

Populism is a Form of Anti-Pluralism

by Hervé Berville

The omnipresence of the term ‘populism’ only serves to underline its semantic and ideological ambiguity. According to J.-W. Müller, populists claim that they and they alone represent the popular will and are both a reflection of political institutions in crisis and a threat to democracy.

Reviewed: Jan-Werner Müller, *Qu'est-ce que le populisme ? Définir enfin la menace* (Paris: Premier Parallèle, 2016), 183 p. (Also translated in English: *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

Is everyone a populist?

In today's global political landscape, there is undeniably a groundswell of what seems to fall under the rubric of populism. From the United States (Donald Trump) to Greece (Alexis Tsipras), as well as Hungary (Victor Orbán), France (Marine Le Pen), Spain (Pablo Iglesias), Italy (Beppe Grillo), and Ecuador (Rafael Correa), a range of political actors have been labelled ‘populist’, particularly by their opponents.

Covering a broad variety of phenomena and movements, populism has become a catch-all concept including every possible ideological component, with commentators placing Victor Orbán and Pablo Iglesias, for example, in the same category. Even proponents of radical neoliberalism such as Alberto Fujimori in Peru or Carlos Menem in Argentina have been described as populist, further adding to the multi-faceted nature of the concept. Jan-

Werner Müller's book, *Qu'est-ce que le populisme ?* aims to develop a theory of populism that distinguishes between the different phenomena observed.

According to J.-W. Müller, the debate about populism conflates many things and sparks strong emotions. Those who see it as negative find it difficult to remain detached, referring to 'pathologies', the 'degradation of democracy', or even 'ochlocracy' (mob rule). In the eyes of its proponents, its critics are in the grips of nothing less than a 'hatred of democracy' or even of the people. The concept is therefore bitterly disputed and, J.-W. Müller tells us, a theory of populism is necessarily also a theory of democracy. While populism can seem to be democratic or to be part of radical democracy, in fact it is not and, according to the author, has a tendency to be anti-democratic.

A definition of populism

J.-W. Müller suggests defining populism as a 'anti-establishment' attitude coupled with antipluralism, reflected in a fundamental claim to have moral monopoly over representation. According to the author, being critical of elites – something usually ascribed to populists – is a necessary but insufficient criterion. A politician who takes an 'anti-elite' stance but does not claim to have any monopoly over representing the people could be described as a demagogue but not as a populist. The decisive criterion is that populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people as a whole.

In J.-W. Müller's view, populism is therefore intrinsically anti-democratic as it challenges the very foundations of modern democracy: the polyphony of the people, political representation and pluralism, and the recognition of intermediate institutions. In the populist conception of politics, the people are envisaged as homogeneous, morally pure, and with nothing in common with the immoral, corrupt, and parasitic elites. According to the author, this vision illustrates a concerning relationship between populists and democracy: for populists, all other representatives of citizens are illegitimate in one way or another. In theory, only the imperative mandate, directly giving representatives the people's instructions, is acceptable: presenting themselves as nothing more than spokespeople, populist politicians distrust or even reject deliberative and pluralist institutions (parliament or other forums) in the name of the unique and clearly recognisable will of an authentic people. Perfectly capable of identifying this popular will, populist leaders have no need for intermediate institutions such as the media to communicate directly with the people. They therefore prefer the *spirit of the people*, in other words the supposedly self-evident general interest of an authentic, homogeneous people, rather than a *general will* viewed as a will guided by a certain number of interests. For populists, anyone who does not rally to join this *spirit of the people* excludes themselves de facto from the people and disqualifies themselves from exercising any legitimate power.

For J.-W. Müller, the relationship to democratic processes, and particularly elections, is a significant illustration of populism's problematic relationship to democracy. Populists frequently refuse to accept election results when they have lost; they draw a distinction – which is fatal to democracy – between the *empirical* and the *moral* election result. They draw on the notion of a 'silent majority' that was unable to express itself, attack 'fake' representatives of the people in the name of the true people, and call into question the processes through which these representatives came to power.

A variable voter base

What are the characteristic features of the populist vote? J.-W. Müller suggests it would be simplistic to explain the rise of populism by 'anger', 'resentment', or 'status anxiety' among the population. These criteria cannot account for the complexities of voter behaviour. The motivations and representations of the populist vote differ according to period and geographical space. J.-W. Müller underlines, for example, that, until the 1970s, populism was mainly linked to peasants and farmers and to value placed on cultivating land. In Europe as in the United States, populist parties were mainly supported by farmers wanting to defend their interests, particularly in the face of financial and industrial groups.

However, the populist vote has evolved and, according to the author, there is now a 'complete transatlantic misunderstanding' surrounding it (p. 48). In Europe, populism is mainly considered as right wing and synonymous with exclusion, whereas on the American continent, it tends to be found on the left wing and to campaign for the inclusion of people marginalised by financial capitalism in the economic and social system. For J.-W. Müller, this is only an apparent contradiction: it simply illustrates the fact that populism has various historical connotations, is not a recent phenomenon, and cannot be identified with a specific categories of supporters. Without denying that there is such a thing as the populist vote, the author is doubtful that populism can be defined based on the distinctive features of its electoral base.

In point of fact, drawing on empirical studies, the book shows that people who have lost status or who are facing that threat do not necessarily vote for populist parties. The determining factor underpinning the choice of populism is often not so much voters' socioeconomic situation as their personal conviction they are witnessing a 'national decline'. Level of education, which is a determining factor in income, therefore cannot suffice to explain this choice.

