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Transcript

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## CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

Host: **Paul Haenle**

Guest: **Thomas Carothers**

Episode 105: The Rise of Populism and  
Implications for China

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**Haenle:** Welcome to China in the World Podcast. I'm honored to be joined today by Tom Carothers, Carnegie Senior Vice President, in charge of overseeing all of Carnegie's research, and the director of our Democracy and Rule of Law program. Tom is here in Beijing for our Carnegie Global Dialogue focusing on Europe, and he's been discussing the populist movements and their effects on European politics and foreign policy. Tom is in his 25<sup>th</sup> year with the Carnegie Endowment, the longest tenured employee at the Carnegie Endowment currently. He was here before we had any Carnegie global centers, and he has seen us, witnessed us, evolving into the global think tank we are today with six centers in hotspots around the world. In fact, Tom was instrumental in opening most of those centers and still today oversees our Europe center in Brussels. It's worth noting that when Tom first joined Carnegie, he was the youngest Senior Research Fellow to join, and quickly went on to found the Carnegie Democracy Rule of Law program as a leading international authority on international democracy and democratization. Tom, we're glad to have you in Beijing for the Carnegie Global Dialogue, and welcome to the China in the World Podcast.

**Carothers:** Paul, it's good to be here.

**Haenle:** You've been talking to Chinese scholars and other stakeholders this week about the changing political landscape in Europe and the impact of rising populism across Europe. I wonder: Do you see this as a fundamental change? Is this something that Europeans will have to live with, and the world will have to live with, or is this a short-term phenomenon that we're dealing with?

**Carothers:** It's a deep change, and I think it's going to be a lasting change. It's fundamental in the sense that it reflects the big structural drivers in Europe. It's not fundamental in the sense that I don't think it's going to change European life in certain fundamental ways. I think most of Europe is going to remain democratic, and I think Europe is going to continue to have a sort of a wide and rich political pluralism. But populism is important, and it's here to stay.

**Haenle:** And how, when you look at it, what are the defining characteristics. How do you see populism in the European context?

**Carothers:** Populism is one of those slippery terms that political scientists use that you sometimes feel like, "I kind of know it when I see it, but I can't nail it down." But, one way to think about populism is it's a political movement, or a set of political ideas that is rooted in the idea of political outsiders challenging the established political set of actors. And it's outsiders who say, "We are the legitimate voice of the people. And you insiders are a self-interested, usually corrupted elite that no longer represent the interests of the people." So populism is rooted in the idea of the authentic voice of the people, legitimacy, authenticity, and so with that often comes the sense of nationalism that we are the authentic voice of the nation, which is represented by its people.

**Haenle:** And are there a set of issues that you find populism tends to gravitate toward?

**Carothers:** Populism is usually fueled by frustration or anger on the part of people, or fear. And so it usually gravitates toward issues that address anger, frustration, and fear. So on the one hand, economic issues, dislocation, stagnation, lack of opportunity, and it feeds on the idea that, “What’s with those people in power? Why can’t they make your life better? They’re probably cheating you. They’re doing fine, how come you’re not doing fine? What’s wrong with this system?” So it plays on that, and then secondly it often plays on the fear that the society is being jeopardized by new forces. “Who are all these strangers coming into our society? Stepping ahead of you in line and getting those state benefits that you’re not getting? Why should we treat immigrants so well when the average person in this country is struggling to make a living?” So they’re feeding on economic fears, they’re feeding on social fears, and then they may also be feeding on other kinds of social change. “What’s with all this favorable talk about lesbians and gays getting married and such? What happened to our country the way it used to be? Let’s go back to a time when we had our feet on the ground and we knew ‘right from right’ and ‘wrong from wrong.’ We’re going to put this country back on its feet.” So, all of these kind of things are typical issues that populists gravitate toward.

**Haenle:** And you’ve talked this week about how changing media landscape affects all of this. Can you describe that in the European context?

**Carothers:** It’s a crucial part of it. Of course, populists have been around for, you know, all of modern times in politics, so they don’t have to have Twitter accounts, but it helps. What populists want to do is leap over obstacles to communicate indirectly to the people. They don’t necessarily want to go on national television and debate somebody. They want to speak directly to the people. They used to do that on the backs of trucks driving around the countryside. But now, a populist leader can develop a Twitter account and develop other forms of social media. They can create spaces on the internet where they can activate their followers and so forth. So as we know, social media is a great leveler in certain ways. It allows a tremendous amount of horizontal communication within a society, and that’s what populists want. They want to overcome the verticality of the hierarchies and reach directly to their followers. So new technologies, it’s funny, old populism and new technologies tend to go very well together.

**Haenle:** And in Europe, I mean you’ve described sort of the defining characteristics in the drivers, but you’ve also been talking this week to Chinese interlocutors about how populism varies throughout Europe. Often there’s geographical elements to it. Can you talk about some of the differences that you see among populist movements throughout Europe?

**Carothers:** One basic division that’s crucial to keep in mind is that some populists really are rooted in the left, or they’re rooted in ideas of economic redistribution. Based on that economic anger that citizens have, they say, “You know, it’s those international banks that are cheating us.

What if we nationalized those banks?" Or, "What's with these economic policies that, you know, give all these tax benefits to the rich? Let's give tax benefits to the poor for once," and so forth. So, sometimes it comes from a traditional redistribution impulse. Other times, it has a more conservative social quality that tends to come more from the right which focuses on anti-immigration or is anti-foreigners and says, "You know, our country used to be pure, and it used to be strong, and now it's being diluted by all these people coming in from other places, and we ought to do something about that. You have to become more pure." So you have the left and the right and they're sometimes fused and that's why we talk about Red-Brown Alliances, the traditional European political speak of putting together red from the left, brown from the right, into single leaders, and so you have a fusion of both leftist and rightist impulses. And as you go around to different European political movements trying to analyze which elements are driving them the most, you find a different configuration with any particular party or leader.

**Haenle:** And regionally, where in Europe do you find populism the strongest?

**Carothers:** Populism is doing especially well in two parts of Europe. It's doing very well in Central Europe. Central Europeans came through the financial crisis feeling quite bruised and damaged. Their democratic institutions were already fragile. There was a lot of corruption in these countries in most cases. Traditional checks and balances weren't really there because of their communist or socialist legacy of authoritarianism, and so they were rather fragile countries politically. When they went through hard times economically, when they began to see the migration rising in Europe, an immigration rising which they haven't traditionally had, these are very isolated countries, in, sort of ethnic terms, that have not traditionally had much immigration, at least in modern times, since the end of the two World Wars. They really felt the winds of populism very strongly. So you have Central European countries: Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, the Czech Republic, all experiencing significant forms of populism. Southern Europe too has also had quite a bit. Italy, Spain, in different ways in Greece, and so forth. So those are the two parts of Europe that have been most affected.

**Haenle:** Now you mentioned Italy just recently had an election, and close to 60% of the voters voted for populist parties. What kind of trends does this indicate?

**Carothers:** The Italian election was a sign of the times that you have both a big populist movement, the Five Star Movement, in Italy, and kind of a slightly unusual Italian-style populist with a colorful, somewhat odd leader who doesn't represent a traditional political tendency, but lots of populist qualities. But then you also have some very right-of-center, very rightist nativist parties, anti-immigration that aren't necessarily purely populist. They're kind of straight conservative in certain ways, but they have some populist elements to them. So, what's weakest in Italy right now are traditional centrist parties or central-left parties. They're really starving for political oxygen because voters are very dissatisfied and are looking for these alternatives.

**Haenle:** And this sounds like obviously an issue we'll be grappling with for some time, but can you lay out some of the consequences that you've seen of these populist movements across Europe?

