Recall this Book 61

Brahmin Left 2

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Jan-Werner Mueller (AU, JP)

John Plotz:

From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall This Book where we assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events. So specifically, welcome to our summer series on the Brahmin Left: past, present, and future.

Today, we're lucky enough to have for our guest Princeton historian and among many other things renowned expert on populism Jan-Werner Mueller. I'm John Plotz and my co-host for our Brahmin Left series (I want to call it the BL, but then I worry that that sounds like the British Library) is Adaner Usmani, sociologist at Harvard.

RTB listeners likely know him already from our discussion of his work on the origins of mass incarceration in Episode 44, as well as Episode 51's conversation with Thomas Piketty. In fact, that conversation inspired this series because Piketty has, in recent years, made a thought-provoking and also for many an ire-provoking argument about the ways in which European and American left-wing parties have increasingly drawn their support from an educated non-working-class political base high in educational attainment, I guess, is the way he describes it.

So today is the second of three conversations in which we think with and around that claim. The claim I think, is in a nutshell, though, Adaner, I invite you to push back at this is the wrong description. I think the claim is, in a nutshell, that for the past several decades, there's been a "Class Dealignment" that leaves many highly educated folks, especially the so-called PMC, professional-managerial class, serving as the new core of left parties throughout the first world. So, if Piketty's facts and figures are right, how do we understand that shift? And Adaner, do you want to nuance that at all or…?

Adaner Usmani:

For the purposes of this conversation with Jan in particular, what will partly be of interest, I think will be to discuss how the parties of the right have responded to that shift and how we might make sense of the rise of populism as a consequence of that shift.

John Plotz:

Totally. And as I was going to say basically, we really welcome Jan for his fascinating perspective, given his incisive work on the underlying fabric of representative democracy in its North American and European manifestations.

So I'll just say briefly, our last conversation, so episode one was with Matt Karp, your colleague, Jan, who's grounded in American politics and material interests, and today we're fortunate to speak with Jan-Werner Mueller, whose books include *Another Country: German Intellectuals, Unification, and National Identity*, 2000, *A Dangerous Mind: Carl Schmitt in Post-war European Thought*, 2003, and *Constitutional Patriotism* 2007, many, many other things but also forthcoming *Christian Democracy: A New Intellectual History*, and *Democracy Rules.*

But we were drawn to him by his book written in 2016 and published in English under the title *What Is Populism?* Among other things, that book aims to understand the identitarian logic of populism and how it can come to lodge within democracies. Is it the product, for example, of what he calls plutocratic populism? Which I think is a wonderful phrase to think with. Or is there some other more systemic maladjustment in Europe and America, whereby the ground rules for deliberative democracy have gotten on the track so that the wrong sorts of questions get debated and the wrong sorts of attacks come to define the always rowdy, agora space?

Adaner Usmani:

There are many things I want to ask you about your account of where populism comes from. You say a few different things in the book, all of which I think are very provocative. But actually, before we talk about that, I was wondering if I could characterize your argument to you and you could tell me whether this makes sense.

In some ways, what I take you to be doing in the book is saying that people have taken the defining feature of populism to be its anti-elitism, but in

fact, what should concern us about right-wing populism today is not so much its anti-elitism. In fact, at some points in the book, you say, there's a lot of very healthy anti-elitism in the history of developed country politics, and we might need a lot more of it going forward.

But it's anti-pluralism. And I suppose, I guess my first question is just whether you would agree that then the kind of anti-pluralism that should concern us today is not simply the preserve of right-wing populist, but that there are other kinds of anti-pluralisms, maybe that also flourish today in advanced country politics. Is that fair? Would you say that anti-pluralism is the preserve of the right-wing politics or is it also to be found elsewhere?

The thing I'm thinking of in particular is something that John and I discussed a little bit yesterday with Matt Karp, which is a certain kind of attitude that you might call them the Brahmin Left to the professional-managerial class or whatever, but the attitude that you're sometimes seeing people of those political stripes take towards the people who voted for, say, Trump, that they're stupid or that they're ignorant. I wonder whether that also figures in the kinds of things that concern you about contemporary political developments.

Jan-Werner Mueller:

So very good, which is to say, very difficult question. Let me start with a fairly pedantic remark, which is simply that if you find anything worthwhile in my account, it's maybe worth underlining that I'm giving you an essentially purely formal approach.

