

Jan-Werner Müller,
What is Populism?,
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Michal Sládeček

Now that marginal, populist rhetoric have entered into the public discourse of long-term democracies and states with mature political cultures, it cannot be said anymore that populism is an anomaly or the characteristic of unstable peripheral states. Populism is one of the concepts which have marked political debates during the last few years and it is no surprise that confusion has emerged regarding the meaning of this concept. Populism has been associated with Trump and Sanders, Brexit and the British Labour Party since 2015., Syriza and Golden Dawn, Occupy and Tea Party Movement, Mélenchon and Marine Le Pen, and Putin and Chávez. When xenophobia, anti-elitism, nationalism, anti-globalism, critiques of austerity politics, claims to participatory democracy and the more equal distribution of wealth are all inserted into the same rubric, there is the threat that every appeal to the public good and confronting status quo politics is identified with populism.

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The good news is that Jan-Werner Müller's book *What is Populism?* has been published just in time, and to considerable extent clears this confusion, sheds light on the character of populist movements and parties (chapter one), explicates the modus operandi of populist regimes (chapter two) and offers instructions for democratic responses to such politics (chapter three).¹ The very title of the introductory chapter "Is Everyone a Populist?" suggests that it needs to be determined what or whom the concept of populism refers to. One of the basic characteristics of populist movements is the critique of elites as "alienated" from the people, but anti-elitism as such is not characteristic of populism only, nor are populist parties non-elitists unconditionally. The critique of elites as "alienated" from the people is one of the main traits of populist movements, albeit not sufficiently distinctive condition of populism, considering not all critiques of elite is in a name of the fiction of "real" people. Moreover, populist leaders can claim that they reject *the* elites which are acting against the people's interests, dissociate themselves from the people and do not hear their voice. The very same leaders of such movements are quite often part of these elites, as well rival elites are denounced as unrepresentative, corrupt, untrustworthy, and treacherous. In contrast, non-populist critiques

¹ The addendum of the book consists of Müller's concise summary, that is the main tenets of the book in the form of seven theses on populism.

of elites advocate replacement of political representatives without labelling them as morally corrupt or deviant. While the latter critique is aimed at minority which does not respect the common good but advocates particular interests, and thus opposes the demands and interests of the majority and other social groups, the former critique stigmatizes the representatives of legislative, executive and juridical power as enemies.²

Populism promises the impossible and oversimplifies the complex issues, which is the reason why it is often used interchangeably with “demagoguery” (p. 11). Also, it generally coalesces with nationalism, as both of them are negatively charged: any positive politics, if they are elaborated at all, could be brought about only through “negative” politics oriented against particular groups. As the primary aim of nationalism, demagoguery and populism is deliverance from and neutralization of somebody (contested elite, racial, ethnic or any other social group), psychologically they express “fear”, “anger”, “frustration” and “resentment”.

Müller, however, avoids identifying populism exclusively with these negative psychological stances, as well as with politics which exclusion is the only content, such as xenophobia and nationalism. The latter two are the most toxic embodiment of populism, but not the only ones. In the sense in which populism is “positive”, it is “a particular moralistic imagination of politics” (p. 19), which assumes moral purity of the people. Intruders’ inauthentic influences, along with alienated political and professional elites, are obstacles to “people’s will”. The singularity of this will is the basic premise of populism, as it always has a firm anti-pluralistic stance. The populists claim that they and only they represent the true people (p. 40), but this claim presupposes the existence of “the people” with a homogeneous will. Therefore, the imagined object as ontologically unified and axiologically affirmative precedes empirical determination of what or who the people are as a social or political group, which values this group endorses, whether their interests are mutually compatible etc. The populists argue they are symbolic representation of “the real people” (p. 27, 102), and as a consequence

they are prone to nullify any electoral success by rival party and to ascribe its victory to manipulation. If the rival party gains a majority of vote, that only means that it gained it by deception and fraudulence and, as that party does not represent the “real people”, its legitimacy is null and void notwithstanding the number of votes.

But populism shares a symbolic construction of “the real people” with National-socialism and Stalinism which envisaged a singular nation in the form of *Ein Volk* or a working class coalesced with the party. Nevertheless, populism can comfortably use democratic procedures and all democratic means without their abolition. Rigged and unfair elections do not imply that the system has diverged towards totalitarianism as long as the opposition’s accession to power is not precluded systematically. This is the reason why a situation where populist leadership aims to change the constitution or electoral rules and consistently restrict freedom of the media is more sinister than in populist regimes which are reluctant to do so.³

The fact that makes populism more elusive is the absence of a codified doctrine on which it might rely, so it is more akin to an assembly of eclectic practices than to a coherent political stance (p. 10-11). As has been said, the opponents of political pluralism are prone to accept democratic rules, and therefore the threat to democracy does not come from a theoretical conception or ideology which renounces democracy and abjure the idea of parliamentary representation (in contrast to Nazism and fascism, there is no populists’ Carl Schmitt or Giovanni Gentile), but from within – from politicians and parties appealing to the very ideals of democracy, arguing that existing parties

3 Populistic regimes are reluctant to slip into plain authoritarianism – to suspend all separation of power, independent oversight of the government and all democratic procedures – not only fearing the loss of international reputation, as Müller assumed (p. 50), but also because of the fact that democracy is the overwhelmingly accepted normative condition of legitimacy of governance. In virtue of fear of losing the justification of its governance, populist regimes are constrained to abide by the rules of democracy, notwithstanding their unwillingness to accept the rules and attempts to circumvent them. In scrutinizing the fall of Milošević and his regime as a result of uprising on 5th October 2000, the fact of his previous losing the election on 24. September – which was procedurally correct albeit far from being conducted in fair conditions – is often overlooked. The consequent mass demonstrations just complemented and completed the change of power, and so-called Fifth of October revolution was a revolt against the populist regime’s attempt to subvert democratic rules.