**Carothers:** There are a lot of consequences, and additionally in Western Europe and Northern Europe, where populists are present but not dominant in the systems, but they've become established parties often in parliaments, like in Germany or in political life. So here are some of the main consequences: first, it changes the level of political anger in a country. Populists are angry. They feel that you're angry, the citizen, and they want to channel that anger into the system. So there's a level of anger that goes against, you know, post-WWII Europe was all about political consensus. Center-left, center-right, decency in getting along, agreeing on fundamentals. These populists don't agree on fundamentals, they want to challenge fundamentals. And so, particularly in Northern European countries that really rely heavily on consensus, this political conflict and hostility and anger is a shock to the system. In the Netherlands, for example, we think of the country of Netherlands as just, you know, a calm decent society. But the level of political anger in the Netherlands has been startling. The same in Denmark, a country we associate with a certain kind of equanimity. So one is political anger and conflict; another is changing actual policies. Populists are pushing all mainstream parties to be more restrictive on immigration and migration. So Europe is closing its borders. It's building walls, it's closing borders, and it's trying to step back from the last ten or fifteen years of open immigration as a result of this populist wave. Third, we don't yet see that much effect on economic policies as much as you might expect. We don't see a big anti-trade push by Europe, but there is nevertheless a lot of questioning of basic economic policies: "What about the plight of the worker? The plight of the pensioner? Are we doing well by these people?" And so in some countries, at least, there's more focus on social protection, and what could be done. Sometimes in fairly sort of rational, positive ways, economically of the times, and kind of unthinking giveaways or, lashing out at banks or other things that's not very positive, as happened in Hungary, for example. So you have anger, you have changed immigration policies, you have start of some change of economic policies, these are some of the main consequences so far.

**Haenle:** Tom, as you describe populism in Europe, I can't help but think of Donald Trump and this last presidential election and what we saw play out in the main four elements that you described: the economic piece, the immigration piece, the cultural changes that are taking place, and the new media, and Twitter. Of course, those all apply in an American context. Where do you see the commonalities between what's happening in Europe, but also where do you see the differences?

**Carothers:** There are some profound commonalities. These structural drivers are really larger conditions than most Western economies and Western societies, so the United States and Europe certainly differ in a lot of ways. But, in terms of struggling with the aftermath of the economic crisis, struggling with what's the right amount of immigration, adapting life to new social forms of

communication and so forth, all of these things are common. So the roots of populism are smaller. But there are some important differences. The United States is locked into a two party system, unlike European countries with parliamentary systems. It's very difficult in the United States for a third party to break in because of its two-party basic rules of the game. And so populists in the United States don't form alternative parties; they grow up inside of existing parties. The Tea Party movement in the Republican Party was a populist revolution within the Republican Party itself. The Bernie Sanders movement in the Democratic Party in the 2016 primary process was a populist revolution within the Democratic Party. So the struggle in the United States is populism within the established parties, not populist parties outside the system. It's very different.

**Haenle:** And so it wreaks havoc within the party?

**Carothers:** It does. So both parties are very divided now in the United States between a more populist kind of wing, and a more mainstream wing, and it's causing a great deal of tension within each of the parties. You know, we see it in the reaction of some of the Republican mainstream to the push by President Trump on trade sanctions, for example, or tariffs. We see reactions within the parties saying "No, that's not us, that's populism. We're the party of business and sensible economic policies. What's this populist thrust within our own party?" So in the United States, it's different having it within the parties. Another difference is we're a presidential system. The president has a lot of power in the United States, he's not just a prime minister. He's the president. That gives the level of visibility, the level of power, and both symbolic power and real power, and that, when you have a populist president, it's different than just having a populist party. You have a very, very visible symbol of populism and Donald Trump radiates out his political style around the world as we know. No European politician has anything like the global profile of an American president. And so when the American president is populist, that resounds loudly in the world.

**Haenle:** You talked this morning to business leaders about some of the safeguards around populism getting too strong and overtaking the system. You talked about the importance of the judicial system of the courts. You talked about media. Can you describe some of the common elements within both Europe and the United States that will lead to potentially limiting the advancement of these populist movements?

**Carothers:** Well populists are somewhat anti-systemic. "The system is rigged against us," they say, and "so we need to break the boundaries of this system." They say, "You know, we try to pass an immigration law that reflects the will of the people, and these courts tell us we can't do that. Who elected these courts? Who are they to tell the people what they can or can't do? I thought this was a democracy." So you have this deep tension in liberal democracy between the democracy side, the peoples' will, and the liberalism side which is set of rights and laws that organize the system. So this tension between this democracy side and the liberalism side manifests itself in any situation of a populist leader pushing for change. So courts are one form of check on the system, the media is another; scrutiny, and you know, watching carefully what people do. I don't believe

Donald Trump has had a normal press conference the entire time he's been president. He never sits down in front of a group of forty or fifty journalists and has a wide-ranging conversation and answers hard questions, because he doesn't want to subject himself to that kind of scrutiny. He wants to control the messages, choose the journalists with whom he talks, and of course he's constantly attacking the press, saying they're liars and they're bad people, terrible people, he said, getting his followers to boo them in rallies. So he's turned on the press and said, "This is a group of people who are not on the side of the people. They're bad people." So that's another feature.