I haven't said anything about policy content. So if you tell me what you think about the right income tax level, or immigration, or how to solve the euro crisis, etc, I could not tell from any of that, whether you're a populist or not. It really is the specific claim about representation that ends in a particular form of, for shorthand, exclusionary identity politics, which is not to say, I hasten to add, that all identity politics is somehow exclusionary or dangerous, or anything of that sort.

So, I think one of the problems one occasionally encounters is a conflation, where basically populism is used as a shorthand for what is actually, let's say, radical, right content, be it nativism, xenophobia, outright racism, and so on. And, frankly, you can be a nativist or a racist without ever saying anything about elites, without being a populist, and at the same time, you can be a populist, contemporary Venezuela is an obvious example,

without buying into this kind of radical right content. So very pedantic. But I think maybe it's important to not conflate these different phenomena.

Are there other anti-pluralisms? Yes, there are. Historically, we can find plenty. If you were a Leninist, you weren't exactly a very pluralist kind of guy. If you're inclined towards forms of theocracy today, you're certainly not going to be a very pluralist kind of guy.

What is distinctive, it seems to me with regard to populism is that it relates back to a claim about the people. And in particular, I haven't said much about this so far. But I think populist have to hold on to some notion that the people are morally pure. They're a source of wisdom, they can't be fundamentally wrong about something. Whereas the Leninist, of course, would say, "Look people are completely irrational. At best, they're going to get to trade union consciousness. They need a Vanguard Leninist party to tell them what's what."

And theocrats would say, "The people are fallen and sinful, and we will set them right, etc. And we have no trust in ordinary folks, by themselves." Whereas populists clearly couldn't say these sorts of things, whether they actually believe that or not, whether they act in accordance with that belief, we can debate. But I think that has to be there as a kind of attribution of moral wisdom to people.

Now, is a certain type of left today, perhaps equally anti-pluralistic, intolerant, in certain ways. Certainly, you can find examples. At the same time, I'd be very reluctant to construct a kind of symmetry here. Many people who've tried to react to my work have said, "Well, but look aren't some of the people who are reacting against populists, ultimately the same? Aren't they saying, *oh, these pernicious populists, and we have to exclude them because they exclude, we exclude them*? "And then we end up in a fairly paradoxical situation.

First of all, I don't think that's the correct, so to speak, reaction to some of these popular strategies is a complete exclusion. I've never advocated that and we can talk more about that if you wish. But secondly, I think that people taking a strong moral stance is not quite the same as saying certain other people don't belong at all. So maybe a cartoonish example.

But if you really imagine those who might fit the caricature of the supposedly intolerant, woke left, and so on, they're not saying that those they criticize don't really belong to the polity at all, they're completely out. That's it. It's entirely un-American to be like this or say that and so on.

Now, there's more to be said here, obviously. But overall, I think it's in and of itself been a problem that too many observers are essentially buying into a framing that more or less adopts the kind of arguments and framing suggested by a right-wing populist. In other words, culture is the primary mover, is what matters most.

On one level, it's justified to think of some of the constituents of right-wing populists as a community of victims. Remember Trump in December telling his movement, "We're all victims." And this led to an outcome, if I may put it this way, where no white man could have a quiet coffee in a Midwestern diner without being surrounded by 10 sociologists and five New York Times journalists being asked about grievances and so on.

Obviously, I don't mean to dismiss the very real problems that we can find here. But I would be very reluctant to go along with a framing that puts culture first in a kind of unthinking, unproven way. And also one that too easily assumes that, "Yes, we're obviously talking about the left behind," because as by now, I think plenty of our colleagues have shown left behind is not a totally useless category, but it's a hell of a lot more complicated than it's often meant out to be. And these are not always the worst off. It's very hard to establish causalities, which people were very quick to claim in 2016. So, long story short, and of course, every professor will always conclude on this note, it's much more complicated.

John Plotz:

So Jan, can I ask one detail about that, because it's a very interesting point you made about racism. And if I understood you, you were making the point that one could be a populist easily without being a racist, that they are orthogonal to one another or something. But is it the case that one can be a racist in the political sphere without being a populist in the sense you're describing? It's just a question.

I'm just thinking it through because it seems like the exclusionary claim of the pure people is a classic racist move. So I totally get that there are forms of populism that don't involve race, but are there forms of racism that don't involve populism in the way you're describing?

