

Jan-Werner Müller: *What Is Populism?*
University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2016, 123 pages¹

Populism is democracy's evil twin brother. It presents itself as democracy, as making good on democracy's highest ideals, "Let the people rule!" (p. 6). But behind the mask it is demagoguery (p. 11), a degraded form of democracy (p. 6). The author pits representative democracy, with its mass suffrage, against populism, and the latter depends conceptually on the former: "Populism arises with the introduction of representative democracy; it is its shadow" (p. 20). A claim attributed to the Nazi ideologue Carl Schmitt and his Fascist counterpart Giovanni Gentile (p. 28) stayed with me throughout the book; the claim, namely, that Fascism is more democratic than democracy is capable of, or that only Fascism can realize the full potential of democracy. Whether Fascist or just populist, this claim makes a mockery of democracy.

The author is a political scientist of German origin who works in the United States. Müller casts his net wide, drawing extensively on recent examples from Europe, North and South America, with Asia and Africa taking more of a backseat. He presents his book as a conceptual analysis of populism, which qualifies it as a treatise on political philosophy, but he also offers hands-on advice on how to counter populist politicians and voters in the day-to-day political fray. His advice is congruent with his analysis and thus elucidates the latter from an applied angle. The advice is helpful, since populist politicians and their supporters play by other rules than their competitors in the political marketplace. The author is openly in favour of democracy and openly against populism, but what I found appealing about the book is that it resists the temptation to speak condescendingly of populist voters, picturing them as unlettered, unwashed masses stoked up on hatred, disdain and aggression directed at everyone who is 'them' and not 'us'. It would be contrary to the democratic mindset not to engage with them as equals, without necessarily buying into their framing, and it would also be counterproductive, because it plays

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right into the populist narrative of being outsiders whose rightful place is in society's mainstream.²

Though billed as an analysis of populism, I came away with the impression that the book is at heart an examination of democracy. The author's methodology, accordingly, is to study the healthy body of representative democracy by studying one of its typical maladies, namely populism.³ The diagnosis is that the 'shadow' of democracy is a fully functional method of government, which when fully implemented is not democracy in full bloom, but straight-up dictatorship. Not surprisingly, the final of the 'Seven Theses on Populism' that form the Conclusion of the book, states, "Populism, then, should force defenders of liberal democracy to think harder about what current failures of representation might be" (p. 103).⁴

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² Müller tracks some of the different meanings that the terms 'populism' and 'populist' have had since the 19th century, applying to different political situations and landscapes. Müller's book is specifically about the most recent trends, and his use of the terms is tailored to those. Portions of the book are devoted to critiquing rival interpretations of populism and strategies for addressing populists. I am leaving those portions out of consideration here. I am also disregarding attempts to explain why populism has become such a political force. Briefly, though, Frum (2017) makes this interesting, if somewhat sweeping claim: "Outside the Islamic world, the 21st century is not an era of ideology. The grand utopian visions of the 19th century have passed out of fashion. The nightmare totalitarian projects of the 20th have been overthrown or have disintegrated, leaving behind only outdated remnants: North Korea, Cuba. What is spreading today is repressive kleptocracy, led by rulers motivated by greed rather than by the deranged idealism of Hitler or Stalin or Mao. Such rulers rely less on terror and more on rule-twisting, the manipulation of information, and the co-optation of elites." Populist machinations would, accordingly, facilitate the power grab of 'repressive kleptocrats' and their clients. But I am not entirely convinced, nor would Müller be, as he emphasizes that the mass appeal of populism is driven by identity politics rather than by primarily economic concerns.

³ Rosavallon (2011) says something along the same lines: "Si nous voulons mieux comprendre la démocratie, il nous faut donc aussi mieux saisir ce qu'est le populisme. Car l'intelligence de la démocratie est inséparable d'une intelligence de ses perversions."

⁴ See, e.g., p. 60: "... the defect that weaker socioeconomic groups do not participate in the political process and do not have their interests represented effectively".

The author does not spell out in any detail what he understands by democracy, but he lists (p. 55) the following political rights as being among those constitutive of democracy:

- freedom of speech and assembly
- media pluralism
- the protection of minorities

together with this requirement (p. 55):

- citizens must be well-informed about politics

Moreover, he ascribes (p. 40) the following tenets to democratically-minded politicians:

- representation is temporary and fallible
- contrary opinions are legitimate
- society cannot be represented without remainder
- it is impossible for one party or politicians permanently to represent an authentic people apart from democratic procedures and forms

What permeates these tenets is a fallibilist, bottom-up, empirical approach to politics and of how to structure society. Populism turns this upside-down. Müller describes populism in terms of the following package of tenets:

- polarization between the people versus the elite(s)
- monolithic culture, antipluralism, delegitimization of opponents
- populist governments characterized by open displays of:
 - suspension of the separation of powers
 - state jobs being handed out to loyalists
 - corruption, cronyism
 - mass clientelism
 - discriminatory legalism⁵
 - suppression of civil society
 - proneness to conspiracy theories.