**Haenle:** He sees them as checks to his power, and so he's pushing back, attacking them, trying to impact their credibility.

**Carothers:** Yes. You know, the free press is one of the greatest constraints on power that's really ever been created. The simple transparency of being able to ask what the leader is doing, ask hard questions, and get the truth about what's happening, so that's another constraint. And opposition parties, the ability of opposition parties to assert, you know, opposition in a rational way, and so you know, when he says that his former opponent in the presidential campaign should be locked up, he's denying the legitimacy of opposition. He's saying they're not just normal political opponents, they're criminals. These people are criminal opponents (Crooked Hillary). These are people who should be put in jail, they have no right to power. So you deny the legitimacy of opposition. So if you deny the legitimacy of courts, deny the free press, deny the opposition, these are all ways in which you say, "My power is kind of absolute, in a sense. It's something that shouldn't be questioned, because it's authentic. I am speaking for the people."

**Haenle:** And these constraints that you describe all exist in Europe, are there differences in how they're able to constrain populism?

**Carothers:** There are. I mean, every country has a different configuration. You saw in Italy for example, Italy experienced a wave of populism with Silvio Berlusconi in the 1990's. What were his strengths? Well, a media empire. He controlled a lot of the press in Italy. And so that was one of the primary forms of his power was the fact that he controlled the media. What didn't he control? The courts in Italy. Italy actually has independent prosecutors, independent courts that are fairly strong. You remember all the anti-corruption trials in Italy and the ability of Italian prosecutors to question politicians and that. So it was, you know, Italy had a captive media because of his media power. On the other hand, it had courts that were able to stand up in some ways. And they had some opposition, although he was able to fragment it and circumvent it. You could do a diagnosis of each European country: what are its strengths and weaknesses, and, you know, what is it able to control? We could talk about Brexit, for example. One configuration of a populist moment versus, you know, another in Poland or Germany. Each one is a separate case underlying structural drivers similar, but particular manifestations and constraints on it different in each European country.

**Haenle:** I can't let you get away from the China in the World podcast without turning our attention to China, where we are here, and I wonder if you could comment on the impact of these populism movements in Europe on Europe's relations with China and how you see that.

**Carothers:** I think in the first sense, Paul, that the Chinese political establishment and also just, you know, well informed Chinese looking at Europe and looking at the world, first of all they see a bit of chaos and they see unfamiliarity and it's unsettling. "Who are these people? What do they want? Is this bad for us? Good for us?" You know, they're used to a Europe that's almost boring. Politically, it kind of goes from the center-right to the center-left and there's quite a bit of consensus. First, it's just an unsettling time for Chinese trying to think about how to deal with Europe. Second, they see fragmentation. They see some countries going down very unexpected and different directions, and others not. Macron and France seem to be moving right up the center alley of politics, yet then another country like Italy seems to be in a completely unstable and fragmented state. So they're again, used to dealing with Europe as a region, you know, China and Europe, but what if Europe is multiple Europes? What does that mean? That requires a more differentiated focus and some new thinking. Third, populists are often nationalistic, anti-globalization. China benefits from globalization. China's a major engine of globalization in the world. What does it mean for China to live in a world where the West, which is traditionally the driver of globalization, becomes often opposed to globalization? So these are all big questions for China. The good news for China so far is that populists in Europe have not focused their negative energies on China very much.

**Haenle:** Right.

**Carothers:** They've been focusing it on Brussels and the European Union, on established politicians. If anything, they sometimes point to China and to Russia and other powers outside the region, non-traditional powers, and say, "Look, we have other friends that we could call in and we can make a deal to build a new railroad with China. We don't need structural funds from Brussels." And so China has actually gotten kind of a free pass, I'd say, from populists in Europe so far.

**Haenle:** Well Tom, thank you very much for joining the China in the World podcast, but more importantly, for visiting us here at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center. You've been a leader in the Carnegie Endowment, the global institution, and we're delighted to have you come visit. We hope this is the first of many.

**Carothers:** Well, what the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center is doing under your leadership, Paul, is a perfect example of what we'd like to do everywhere, so it's a pleasure to be here.

**Haenle:** Thank you very much.