Jan-Werner Mueller:

Yeah. Very good question. I would say that populism needs to involve some larger claim about the people, but also about your relationship to the

people. It's, for me a representative claim, essentially made by particular elites, where they say, "Only we truly represent people that we consider to be morally pure," and so on.

And in some countries, at least, we do find actors who conceive of themselves as basically elitist who say, "We are a very small group here of the true and the pure, and so on. We don't actually represent anything larger." And we again, so a little bit like theocrats, we actually consider most people to be somehow lost or no longer be up to the task, whatever job they're supposed to play in some kind of racially constructed account of world history.

So, I take your point, it's very plausible to argue that, "Yeah, there's going to be something that makes them at least gives us a very strong family resemblance," I would say. But I can at least in some countries, something, for instance, of a far-right party in Hungary that has changed since its heyday initially. But that clearly was much more invested in an outright elitist language. And that would not have said, "Oh, the people are fine. We represent them uniquely," and so on.

So in that sense, I think there's still something else that needs to be there (at least in my account, which obviously you don't have to like) it's essentially a particular claim of representation, which also means that at least in theory, it's always available. So we can construct a situation where as long as we have representative democracy, and we think of politics as involving the claim, "I represent another group", as long as that is the case, somebody can always appear and say, "Only I truly represent the American people." Nothing can prevent that from happening.

Why it happens more often than in other times, and which particular constellations in particular countries make it more likely, we can certainly debate. But I think we can't simply say, "Oh, there will be a way of getting rid of it altogether as long as we stick with representative democracy as we know it."

Adaner Usmani:

I wonder if we might talk a little bit about what you and I were discussing before Jan came on the line, which is the way in which Jan's arguments about the importance of representation and deliberation and institutions push back against the certain strand of thinking on the left that has been very scornful of representation, a lineage that, I'm not an intellectual

historian at all, but seems to me to run from Carl Schmitt through Chantal Mouffe and Laclau who write about populism.

Jan, I think you address those people explicitly in the book as well. There seems on the left just to me to be a certain romance of this direct unmediated connection between the people in power and the people who put them in power. And your book, in some ways, is an emphatic defense of institutions and mediation. And I wonder if you could spell out that argument a little bit.

I know this is something that you've written about a lot for a long time, and probably had this argument many, many times and made this argument many times. But I think for our listeners, it would be very useful to hear it because I see this romance, the romanticism of that wing of thinking a lot in my circles.

Jan-Werner Mueller:

I think we still need those mediating institutions, which pretty much ever since the 19th century, were considered crucial to make representative democracy work, by which I mean primarily political parties, and more or less professional media.

Obviously, associational life is much richer than that. We can talk about churches, trade unions, and so on. I'm not dismissing the role of those. But we really can't imagine representative democracy as we have it today without parties and without professional media of one sort or another.

Now, critics, of course, have long been saying that this automatically introduces a degree of inequality, that these mediating institutions have a tendency towards becoming oligarchic in one form or another, becoming bureaucratic, and so on. And a lot of these critiques, of course, can be justified. I'm not saying there's nothing to criticize about these mediating institutions.

At the same time, I think the critique tends to underestimate what for shorthand, we might call the normative potential of representation. Ideally, at least, it's a big if, of course, a democracy has a truly open, creative, dynamic dimension, such that new actors can come on the scene and say, "Look, I think there are people out there who aren't properly represented or people who are represented, but aspects of their identity, or their interests, or certain ideas just aren't really in the poker game in the way they should be."

And if people then tend to identify with those kinds of claims, things can potentially move in a very progressive direction. Obviously, none of this is

guaranteed. We've been talking about the flip side of this, we've been talking about anti-pluralist actors who also make claims to representation. But I think there is nothing inherently problematic in the idea of representation as such.

If you think about the models, which have sometimes been advanced to replace political parties altogether, for instance, or even to replace elections altogether, there are plenty of people around today who would say, "Let's do what the ancient Athenians did, let's draw lots. If we truly believe in equality, then all of us should be qualified enough to fill certain offices and do certain things."

All of which, again, has a certain plausibility. What I also tried to show in the book is that there are instances where alternatives to elections and representative democracy as we know it can be perfectly justified. But what I think some of these critics tend to overlook is something of which we've had a very drastic illustration, just a couple of months ago.

