

On the Present of Democracy and the Future of Populism – Interview with Ives Mény

Apie demokratijos dabartį ir populizmo ateitį.
Interviu su Ives Mény

Yves Mény is the President Emeritus of the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. He has also served as Chairman of the Executive Committee of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) as well as on editorial boards of journals such as *West European Politics*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *Federal and Regional Studies* and *Journal of Public Policy* among others. His main areas of expertise are comparative politics, public policy, European Union affairs, and political and administrative institutions. Yves Mény is perhaps best known for his book *Democracy and the Populist Challenge* (2002), which he co-authored with Yves Surel. His other major publications include *Challenges to Consensual Politics. Democracy, Identity, and Populist Protest in the Alpine Region* (2005) (co-edited with Daniele Caramani), *Government and Politics in Western Europe: Britain, France, Italy, Germany* (1998), *Remaking The Hexagon: The New France In The New Europe* (1995) (co-authored with Gregory Flynn).

The interview was conducted by **Dominykas Kaminskas**.

Professor, the first question I would like to ask is about the problem of trust in democracy. You mentioned in your presentation as well that you feel that the rise of populism is tied to the fact that people are trusting democracy less and less. Can you elaborate on this phenomenon?

Mény: You know, trust is an invisible ingredient in the machinery of democracy. It's not something that you can codify; it's not something that you can regulate, etc. It's an attitude vis-a-vis the order – you accept to deal with the order in good faith. And it's particularly true in the field of representation, if you are to accept that somebody speaks on your behalf, you have to trust them. What has occurred over the past 20 or 30 years is that a sharp contrast developed in political speech on one hand and the capacity of delivering what has been promised to the people, sharp contrast between what was announced and what was delivered. It did not so much result from the bad faith of politicians. In some cases the politicians obviously tend to exaggerate slightly, but they deliver. This contrast, this difference stems mainly from the fact that politicians do not realize that they do not have the capacity anymore to deliver as they used to. Before the Second World War you could have argued that a few democracies, which were in existence at the time, have all the cards in their hands. They were responsible for economic policy, social policy, monetary policy, trade policy and so on. So within the nation the politician could argue that he could deliver what has been promised – today it is not possible anymore.

So it is a question of diminishing political power?

Mény: The limitations of power derive from many, many different causes – some are related to the increasing globalization. However, it's also related to the equilibrium between markets and states. Markets are stronger than states. The states are limited by what constituted their strengths before, that is frontiers. The frontiers were protecting the state within. Now that the markets cross over borders, the state has no possibility to intervene beyond its frontiers, except through cooperation, through trust. However, the international arena is constructed on the basis of Westphalian philosophy – every state is equal. Obviously, some are more equal than others, but even states which cannot do something, can impede others from doing something

or can create, for instance, rogue states, tiny states with a big advantage in the global system, because they can take advantage of their smallness by becoming fiscal havens or offering favourable legal systems. In a certain way, some small states, with the help of markets, are pushing aside big states. It is no accident that most of the international holding companies have decided to host their headquarters in the Netherlands. The Netherlands is a country which offers the most favourable conditions for holding companies. In the United States for a long time the most favourable legal system within the country was Delaware, which served as a heaven for companies. So in a way we have to see the question in a dynamic way. These strategies create rather dramatic problems, but at the same time this dynamism of the system is part of this difference in equality. Similarity or equality can safeguard many values, but at the same time the system becomes static. Inequality creates dynamism, because inequality is contested, and this creates new opportunities.

We talked about power and yet somehow, especially in American academia, there is a lot of talk about discourse and whether or not this is not just an issue of distribution of resources and distribution of political power, but also of some people being unable to speak about certain things, such as migration. Would you agree that that has also contributed to the rise of populism and that some topics are just off the table for public discussion?