⁵ “For my friends, everything; for my enemies, the law” (p. 46). For instance, a populist government can decide to single out particular individuals, companies and organizations for nitpicking tax audits while leaving the rest alone.

Rosanvallon (2011), which Müller references (p. 109, fn. 43), also lists the people/elites dichotomy as the first of three ‘simplifications’ that characterize populism. The second simplification is a variation on the theme of suspension of the separation of power, namely the elimination of ‘intermediaries’, such as nonelected judges, between the people and the ruler(s). The third simplification is that social cohesion becomes a matter exclusively of cultural identity, rather than the social rapport between individuals and groups of individuals that is found in day-to-day civic society. This, again, is symptomatic of the monolithic vision of cultural identity and the adjacent lack of tolerance. It is important to note, as Müller does, that his description of populism is of a form rather than of a content. For instance, it is not necessary that xenophobia must be part of any populist agenda. Xenophobia, say, will be part of a given agenda only if a particular populist definition of a particular people states or entails that foreigners have no place in the country because they are foreigners.

A noteworthy feature of the list of tenets above is that populism will intersect with totalitarianism, while it is possible to have one without the other. A totalitarian regime that imposes itself from above even without pretending to represent the people will not be populist, and a populist regime that, for instance, does not persecute dissidents (though it will harass them) will not qualify as totalitarian. However, there is not much conceptual wiggle room, so for this reason I would have appreciated a closer comparison between totalitarianism and populism. What the author does offer is a remark like this (p. 93):

One implication of the analysis presented in this book is that National Socialism and Italian Fascism need to be understood as populist movements – even though, I hasten to add, they were not just populist movements but also exhibited traits that are not inevitable elements of populism as such: racism, a glorification of violence, and a radical ‘leadership principle’.

In other words, Nazism and Fascism were (are) populism-plus.⁶ But it seems to me that Nazism and Fascism (including the avowedly Fascist regimes that held sway in southern Europe well into the 1970s) did (do) little more than put the icing

⁶ I am not sure Italian Fascism was distinctly racist. Once the movement had shed its progressive ambitions and become reactionary, Fascism strikes me as run-of-the-mill imperialism. To be sure, Fascism definitely had a strong fondness for violence, dominance, cult of personality, hierarchy, and militarism. (I suppose that ‘leadership principle’ is a nod to the *Führerprinzip* practiced in the Third Reich.)

on the populist cake by concentrating all institutional power in one point while soaking the oxygen out of civil society. It can be no accident that a string of populist government or party leaders have become household names, unlike the leaders of perhaps most democratic countries.

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The populist makes a number of assumptions that strike the philosophical mind as being exceptionally strong. First and foremost, it is assumed that there is such a thing as *the people*, e.g. the Turkish people, the Korean people, the Danish people, above and beyond the individuals of flesh and blood who at any given time self-identify as Turks, Koreans, Danes, etc. Next, it is assumed that the people has a clearly circumscribed set of properties defining its culture. Third, it is assumed that it can be known what these properties are. Populism is infallibilist, because it takes for granted that it knows what the people is like and what it wants, that there is exactly one view of how to run the country that is true and legitimate, and that that view is that of the populist. This point of departure explains why the populist thinks that any alternative view is a deviation from the truth, and also why the populist is adamant about eliminating alternative news sources and alternative communities within civil society. Instead of the citizens being exposed, or at least having access, to a wealth of different sources and views, they are locked inside an echo chamber with a clear framing of questions and answers – “and, amazingly, it always happens to be the [answers] we were expecting” (p. 36).⁷

Starting from these assumptions, the first move the populist makes is to instill a dichotomy between *the people* (*populus*, hence the term) and *the elite*. It bears repeating that the people thus understood is not the totality of a number of individuals sharing the same passport or living on the same territory or self-identifying as belonging to the people in question at a given moment. This conception of the people Müller calls the empirical one. The mythical or moral conception, as he sometimes calls it, is to deem only some, if most, of the people part of the people. They, and only they, are the real people. The term ‘populism’ stands for an exclusionary, rather than inclusionary, conception of what it means to belong to a given people. The populist, self-declared or not, speaks on behalf of the ‘morally real people’,

⁷ 1930s Germany offers the clear-cut example of *Lügenpresse* (newspapers not toeing, or even defying, the Nazi line being called a lying press) and *Gleichschaltung* (the ‘equalization’ of all mass media, meaning that they would all stick to the official line).

excluding the ‘illegitimate’ ones that, though empirically belonging to the people (by possessing Turkish or Danish citizenship, say), fail to belong to the people proper. Thus, a member of the Turkish elite, say, does not belong to the Turkish people.⁸ The populist decides what is required to belong to the people, making the notion a thoroughly politicized one, which is, furthermore, plastic enough so as to be remoulded to fit an altered political landscape despite its pretence to be atemporal.