If you have elections, and if you have structured parties, the role of the loser, which is tremendously important in a functioning democracy, is a short, because A, to put it in a very hard, brutal, realistic way in the way that, for instance, our colleague, Adam Schabowski has put it, one of the effects of elections is that people really figure out who's stronger and who's weaker.

And if we believe that elections, at least on some level, might always happen in the shadow of potential civil wars, it's a good outcome that people know what's what. And the losers ideally will say, "Okay, we'll wait it out, we'll give it another shot in four years, we'll try to convince more people and so on, but we're not going to start a war because we've just learned that we are the weaker party, and we're going to destroy all the infrastructure in the process. We're going to inherit a destroyed country, that's not a good route to take."

And with parties, of course, as well, if we have actually functioning parties as opposed to a personality cult, let's say, where basically no internal dissent is allowed, where you can't have anybody who has a position of let's say, critical loyalty, where you criticize, well, you know what I'm talking about, you criticize Trump, but you can still be a Republican in good standing.

If we don't have that situation anymore, then parties also don't fulfill the function of basically having a long-term program, the flip side of which is they can live with an election loss and they can say, "We'll try again the next time around." If your party is simply about, with all due respect, a man in his early 70s, who doesn't have a terribly long time horizon, and where everything is

always at stake, where it's really about the person and not about the program, it becomes very dangerous.

So, long story short, I think we should certainly see the flaws in these mediating institutions. And we haven't even gotten to the media. But I think we should also recognize the distinctive normative advantages of these institutions, if they're well-constructed. If they work at least halfway the way they should because they do contribute something through the health of democracy overall.

And just as a last point, if we had what some of our colleagues wish would happen, so we randomly select... I'd say, the stratified randomized where we select citizens, they get together, they debate some policy issue, they come up with a solution, there's a lot to be said for that in particular contexts.

But what do you do as a loser in that process? After an election, you know what to do. You go from door to door, you canvass, you tweet even more crazily, etc, at your opponents, whatever it might be. But as a loser in the process of sortition, I'm not sure what you would do next because you don't have this pattern or rhythm of regular elections and institutions that participate in these elections, i.e parties, where you have a foothold, if you have a particular agenda. So I know this can sound incredibly retrograde and conservative. But anyway, there it is.

John Plotz:

And one of the advantages of the argument about democracies as self-correcting system is that it allows you to feel smug about the weakness of other systems. As you were referring to the internal weakness of the Soviet Union, you can say, "Well, look, other systems don't have the corrective mechanisms that we do." But they may not have those corrective mechanisms. But they [populists] have a whole new playbook right now, which is that they can borrow from one another.

So I totally take your point that India, Brazil, the United States, for some period of time, Hungary, Poland, are very different underneath. But then they had a common playbook. You can see it with COVID. They had a common playbook of responses that often were very successful. So, can I ask how you think those two things together, like the existence of this advantageous populist pass-through where they're tipping one another off about how to proceed?

Jan-Werner Mueller:

I'm not entirely sure whether we can uniformly say they've been successful. I think what we've seen is, and again, this can sound very basic, but I think the distinction still matters. I think we have seen a significant distinction between those who really went all out in the direction of basically doing culture war, who immediately recoded masks as un-American, and so on. And who otherwise, also had, maybe not so surprisingly, very little administrative experience. So I'm thinking about most obviously, Trump and Bolsonaro, who really in a sense had never really properly governed. Unlike someone like Orban, who is whatever else you think about him is a very savvy politician who really knows how a state apparatus works.

Where some of these other characters simply thought, "Okay, we can just solve this by doing what we always do, which is basically the business model of dividing people, reducing our policy questions to question of belonging." And that didn't always work out so well.

Having said that, maybe as a footnote, it's also, of course, not entirely true to say that Trump or Bolsonaro did absolutely nothing. That was occasionally alleged in 2020. But I think what they actually very often did, while nobody was really paying attention to it, was to rev up the thing they had been doing from day one of their administrations, which is to deregulate like crazy under the cover of the pandemic, say, "Let American companies dump even more shit into rivers and forests."

Bolsonaro saying, "Let's destroy even more of the Amazon because nobody's really paying attention to this right now. Plus, we can maybe tell a story about the recovery of the economy, which is going to be driven by this and so on."

So, these strategies, I think it's fair to say, didn't work out particularly well. Again, it might sound like a very pedantic argument, but we do also need to pay some attention to where exactly some of these populist actors are coming from, what their own history is. I think some of them have taken away lessons from their own trajectory.

So, I think it's not entirely an accident that for instance, Orbán and Kaczynski lost elections, and then they came back and then the second time around, of course, this is bad news if you think about the United States and envisage certain scenarios in the next couple of years, but in some cases, I think had a very clear game plan of saying, "Look, we need to hijack the media, we need to get the judges. We're not going to futz around this time with big

symbolic gestures about history museums, and so on. We're going to go straight for the real power."

John Plotz:

I probably framed the question wrong. But I think what you just said is in the spirit in which I was asking the question, which is, I totally admit the differences. But what you're pointing at is a extramural set of strategies and successes that work in the political sphere that are antithetical to the representative democratic structures that you're arguing in favor of.

Maybe this is a way to transition to our question about the Brahmin Left. The question is, it's one thing to argue against populism if you see populism as innately self-destructive. If I look at just a machine that's falling apart, even at the moment that it's built, then you'd have one argument against it.

But if you actually see it as capable of developing momentum and headway, losing elections and coming back, for example, that's more worrisome. I think you're describing a pattern that is more worrisome in 2020 than it was maybe ever before.

Adaner Usmani:

What is it that has made these democracies, varied as they, are vulnerable to the populist challenge? And maybe this isn't exactly the right way of thinking about history. But why does it seem like at least that they're now more vulnerable than they ever have been?

There are a few things that you say in your book, you say, I think you give some structural and institutional accounts, reasons you talk about the hollowing out of the party system, you talk about in Europe, at least the rise of these supranational institutions that have left people feeling unrepresented, and then you also say some things about some more conjunctural factors like the failed response to the crisis in 2008, 2010.

I wonder if you could talk a little bit about what has made these polities vulnerable to the populist challenge and why as John was saying, it seems like they're able to draw on this set of tactics to so successfully or maybe not so successfully, but at least worryingly enough, takeover, or at least challenge.

Jan-Werner Mueller:

So I would mention a couple of elements always with, again, the very pedantic preface that we really need to pay very close attention to these national trajectories. So let's say the reasons for the rise of a Jean-Marie Le Pen in the 70s and 80s, are really very different from what may have facilitated the rise of Erdogan in Turkey earlier this century.

Clearly, on one level, there needs to be a certain discontent. But that can never be enough. It's not like everything was working fantastically. And all of a sudden, we have policy challenges, or we have crises, and then democracy as such goes to hell. It's always very tempting, of course, to construct golden ages. But for most of us, when we really think about it, the 70s weren't exactly a golden age, lacking in policy challenges and so on.

So, I think we need discontent, but we need perhaps also, a discontent that is easy to recode along cultural lines. So it certainly helps if you are already in a situation where you can tell people a story that appeals to the notion that, oh, the country is divided between something that supposedly is real, and something else that doesn't really belong at all, or is traitors or a threat or what have you.

These things, of course, are not given. I think this is the mistake that is sometimes made by people in the US that they say, "Oh, yeah, it's all obvious." Of course, flyover country versus bi-coastal liberal elites, of course, our politics is structured this way. But, of course, they've also always been cultural differences. And they weren't always translated like this into a particular party system.

And very often, I'm not telling you anything remotely new. What's behind the supposedly, deep cultural differences is much better explained by well, lack of infrastructure, a very difficult to get to certain places. It's not like, oh, everything is entirely determined by these cultural factors.

But savvy politicians can certainly use a situation like this and start to convince people that well, this really is about cultural groups that are supposedly opposed to each other in a certain way. And what's worse, if other actors then are inclined to adopt this framing, this goes back to our discussion about nobody in the Midwest can have a quiet cup of coffee without being questioned about grievances, and others react in a way that then reinforces some of these frames, then of course, at a certain point, yeah, it becomes very strong. And it's very hard to undo. And it will not be good enough to say, "Oh, look, you guys think it's all about cultural differences. But here's my magic solution for your local transportation problem," as if that was enough.

And that, since you're particularly interested in the left, I think this has been one of the major mistakes, certainly of the European left. I think one of the underlying trends which we can generalize about in the early 21st century, certainly in Europe, and I would say in other parts of the world, too, is the mainstreaming of the far right. Not because the far right is in and of itself so powerful, but because enough other actors, for various reasons, eventually throw in the towel and say, "Yeah, these people are really telling us the truth about the working class."

And we hate the fact that the workers now hate foreigners, and seem to be so racist, but we're just going to have to live with that and adopt that framing. And then you get outcomes like Denmark, where people think that oh, to be a good social democrat, you have to be super tough on asylum, immigration, and so on.

And I think it's fair to say that a lot of the empirical evidence doesn't really support this picture. That it's not true, that workers have all deserted leftist parties and gone over to the far right. Some certainly have, it's empirically true that in some countries you can say that the far right is now mainly a working-class party. True. But that tends to forget the fact that many other people don't vote at all.

I think this is actually one of the points that Piketty rightly makes in a footnote, where he says, "Look, if it were true, that all the working-class ever wanted was xenophobic parties, everybody will be so happy right now because there's more of this stuff on offer than ever before." But instead, many people still don't vote at all. And obviously, that can also have complex reasons.

But surely, it's not a crazy thought to say that, "Well, maybe there is just nothing on offer, that would really make people say, 'Yeah, that's the attractive program.'" So, it's real discontent, it's institutional vulnerabilities that you also hinted at. So weakened party systems, lack of internal pluralism within parties, all kinds of weaknesses that are more institutional, but it's also the mistakes of other actors.

And sometimes I think last point, I would add, of course, we will never know whether an Erdoğan or a Chavez always would have gone in an authoritarian direction anyway. Nobody can tell, as a counterfactual. But given that at least some of these actors initially, I think, had substantive justified claims.

When Erdogan said, "Look, there are people in rural turkey who have been systematically ignored by the Kemalist elite." This is not like, "Oh, this is crazy populism. This is so obviously untrue." When Chavista said, "Look, Venezuela is not exactly a super egalitarian country of equal opportunity." That wasn't crazy either.

But in at least some of these cases, existing elites really shut down the conversation right away. And I think that may have led to a dynamic of radicalization, which perhaps, I'm saying perhaps, maybe and Erdogan always had the playbook ready. He had this famous quote that you probably remember where he said, "Look, democracy is basically like a train or a tram, you get on and then once you finish your destination, you get off."

So that's pretty strong indication that maybe he was never such a great democrat, to begin with. But I think it will certainly be facile to assume that anything of these characters ever say, we can simply discount. It's going to be fake news, it's going to be demagogic, we don't have to listen at all. That's a mistake. But the other extreme as I've been trying to make plausible, it's also a mistake to think that, "Oh, Trump proved to us that 63 million people or by now 75 million people think exactly like he's saying because he is the one to run representative of all these people." That's not true either.

And that basically leads to a defeatist attitude, like we've seen with European Social Democrats who simply throw in the towel and say, "Okay, we just have to be a tiny bit racist ourselves now."

John Plotz:

So Jan, I'd love to follow up on that question of throwing in the towel because I hear what you're saying about like, the Denmark example is such a good example. But I actually thought you were going to say something slightly different in terms of the cultural politics of the left, which is I thought you were going to allude to something that I think happens in America, which is that there can be a countervailing politics of identity.

In other words, conceding to Trump, that aggrieved white man with his cup of coffee, and claiming instead, that one's coalition has to be defined on a mirror-image identitarian basis. Do you want to talk about that? Because that seems like a political fallacy as well.

Jan-Werner Mueller:

Yes, I agree. At the same time, I think many observers are in danger of constructing a false equivalence of, "Oh, there is right-wing white majority and anti-politics, and then the stuff that happens on the left is exactly the same." This has been very strong in Europe as well, of course, people then coming on the scene and saying, "Look, let's just forget about all this stuff. Let's talk about the only thing that's real, which is economic issues. And if only Social Democrats rediscovered the social question," and so on.

Obviously, as you can tell by now, I've some sympathy with the imperative to rediscover the social question. But at the same time, there's this idea that everything else is some self-indulgent, narcissistic, minority stuff, when we're talking about people claiming basic rights, basic rights not to be harassed, let alone be shot by the police, basic rights not to be harassed, let alone be raped by powerful men. This is not narcissistic crazy stuff, and so on.

Plus maybe less, obviously, again, the golden age that occasionally people then construct where they say, "Oh, in the good old days, it was all economics all the way down." Gives us an image of socialists as if they had simply been a lobby for workers who all they ever did was negotiate slightly better working conditions, pay rise, and so on, forgetting that, of course, this was also a cultural movement. Of course, this was about recognizing the dignity of a certain work, and so on. So this false alternative, I think, is fateful and has consumed enormous energies, that perhaps could have been spent more productively on something else.

Adaner Usmani:

I think the perfect place to go now, it might be the place to end. I'm not sure, John, do you have other questions, but-

John Plotz:

No, I think we're moving to an ending. I agree.

Adaner Usmani:

I think you've very eloquently pointed to this. I can't remember exactly how you put it. But this false choice, I suppose that the left has been confronted with and said that a lot of energy has been spent on this failed false choice. You also end your book by saying that the solution to the populist challenge is different. I think you say something like to forge a new social contract.

Adaner Usmani:

So I think maybe we're moving naturally towards asking you, Jan, to save us and to tell us what the way forward ought to be? It seems like neither of those false choices that you laid out is the right choice. So what do you see as the right choice? And maybe the narrower way to put it is, I think I take you to be addressing yourself, in part at least, to the left. So maybe the question is, what's the way forward for the left in the landscape that you've outlined?

John Plotz:

It's not much narrower, by the way.

Jan-Werner Mueller:

I'm glad I have three hours left to answer this very simple question. So I think it's a multi-dimensional project, which, of course, sounds like a very highfalutin thing to say. But I think first of all, yes, you got to find a creative way to bring together concerns about basic rights, which is how I think about a lot of these identity questions. They're not about, "Oh, this is culture as some amorphous luxury thing, etc."

You've got to think that together with economic questions. I know that it can be very facile at this point, to draw great lessons from the pandemic. But I think all those people who said, "Look, it's not an accident that we saw certain patterns of who was most vulnerable," is the thing that a good politician, a good party will creatively use and appeal both to lived experience, including certain cultural experiences, and bring it back to the economic at the same time.

And, again, if I may add a footnote, which is what you always get when you invite these Professor types, I think it's a fatal mistake, if one now assumes similar to 2008 that, "Oh, some of these lessons are obvious." Remember how in 2008 people said, "Oh, it's going to be great for the left because it's so obvious how finance capitalism has failed."

Well, as we all know, the movement that most successfully addressed 2008, both in terms of politics on the ground, but also in terms of symbolic constructions, happened to be the Tea Party, which nobody had reckoned with. The left at that point, that was occupy, which obviously a matter of two but for a while, there was a real vacuum and this assumption that, "Oh, every crisis basically delivers its own lessons. And you don't need to do the hard

work of precisely forming these representations that bring people together in a way that isn't already completely obvious."

That's something that somebody needs to do. And that does need to involve everything. More particularly, I would stress that, yes, you need to re-engage those people who, in one form or another, have said goodbye to representative democracy altogether because they simply don't vote.

Obviously, in the United States, we have a special situation in terms of very low levels of participation in general. But as a general trend, we've been observing this in many democracies, and you can't explain it by saying, "Oh, that's because everybody is so happy with the way things are."

I don't want to tell you an uncritical story about some of these new parties/old movements like Podemos in Spain, or Five Star in Italy. It's a complicated matter. I think they have plenty to criticize as well. But the fact that some of them, basically, with very few resources came onto the scene and were able to bring people back to the polls who had basically said goodbye to representative democracy is a major, major achievement.

If you think about young people who had their life chances radically reduced by the euro crisis, by the financial crisis, and so on. And then, in addition, had the sense that, "Oh, in our country, nothing ever changes. We have two more or less technocratic parties, which alternating government, nothing is really open, is dynamic," and so on.

The fact that then these people A) go to the polls, B) find that their party loses, and then go back home and try again, is near miraculous. If you think back to the 1970s, young people occasionally had different ideas when they felt that a system was totally closed, and they couldn't do anything about it.

I know this isn't super concrete. But that's roughly the direction in which I would be thinking, and maybe one not so obvious last point in this context, because you have asked very good searching questions about previous mistakes one shouldn't repeat. I think I'm not the only one who thinks that the technocratic temptation, the tendency to say, "Okay, the left can always just talk about modernization and rational solutions to certain problems, the stuff we solve with a third way."

