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## Review

# What is populism?

Jan-Werner Müller

University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2016, 123 pp.,

ISBN: 978-0-8122-4898-2

*Contemporary Political Theory* (2018) **17**, S146–S149. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-017-0129-8>; published online 27 June 2017

Jan-Werner Müller's short book on populism is direct yet evasive, insightful and provocative while also unsatisfying. The book is officially organized into three parts: what populists say, what they do, and how to deal with them. It also addresses another three-part concern but this time simultaneously rather than sequentially: the identification of populism, diagnoses of conditions favourable to it, and what a better, non-populist politics should be like. Müller is most successful at identifying populism but his diagnosis of contributing conditions and ideas for a preferable politics are anaemic, and, if widely shared by others, will contribute to more rather than less of the politics Müller fears.

Müller's basic description of populism is persuasive. Populism involves a "*moralistic imagination of politics* ... that sets a morally pure and fully unified [but fictional] ... people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior" (pp. 19–20). Consequently, populists are anti-pluralist. Only they can represent the people which, to be unified, must exclude all those who do not fit in (e.g. various elites, minorities, welfare scroungers, multiculturalists). Because populists think the people's will has been betrayed, they are willing to restore its rightful place at the centre of political decision-making even if that involves means that are anti-democratic, anti-liberal and unconstitutional. In fact, once in power populists are inclined to do the following (pp. 44–49): colonize the state and judiciary with their partisans; engage in clientelism in exchange for broad political support; and suppress opposition within civil society to maintain the illusion of a unified people. Together these specific criteria yield a list of historical and contemporary populists. Müller's favourite examples, which come with sound evidence in most cases, include Viktor Orbán, Hugo Chávez, George Wallace, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Donald Trump and Geert Wilders.

What about figures or parties that are often regarded as populist, such as Bernie Sanders, Syriza or the Indignados? They do not qualify in Müller's scheme because even though they might attack elites in the name of the people, they do not treat the people as a morally pure, unified whole; they are not anti-pluralist or anti-



democratic. The trick, then, is to avoid confusing popular progressive politics with populism. So what should we make of Müller's admission (in an endnote) that Bolivia's Evo Morales – whom he labels populist – has pursued “an inclusionary approach” to politics that includes “new basic rights” and the recognition of “previously excluded minorities” (p. 113)? Müller states that there can be degrees of populism – the Swiss People's Party is “deeply populist” (p. 30) – which allows for some variety – but how much can there be if all populism is anti-pluralist, anti-democratic, corrupt, etc.? His approach is definitionally strict, yet the members of the class that is produced are heterogeneous beyond what the definition allows. One solution, which Müller does not consider, is that in cases like Morales we are witnessing a progressive enactment of constituent power rather than populism.

I find it admirable that Müller sticks to a hard line that populism is always regressive. Even though some of his examples are confused, he displays none of the common ambivalence on the broader point. Another issue that often produces ambivalence among scholars is whether populism should be approached formally. Here Müller mentions Ernesto Laclau's work dismissively and only in passing, despite seeming to align himself with Laclau when he writes that populism is not about policy content (p. 93). For both, it seems, populism determines the logic of politics' social content but not the content itself. I have always found this separation of form from content to be unconvincing. Populism's ‘people-other’ logic is not content-determining but neither is it absent of content, because it immediately organizes people into two camps that by definition are antagonistic towards one another. Antagonism stands as political logic and content. Treating populism formally according only to its logic or rhetoric allows for so many examples that the term is stretched beyond recognition (Erdoğan *and* Morales?).

Müller rightly takes on the challenge of explaining populism's recent success. The general problem is that “all is not well” in the democratic world (p. 59). Unfortunately, this mild phrase reflects a series of bland diagnoses found throughout the book. For example, why write that democracies are “suffering from the defect that weaker socioeconomic groups do not participate in the political process and do not have their interests represented effectively” (pp. 59–60), when the widespread reality is that the working classes and the poor are excluded from politics, while public policy actively ignores their interests when it is not directly attacking them? Why pretend that “democracy is a system where you know you can lose, but you also know that you will not always lose” (pp. 78–79), when in many democracies (America and Britain particularly) the poor have been losing for decades? In the American context, Müller cites the influence of cultural change that some find objectionable, from “social-sexual liberal values” to a looming “majority-minority” demographic shift that “white Protestants” feel will put them at a permanent disadvantage (p. 91). In better words, North American and European populism is rooted in heterosexual whiteness even if its supporters are not all homophobic racists.



When viewed together, these examples – and there are more – amount to euphemistic liberal language about neoliberal capitalism, the economic oligarchy that it promotes, its corrosive effects on democracy and its reluctance to name and confront social pathologies. Granted that this is the word of one reviewer against one author – how to decide? We can consider Müller’s suggestions regarding the commitments we must make to generate a democratic fightback. If they are convincing, then his diagnosis of populism’s conditions of possibility is stronger than what I maintain. On the other hand, if his solutions fail to convince, then there is good reason to think that the diagnosis is also flawed.

One part of the solution has already succumbed to the flawed diagnosis: Müller insists that defenders of democracy “have to be honest about the fact” that all is not well. The sentiment is correct, but his account of those facts is not. This does not prevent Müller from drafting Francis Fukuyama to his cause and lauding his claim that neither liberal democracy nor market capitalism has any plausible challengers (pp. 5–6). Populism is certainly no desirable replacement. What becomes clear is that Müller’s ambitions are restricted by his political horizon: liberal democratic capitalism cannot imagine anything other than itself, so how much work can there really be? Strengthening our party systems is on his list. Müller also provides a lengthy comparison of the differences between democracy and populism that I will not quote in full: “[O]ne [democracy] enables majorities to authorize representatives whose actions may or may not turn out to conform to what a majority of citizens expected or would have wished for; the other [populism] pretends that no action of a populist government can be questioned, because “the people” have willed it so. The one assumes fallible, contestable judgements by changing majorities; the other imagines a homogeneous entity outside all institutions whose identity and ideas can be fully represented ... the one takes it that “the people” can never appear in a noninstitutionalized manner ... the other presumes precisely the opposite” (pp. 77–78).

Müller’s wager is that if you are persuaded by his strict depiction of populism (I largely am) then you will necessarily support the liberal democratic side of the comparison. This will convince some readers; others will find it entirely presumptuous regardless of their view on populism. Even though Müller admits that the danger to the democratic world comes from within it, he thinks it is a situational danger rather than a permanent one. But it can only be situational if liberalism can properly diagnose what ails the land – unlikely – and then take action that accounts for how it contributed to the conundrum in the first place. Can liberal democratic capitalism manage to do this? In the section on how to deal with populists, Müller writes that “as long as populists stay within the law – and don’t incite violence, for instance – other political actors (and members of the media) are under some obligation to engage them” (p. 84). This statement registers why more and more people think liberalism possesses an arrogant self-regard: play by its rules and you will receive *some* acknowledgement of your existence. Populism is a



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symptom of liberalism's problems – but they go much further than that. Müller writes that populism's success is “connected to what one might call promises of democracy [especially rule by the people] that have not been fulfilled and that in a certain sense simply can't be fulfilled in our societies. Nobody ever officially issued these promises” (p. 76). Actually they did. The promises of democracy are in our constitutions and are trotted out by every politician at every election in every one of their platforms. Müller is right that populism is not the way to go, but neither will liberalism overcome why people think the system is not for them.

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