Mény: Well, call these kinds of reactions populist or not, but these kinds of reactions often occur or have occurred in closed systems. That is, the elites were interlocking. There were some forms of solidarity in order to exclude some issues or in order to remain in government. For instance, Austria, before the rise of the populist movement, was a system where the Socialists on one hand and the Christian Democrats on the other governed the country for 50 years or more. These governments and the alternation of government between these forces meant that in Austria everybody had to be black or red – from

the shopkeeper to the elites, you had to be in one camp. One camp could move into power after the other, but at the same time the system was completely frozen, because you had to be either Socialist or Christian Democrat. Some people wanted to be grey or pink, not red or black, and I think the biggest mistake, or one of the biggest mistakes of the Social Democratic parties or, let's say, of the parties which are centre-right or centre-left, has been to avoid discussing hot issues. Migration was a hot issue, because people are, at least initially, not so much against migration. The fact is that this migration is not properly dealt with and it creates problems – for instance, if your children are in a tiny minority in a class where you, for example, have 35 different nationalities, it's a real problem for the parents, because their children are spending their time trying to adjust to the fact that all these other children are from different cultures instead of learning. There's a lack of response from the government – maybe we should have specially equipped classes, etc. The same for housing – there was a scandal in, I think, 1982 in France, when a communist mayor sent bulldozers to destroy a residence, which was housing both legal and illegal immigrants in Paris. It was 3 days before Christmas, so you can imagine the response – how is it possible that a mayor could act in such a way? And while this was a big shock, the political class has not faced the consequences of these political choices.

This example happened in 1982, but the big change since then has been the introduction of social media. The question that I would like to ask is how does social media get into the picture of the rise of populism? What is its role in discussing hot issues? There's an aspect of anonymity as well.

Mény: It's what I call the “uberization of politics.” The miracle of democracy was the combination of the democratic principle with the representative principle. Unfortunately, we only have one single word – democracy – for a huge variety, across time and space, of political regimes which are more or less democratic. And the entire

democratic system is based on mediation and representation. We are unable to meet all together face to face and discuss politics. We have to find a way of selecting some people to represent us, and the system has functioned for two centuries on this basis. Today, we have two elements that are put on the table. The first one is, which has been put on the table by the Italian populists, is that everybody's equal, so the voice of each individual has to be the same. The Italians say *uno vale uno* ["one person – one vote" – ed.], which might be true in terms of political rights, but which cannot be true in terms of, for example, scientific knowledge. The second thing is that social media gives the power to the individual to express their opinion whatever it is. One can express any opinion, even the most awful, thanks to anonymity in social media. And this is a radical change in contrast with the tradition of democracy, which was based on mediation, representation, and delegation.

And does this actually lead to the feeling that there is more of you in terms of when you had to meet these people face to face? If you see comments directed at another group or something like that and you feel the same way, this makes you feel like part of the silent majority, doesn't it?

Mény: Well, it is a rather bizarre situation where people coagulate, but at the same time they don't really exchange. It's like a superposition of opinions, but most of the time there is no real discussion and these exchanges are often limited to a few nasty words on one side or the other. You have thousands and millions of individuals behind their screens, who can coalesce for a specific purpose at a certain point of time. For instance, you have an interesting experience of that during the Arab Spring revolutions, an even more interesting case of the so-called Sardines¹ in Italy, but you can also observe

¹ The Sardines movement is a political movement against right-wing politics of Matteo Salvini which began in 2019 – Ed.

limitations of these kinds of movements, because, for example, the Sardines have got what they wanted, that is to object and to oppose Salvini, and now the movement is over. It sounds and it looks like a flash mob, but then what do you do with that? Every political movement needs some form of institutionalization. And we have good examples of this fragility of these movements. For instance, at some point in time, Berlusconi in Italy was a really powerful man, but since he hasn't been able to construct a true party with a philosophy, a programme, etc., in 2 or 3 years' time, when Berlusconi will not be able to participate in politics anymore or will die, it's over. Nothing will remain of the Berlusconi populism.

So is populism not sustainable? It does seem that without any actual institutionalization of these movements, it's impossible for them to go forward, and when they do institutionalize, they lose a little bit of that populist edge, because they have to become more inclusive, they have to act according to the laws, etc. Is a populist movement sustainable and is it something that we have to worry about in the longer-term future as democrats?

Mény: Let's say that populism, as it presents itself in most countries is not sustainable as such. That is, the gap between promises and reality is even bigger than in the case of classic political parties and policymakers. They promise much more – for instance, take the case of the *Cinque Stelle* [Five Stars – ed.] movement in Italy, we are going down to the ridicule. They have been elected by 11 million people, which were a lot, they were the main party after last parliamentary elections and they have consulted their followers on various points since they have been in government. For example, do we agree to form a coalition *Partito Democratico* [Democratic Part – ed.], etc. There were 40,000 votes in favour, but what does it mean? You are elected by 11 million people and your strategy is approved by 40,000 – it does not make sense. So I don't think populism, as it presents itself, has a future, because it's completely unrealistic – it's

demagoguery. The other option is the integration of the movement into a more stable party with a more reasonable programme. In that case the populist movement does not become a mainstream party, but inserts itself into mainstream politics. Obviously, what makes a difference is America, because most of the populist movements have influence nationally, but Trump populism has influence worldwide. Many local populist movements feel comforted, feel protected by Trump's attitude, and Trump also contributes a lot to the destruction of what remains of the global international institutional setting – the IMF, the WTO, etc. But my guess is that democracy, which has always adjusted, will incorporate some forms of populist claims, but populism as such always ends either in anarchy or something worse.

I would like to take a little detour from populism and ask about the European Union. You said that our whole order is based on the Westphalian model of nation-states and the politics, the idea of democracy is based on nation-states as well. Is there a possibility of a true supranational democracy?

Mény: Well, we have to be pragmatic, experimental and patient. There is a risk in saying that we need some kind of democratic solution at a supranational level, but the options are either to go back to the nation as before or to try to democratize processes which are presently out of hands of the people, of the population. So the solution would be to imagine a few elements which would give, let's say, more substance to what European democracy might need. Some might be extremely symbolic – for example, the European Health Insurance Card. Most people, including myself, were not aware that there is a European card, which allows you to be treated without any expenses in any country of the European Union. It's a huge benefit, but people don't know they have this benefit. Distributing this card to every European citizen would be a big step, because you also need symbolic, tangible evidence that you belong to the community. Then you might say that while there are these populist demands, there is

also an answer in the citizen initiative in the EU Lisbon treaty, but in reality the citizen initiative is not working. Everything has been done in order to make it impossible or at least limit the possibilities to put forward a proposal, not even on the ballot, but also the proposal submitted to the commission. I would say every 5 years, at the time of European parliamentary elections, why not give the possibility for the European voters to vote on one or two initiatives? We could even think, initially, that these initiatives are put forward by the Parliament itself. We could also imagine that they are initiated from below, but I think that it would be a signal that the views of the people are taken into consideration. That will also be a way of breaking up the closure of the present treaties, because, in practice, the treaties as they are cannot be changed, because everybody has a veto and it is impossible to come into agreement. So the only solution, which was found with this financial stability mechanism, was to sign the treaty outside the European treaty, which is ridiculous.

For the last question now it has to be said that populism did capture the imagination of voters. Pierre Rosanvallon, for example, talks about how the modern democratic politics does not offer an idealistic and ideological view – it doesn't give any real true ideas to voters. Is there anything that the modern democracy can offer to counter populism? Is there a possibility to have something in modern democratic politics that really captures the imagination of the people?

Mény: Well, revolutions and revolts are always more romantic than the nitty-gritty of business as usual. I'm afraid that normal governments will never be able to compete with this revolutionary romantic view of a perfect world. But, at the same time, this romanticism might actually be useful for waking democracy up – we tend to become a little bit stagnant and fall into a routine. What is interesting with democracy is that it's both an ideal and a political system. The political system is trying to adjust and to run after the ideal, but the more you approach the ideal, the more it runs away. That's the

beauty, in a way, of democracy, because fascism or Nazism or Marxism all offer a kind of a ready-made, complete system. Everything is foreseen, everything seems to fit in very nicely. Democracy is always an approximation, it is never perfect and that is not only the reason for the crisis, but also the reason for the success. You are looking for an ideal which is not yet accomplished.