But that is today also extremely strong with someone like Macron who of course, claims to be beyond left and right. All you have to be is in this reasonable center that's why both former socialists and former Republicans can join the project. That I think is again, something that is at least somewhat likely to provoke a populist counter-reaction, because populist will

immediately have an opening where they say, "Look, what do you mean democracy without choices? Democracy without the people? Where are the people in all this?"

Doesn't mean that we should now think of them as good-faith defenders of democracy. But again, sometimes what they say happens to be not totally implausible. And that particularly fateful dynamic, I think we've seen in a number of countries is precisely that when populists then succeed, technocrats are going to double down in a sense their form of anti-pluralism, because they're going to say, "Look, there's only one rational way, if you disagree, you basically reveal yourself to be irrational."

That strengthens the populists again, who also, of course, have a form of anti-pluralism where they say, "If you disagree with us, you're the traitor to the people, you don't really belong," and so on. And everything that we should think of as "normal democracy" disappears between these two options. And that's something that we've seen play out in real life in France very strongly, a sense that it's either Macron and technocracy or it's crazy right-wing populism, a la Le Pen, That's really not a good situation for a democracy to be in. And the parties that you're asking about need to find a way to break that up, and they need to have the courage to avoid the temptation, which I think is strong because a lot of these actors fear that, "Oh, we're going to be seen as too radical. Or, we're going to look like we're going to lose a certain let's say, bourgeois middle-class color, what you wish constituency because you just can't do certain things."

I know this can sound very self-help-y and kitschy, but occasionally, it just takes so much to have the courage to resist that temptation and do something well, more courageous.

John Plotz:

I already had enough to worry about with President Biden, now you've got me worried that he's Macron also. That's a terrifying prospect.

Jan-Werner Mueller:

I might be in a position to relieve your anxieties at least a little bit because I think he obviously sometimes has also talked in a fairly technocratic manner. A lot of the infrastructure stuff does sound like, "Look, no right-thinking person, no reasonable person could disagree with this." But A, this is actually true in many respects. And I don't think he's really standing in front of

an American public and says there's no real choice here. Or of course, he's tempted to go the same route as Macron, which is that look, the other side is basically illegitimate and so on. Which was also, of course, the mistake of Clinton in 2016. And to some degree, again, in Biden 2020 thinking it was enough to-

John Plotz:

Yeah, Hillary Clinton with The basket of deplorables.

Jan-Werner Mueller:

Yeah, enough to tell people that Trump is so awful that this wins you-... into the election. But on the positive side, I think there is a genuine attempt to actually justify these policies beyond simply saying, "Oh, this is the only rational thing you can do and actually giving people a sense of the concrete benefits and what can concretely change in their life.

And that's just, I wouldn't call that populist, of course, but some people might say, "Well, this is exactly what in the old days in the United States was meant by populism." Or in another idiom is just good old social-democratic stuff. And turns out some people actually (God forbid) like that. And once it's in place, and people realize it's working for them just as much as they realize the Affordable Care Act actually has certain benefits, turns out it's actually pretty hard to undo and it does make for a long-term change.

John Plotz:

All right. Well, I always like to find a rare moment of optimism to end on. So I'm going to seize that.

Jan-Werner Mueller:

I was trying really hard to give you exactly that after all this stuff about the all-powerful populist internationally.

John Plotz:

It is eye-opening, but we want to lift our eyes up at the end. So, I'll just say that Recall This Book is sponsored by Brandeis and the Mandel Humanity Center. Sound editing is by our newest audio intern Naomi Cohen, website design and social media by Nai Kim, of the English department.

Adaner and I are very eager to hear your comments, your criticism, and your thoughts on today's discussion or on the notions of the Brahmin Left generally. So please feel free to write a review or rate us on iTunes or Stitcher or wherever you get your podcast.

And if you enjoyed today's show, you might check out earlier conversations with Thomas Piketty on proprietarian ideologies, with Quinn Slobodian on plutocratic capture of democratic governance, and, of course, the other two episodes of our summer series on the Brahmin Left. So, Jan, thank you so much. It was a great conversation.

Jan-Werner Mueller:

Thank you. It was a real pleasure. Thank you.

John Plotz:

And so, from all of us here at Recall This Book, thank you for listening.