The polar opposite of the people (the various elites) remains a fluffy notion, and I would have liked to hear a bit more about how populists picture these elites. There is a sketch (p. 57) of elites standing for “economic liberalism, a pluralistic and tolerant ‘open society’, and the protection of fundamental rights”, but the reader is expected to have an intuitive grasp of this key notion. Müller ought perhaps to have spelt out in more detail the fact that the populist is not opposed to elites per se. First, the populists when politically successful become (part of) the elite themselves (though they would not label themselves as such, of course). Second, even when in opposition, the populists will look kindly upon those portions of the existing elites that serve the populist cause. But then, one wonders, do those portions of the elite also belong to the people as well? It might be tempting to say they do, but then the supposedly sharp dichotomy between people and elite becomes conceptually muddled. Third, Müller notes that the supporters of those populist politicians who already belong to the established elite know that they do: “what matters [to the supporters is the populists’] promise that as a proper elite, they will not betray the people’s trust and will in fact faithfully execute the people’s unambiguously articulated political agenda” (p. 30). The contrast between ‘proper elite’ and (I presume) ‘improper elite’ is intuitively clear, but since *elite* is a key notion this contrast requires more elucidation.

Müller contrasts populism with democracy, while also bringing up technocratic government briefly, but he might have wanted to elaborate on a hint he drops to the effect that the technocrat and the populist are both monolithic, unlike the democrat, who is pluralistic (cf. p. 97). The technocrat believes that there is exactly one correct, rational policy, while the populist believes that there is exactly one

⁸ This exclusionary move reminds me of Stalin’s term ‘rootless cosmopolitan’, which was code for Jewish intellectuals in the Soviet Union, but which feeds on the idea that some citizens do not belong to the people and, by implication, have no place amongst them, and, by implication, should be done away with.

correct, authentic policy, and in both cases there is no need for democratic discourse and inclusion of alternatives.⁹

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Polarization is the hallmark of the populist *modus operandi*. There is no attempt to unify conflicting views, seek compromise or strike a balance. The critical platform is provided by the monolithic notion of the people as ‘the silent majority’ that has, finally, acquired a voice. It is obvious enough how polarization works as part of a campaign strategy, but Müller emphasizes that the populist continues to polarize also when in power. This suggests to me that populism, as Müller understands it, is conceptually incapable of full implementation of its alleged program of the people being the sole political and cultural force of the country; for there is always going to be an elitary residue. This is one place where the conspiracy theories come in handy. Even when real opposition is feeble, there are mistakes that need to be explained away, and ‘foreign agents’, a ‘fifth colonne’ of unreformed members of past elites, etc., conspiring against the people and its leadership by causing those mistakes are easy scapegoats. Just as a hammer needs nails to pound, a populist needs enemies to hammer away on.

An interesting observation Müller makes is that populists in power can quite openly get away with, not least, abolishing the separation of power, not only the separation between the legislative, the executive, and the judiciary branches, but also the additional checks and balances provided by, *inter alia*, the press, the military, the police, and the intelligence agencies. They can do so in perfect keeping with the official programme of serving the people, because the people, as understood by the populist, wants all power to be centralized and put at their service.

The people is a unit that appears to play much the same role as, say, a deity when making a political argument: the people/the deity wants this or does not want that, and its wishes and demands surpass the law of the land. Or, the presumed will of the people/the deity is turned into official law. Whether the populist regime happens to be theocratic or secular, what happens then is that “the [new] constitution sets a number of highly specific policy preferences in stone, when debate about

⁹ The interview found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SH5Jy8xxsY> elaborates on this point, among many other. I seem to remember a recent Danish government that was fond of speaking of ‘the policy of necessity’ (‘nødvendighedens politik’).

such preferences would have been the stuff of day-to-day political struggle in non-populist democracies” (p. 65). Those who find that the appeal to the people or a deity has no purchase on political discourse will be dismissed as not belonging to the people and, therefore, having no legitimacy.

The picture that begins to emerge of populism is that it has a hollow core “because their claim [to represent the people] is of a moral and symbolic – not an empirical – nature, it cannot be disproven” (p. 39).¹⁰ The populist *modus operandi* also looks like a Macchiavellian strategy for seizing and retaining power in the sense that it maintains a façade of being a benign policy (one serving almost everybody) while in fact it is much more self-serving (one serving a few select individuals and very specific segments of society). The masses, to put it bluntly, are being played (again). Müller (p. 49) speaks of a ