

# Populism

## A Short Conclusion to the Volume

by *Anton Pelinka*

### 1. *Populism*

Populism has become—rightfully—a term beyond the polemics of day-to-day politics. Populism has entered the discourse of political scientists, historians, and sociologists. Obviously, the more traditional concepts of the description and analysis of contemporary political tendencies were not sufficient, not deep, not complex enough for the phenomenon of what is perceived as populism today.

Populism is at the same time an old and a new phenomenon. It has been used to describe the presidency of Andrew Jackson in the 1830s, the Russian Narodniki at the end of the nineteenth century, and the Latin American phenomenon of Peronism. Populism was the term used to describe new formations of parties of the extreme right in Europe<sup>1</sup>. The perception of populism usually was and is something not entirely positive—for liberal democracy. Populism is seen as an open or at least indirect challenge to the democracy as it exists in the world (and especially in Europe) in the twenty-first century's second decade.

Even before the rise of parties like the French National Front to political prominence, Robert Dahl has argued that democracy defined as “polyarchy”—a democracy characterized by what it is not, not tyranny—is challenged by “populistic” democracy<sup>2</sup>: A system, which tends to give all political power to the majority, tends to neglect checks and balances, and tends to restructure the relationship between a (democratically) elected leader and “the people”. Institutions between the top of the political pyramid and the society as such were more or less seen as negative.

<sup>1</sup> R. WODAK - M. KHOSRAVINIK - B. MRAL (eds), *Right-Wing Populism*.

<sup>2</sup> R.A. DAHL, *Polyarchy*.