside of populism, a quasi accusation of those who claim to represent them, to falsely represent them, in fact using their power in order to do their own job. So yes, there is this element of calling attention on the character.

John Keane: You've said recently that populism has a karst river quality, that like a river through a karst region, in the history of democracy, it periodically surfaces and then goes underground and then resurfaces at a later point in time, that raises the question of – it's an interesting simile—why now? Why is it that we seem to be living—in the title of your forthcoming book—in an age of populism?

Nadia Urbinati: Yes, it's very interesting for me, because in democracy, there is not only the element of ruling, institution, activity inside of government, but also the activity of the citizen in a permanent motion of opinion, of contestation, of disagreements, of disaffection, of mistrust. So if these two elements are not capable of interacting, one of the two disaggregates from the other and what can occur if not the coming back of all these criticisms, attacks against those who are in power instead of being—as they generally are—in a permanent tension of dialectic communication. So hatred for those who are in power, is back in a strong way, because those who are in power are incapable of listening to, are incapable of understanding. So it's a kind of break of understanding and listening or talking and listening and thus what you have is this new current of criticism becoming preponderant of its own and attacking.

John Keane: Helped by new communications media obviously. Doesn't populism in our times, its karst quality, have much to do with what Italians call 'partitocrazia' I mean the dominance of political parties.

Nadia Urbinati: So partitocrazia is part of the party system. We cannot disclaim it. But when political parties are capable of including, making identity—political reality, partisan reality—a reality among citizens you don't feel this 'crazia' of parties as damaging but when the parties are simply internal to the states and produce cartelisation, cartel parties, then parties are simply inside, once again and the other side is left to his vindication for more voice, despising for those who are inside and so on and so forth.

John Keane: Can we move to talking about the inner flaws, the inner weaknesses in the logic of populism in action? You've said, and in the book you develop the idea of populism dwarfing opposition? What do you mean?

Nadia Urbinati: Dwarfing means, Nancy Rosenblum is important here because she gave us the sense of how the attack against the oppositional parties can become very problematic. Of course all the majority which are in government, they tend to consider the minority less relevant than the majority but they never attack the opposition to the point of making the opposition feel impotent. So the dwarfing is a kind of psychological, spiritual, moral sentiment that the opposition has that it is too weak, no chance for it to aim at becoming a majority. So this sense of dwarfing, of making yourself incapable of...so in this way, the opposition is not eliminated but is in crisis.

John Keane: And the paradox is that populism functionally depends upon, it requires, elections, free and fair elections.

Nadia Urbinati: Absolutely. This is what Peron understood very well in practice, free elections because you have to prove, as Chavez used to do, you see we got a percentage so the people tells us that we are on the right track.

John Keane: Is there a problem, an internal problem, of sustaining through time, a populist political party?

Nadia Urbinati: That is an important issue that has to do with the famous ventriloquism. So a leader needs to prove that within the state now operating as an establishment is never an establishment so he needs to campaign and to be in a permanent campaign to tell his people he is not like the establishment, he is always like them and with them, and if he cannot do what he promised it is because there is a system against him. You mention sometimes, you know, the judiciary, the court, the institutions, the bureaucracy, everything is against this leader who otherwise could do beautiful things but he cannot. So the responsibility is always on others, never on himself, because he doesn't have any responsibilities since he is the voice, not the intention. That is an important trick, because, one, it is a permanent campaign, two, it is a 'de-responsibilisation' of the leadership.

John Keane: Can we talk about, finally, democratic remedies to populism. You write that although populism is a symptom of discontent in established democracies, populism can hardly be seen as a cure.

Nadia Urbinati: Yes, I don't think it's a cure.

John Keane: Why not?

Nadia Urbinati: It's not a cure because it stretches those elements of self, of humility, of self-containment that democracy has in its form of constitutional rule of law and representative democracy.

John Keane: One could say that a sure cure for populism is the death of the great leader. I mean, Christina Kirchner, Nicholas Maduro, and others, the history of populism is a history of the problem that, alas, the leader doesn't live forever.