2 The pro-brexit *Daily Mail*, which can be marked as a populist newspaper, denounced on its front page judge’s ruling there should be parliamentary oversight of Brexit as “Enemies of the people”, a term which is unusual in debates between opponents in democratic societies and which appears to be more an invitation to lynch than a statement.

and elites actually suppress bottom up potentials and the desire to change of the people.

Furthermore, not all anti-pluralism is also populism. Bolsheviks and religious fanatics do not claim that the majority or the people are morally impeccable, likewise they are not in favor of democratic rules. In contrast to them, populists, as Müller argued, are not against representative democracy, as long as it represents the right people (p. 25). But, the idea of representation in parliamentary democracy consists principally of the fact that what is represented is a particular group of people, not the whole nation or people as such. The representatives of an agrarian community would not have the same standpoint, interests and aspirations as the representatives of an urban district; the representatives of an area which is ecologically in peril most likely would be in conflict with those of business orientated city and so on. These examples might look like platitudes, but they reveal the absurdity of the idea that some person or group can have the ability to harmonize all those interests perfectly. Consequently, the idea of democracy endorsed by populists is different from the representative version and is akin to a consensus of unencumbered persons stripped from their particular stances.

This lead us to the paradoxical position of populism: it promulgates unification on the one hand, and unbridgeable polarization into "us" and "them" on the other. This confirms Müller's thesis that the unity of the people is not empirical, but fictitious "moral unification" or "corpus mysticum", and, in addition, goes along with the quest for internal enemies who distort the preestablished unity. This leads some critics to conclude that unconstructivity and contradictions of populist politics have, as a consequence, the inability of populist parties to govern. In the second part of the book this thesis has been reconsidered by examining the questions could those parties govern, even write a constitution, and operate within the scope of a democratic framework. Although Müller's answer is affirmative, considering that populists in some cases are not opponents of the separation of powers and representative democracy (simultaneously attempting to rig the system to their advantage as much as possible), he denies the democratic character of populist parties and movements. Because populism is anti-pluralistic by its nature, the term "illiberal democracy" does not denote populist regimes adequately: populism fundamentally distorts democracy (p. 49-60).

Even when it attempts to play by rules, it is not the friend, but the foe of democracy: populism is neither corrective of liberal democracy, nor a path to participation in politics (p. 102, 103.).

Prior to their ascent to power, populist parties emphasize the "people's will" which preexists alongside political processes but, because of manifold impediments (although less "objective" concerning existing laws, institutions or constitutions, and more "subjective" such as the usurpation of the elites or particular groups), this will has not been affirmed; and when it gains power, a populist party acts as if this party leadership is representative of the people's will. The authoritarian character of the populist party stems almost inevitably from the claim to represent 100 % of the people. As long as pluralism is denied and disagreement excluded, the good for all must be recognized in a unique way. The subject who recognizes it is the leader (p. 32-38). Consequently, it is very difficult to disempower the party claimed to be infallible and the same leadership (most often one person) tends to be in power for the long term. As the leadership is personalized, along with leader's losing power, the whole political system collapses.

The claim of the populist parties to more direct democracy and political participation of the masses could appear as justified, but those claims are only rhetorical: in reality, populism rejects full representation of different social groups, as well as the principle of supersedence of government. According to Müller, populism should be treated as a symptom of the crises of democracy and the treatment of the voters for populist parties as irrational, lead by frustration, xenophobic, bigoted and resentful is inappropriate for a liberal-democratic approach. In the same vein, by the very exclusion of populist groups or parties from the public sphere, this approach falls to one more contradiction: pluralism is negated in the name of pluralism (p. 83). In this way problem with the treatment of illiberal minorities in liberal societies are perpetuated: if illiberal minorities should be excluded, that implies liberal group's tolerance can be applied only to the groups which are alike them, which is in collision with the definition of tolerance.

The avoidance of the paradox means we should be under "an obligation to engage them /populists/" (p. 84), as populism is, metaphorically speaking, the permanent shadow of modern representative democracy, and a constant danger to it (p. 11, 15,

101). As it is impossible to escape one's own shadow, populism is inevitable, but it can be of the greatest importance in pointing to antidemocratic and anti-republican impulses stemming from it, in which Müller's analysis, as well as practical instructions on how to deal with populism, is highly useful. It is always necessary to warn of the point at which populism is converted to autocracy: controlling the media, adjusting the constitution, marginalizing genuine opposition and establishing fictitious ones (which are loyal to the government), constraining the right to demonstrate, spreading fake news, threatening the independent media and intellectuals, banning non-government organizations, overt plain "politics of enmity".⁴ Populism operates in the "grey zone" in which

it is occasionally difficult to discern what are fair democratic process, and what is just appreciation of procedure in biased conditions, what is freedom of the media, and what is their abuse, what is participation of the citizen, and what is manipulation of voters. With Müller's books we are getting up-to-date critique, the response to the challenges which now emerge in almost every elections in almost every democratic society. Although those who are looking for remedies or political solutions will remain disappointed: as Müller shows on numerous examples, populism will not be refuted by pointing to its theoretical flaws, but it could be discredited through disentanglement of its assortment of vacuous promises, pompous rhetoric and shoddy practices.

4 Maybe this tendency to authoritarianism, which is inherent to populism, could resolve tension in Müller's analysis, when he claims that "National Socialism and Italian Fascism need to be understood as populist movements" (p. 93) and "populism is only thinkable in the context of representative democracy" (p. 77).