Populism in practice

The book also questions populist parties' capacity to govern and, in doing so, challenges a few certitudes. Some commentators draw comfort from claiming that, once in power, populists would by definition no longer be able to play the moral card of not belonging to an elite considered corrupt and immoral. Others console themselves in advance that populists would lose all credibility once their simplistic solutions came apart when plunged into the political and economic reality. According to the author, however, these scenarios are unrealistic because populists are capable of constantly finding new enemies and continuing to behave like a persecuted minority, even when in power. Such polarising of political conflict is typical of the populist style of government, which also consists in hijacking the State apparatus, gaining the loyalty of the greatest number through mass clientelism, and developing profound hostility towards civil society actors, particularly the media.

These populist techniques of exercising power all share 'discriminatory legalism', J.-W. Müller tells us, which means applying the law differently depending on the groups in question, an approach encapsulated in Kurt Weyland's expression: 'For my friends, everything; for my enemies, the law'. This logic pushed populist leaders such as Chavez or Orbán to create an exclusive Constitution, that is to say a constitution serving only one party. Ideology and praxis interweave and overlap, allowing populists to justify their actions in a language that has all the trappings of democracy as well as, in their view, an indisputably moral dimension. This dimension, in particular, means it is not enough to simply levy rational arguments in order to defeat populism. An innovative approach is necessary, which is developed in the final section of the book.

Dealing with populism

Focused on Europe, the final chapter of the book addresses the different strategies for responding to populism, looking at which seem destined to fail and which seem efficient. In the author's view, the best tactic consists in seeking out frank and direct debate with populists, because cordoning them off only strengthens their representation of themselves as persecuted political actors. By bringing populists inside the framework of democratic debate, democracies can hope to unsettle their claim to monopoly when it comes to representing the people.

Contrary to claims by some commentators, there is no potential reservoir of voters who are naturally favourable to populism: its rise can be curbed and minimised as long as it is tackled head on, by responding to rather than avoiding its critique of representative democracy. In order to do so, democrats must first and foremost definitively set aside at least two misapprehensions, widely relayed by populists because they reinforce their arguments

about decline. The first is that there was a golden age of democracy in Western Europe during which citizens participated far more actively in the democratic process, public action had much greater room for manoeuvre, and voters' wishes were quickly enacted. The second is that, in the past, Europe did not exert any supranational power, whereas in fact, from the very outset, the anti-totalitarian architecture of the post-war period made provision for certain limitations to popular sovereignty, notably by creating the Court of Justice of the European Union in 1952 and the European Court of Human Rights in 1959. In J.-W. Müller's view, populism forces us to think about the aims of democracy and the failings of our democratic model; however, the crisis of representative democracy should not be tackled with the rhetoric and specious conclusions of populism.

Could 'left-wing populism' be the answer to the rise of right-wing populism in Europe? This 'counter-populism' could potentially tap into citizens' anger about the neoliberal consensus and divert it from the right. In J.-W. Müller's view, though, such a scenario would be a 'vision of horror': right-wing populists would face off against left-wing populists, with each side using its conception of the *single* authentic will of the people to claim power. The result would be an intrinsically anti-pluralist and anti-political Europe. In order to allow the advent of a democratic and non-populist Europe, J.-W. Müller believes that Europeans will have to make necessarily painful choices between economic integration, national sovereignty, and democracy. If they want to continue moving towards, they will have to give up a certain portion of national democracy in favour of a supranational democracy.

Left-wing and right-wing populists: same difference?

Populism is therefore anti-elitism combined with anti-pluralism, expressed through claims of moral monopoly over popular representation. While this book aims to develop a specific concept of populism – an ideal-type drawing distinctions between existing political phenomena – the fact it does not define its key concepts complicates any understanding of its arguments. In particular, it is a shame that it does not develop any general theory of democracy, which could have offered a way of better understanding populism's threat to our model of representative democracy. Moreover, the final chapter devoted to answers to populism would have benefitted from more specific, substantial arguments regarding possible and necessary proposals for quelling the populist 'wave'.

The book would also have benefited from drawing a clearer distinction between the motivations and evolutions of the populist vote over time and according to country, in order to better understand the reasons behind the 'transatlantic misunderstanding'. On this point, particular attention could have been paid to the respective rise of right-wing populism in the United States and of left-wing populism in Europe, as they radically alter the traditional representations mentioned in the book. For the author, empirical studies and the historical

perspective show that populism cannot be defined simply by describing its voters. However, one can question the relevance of an approach that considers that populism cannot be linked to, or defined by, specific political content.

The author broaches populism as a very specific conception of political rhetoric and practice, therefore giving little room in his book to the question of political content. Yet the latter is fundamental, particularly in European countries where left- and right-wing populisms pursue different political goals and therefore cannot be entirely conflated. The author implicitly acknowledges this at the end of the book, when he defines the difference between the democratic and the populist as a conflict ‘between being open and closed, between advocating integration and supporting separation’. He reminds us himself that left-wing populism, whether on the American continent or in Europe, emphasises integration and is part of a logic of openness. European movements such as *Podemos* or *Siriza* are not anti-European and do not reject the idea of European integration.

Furthermore, by asserting that ‘there is simply no rigorous and broadly accepted democratic theory that can define the people, the *demos*’ (p. 126), the author contents himself with defining democracy as a process through which belonging to a *demos* can be negotiated. Beyond the fact that it is at the very least curious to broach the question of populism without trying to define the people, this choice, aimed at legitimising the book’s definition of populism, does not allow for a full understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon – particularly in its various variety contemporary manifestations. In this respect, left- and right-wing populisms perhaps do not represent the same threat to democracy.

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