Nadia Urbinati: Good. So this means that populism cannot truly be a safe system because a good safe system and this is what democracy was able to achieve in a long history, it was not easy for democracy either, to achieve the substitution of leadership without drama but in the populist case if the leader collapses it is a drama for the entire system.

John Keane: You've expressed recently, and I am supposing, in the book, you develop a critique of those who call for a left populism. You say that left populism, the call for left populism, is a dead end. What do you mean?

Nadia Urbinati: For me, I think so, because if we agree that populism is all those things, leadership outside of any form of limitations of power and so on and so forth, then the populists cannot but operate in favour of strengthening the power of the leader. So in this case the left which has a tradition of democracy, of democratisation, disputation, discussions, articulations, oppositions, has to recognise that this is over and there is an identification with the will of the leader. If the left is ready to do so, well this means that the left is completely changed in relation to the kind of left I knew about or I know about. It's another story.

John Keane: So in contrast to someone like Ernesto Laclau for whom all politics is populist, you can imagine and you envision a politics that is not populist. What would that mean?

Nadia Urbinati: Well, he said some... his analysis is very important because he makes us understand many things about populism. I think that he is very preoccupied with unification, he speaks about many claims, equivalences to create the unification of the people. I think that democracy is less concerned with the unification of the people and more concerned with articulation, disputation, disagreements over the people. So there is in Laclau an element of unity that is a little bit beyond the possibilities that democracy can sustain.

John Keane: You've said in the past few days, that one of the really important remedies against populism is to stop treating democracy as an ideology.

Nadia Urbinati: Yes, because, you mentioned this before many times, and I agree with you, beginning with the forties and particularly after WWII the attack and the victory of democracy against totalitarian regimes, and then the Cold War, made liberal democracy a hyphenation of democracy and so on and so forth or constitutional democracy or representative democracy the name of not simply of a system of politics and actions in politics but of the best model for a community to be political. And so it is much more than a form of government and ways of doing politics in associations. It is an ideology, for or against, so if you are for the Soviet Union you are against democracy. So the name of democracy is the name of a flag for or against but it's a battle, it's a kind of battle flag and this can be dangerous because of course democracy can be an object of contestations, pro and against, so why we should insist on these quasi-religious ideologisations of a form of government that not necessarily is totally good, always good, it sometimes produces something that is not pleasant. But what we have to insist on is this is not the reason why we choose it. If we choose it, we choose it because even if it produces something that we don't like, that we disagree with, it gives us the chance or the sense that we can choose, we can change it, and this is what is good in it, not much more, I would de-ideologise democracy.

John Keane: You've pointed out that language really matters when it comes to understanding and politically dealing with populism and you pay attention to similes, the karst simile, for

example. You also invoke ivy as a simile. You say that populism, rather resembles ivy that grows on a tree. What do you mean by this?

Nadia Urbinati: Okay, so if as we said at the beginning, populism is not a regime of its own, it is a parasite on democracy, let's analyse the kind of parasite, Derrida used to say that the parasite takes place and takes the place of, it is not simply that it is *in* the place of but it takes the place of. Meaning that it operates inside of the same space with the same roots, sucking the same blood of the body thanks to which it can live, grow and survive. So the paradox is that this parasite if it wants to survive, cannot get rid of its main energy of sustenance. It cannot. So it has to stop somewhere in order to live, it has to keep alive its sustenance in order to survive.

John Keane: So populism depends upon, it's related to and it feeds upon the body politic of democracy.

Nadia Urbinati: Yes.

John Keane: If it kills it..

Nadia Urbinati: It becomes something, it becomes another regime. It could be fascism, it could be a dictatorial kind... so it's very interesting, the two die together when they embrace each other in a radical way without limits.

John Keane: Nadia, thank you very much, we wish you the very best of luck for the publication of *The Age of Populism* which is sure to generate a very large discussion.

Nadia Urbinati: Thank you so much.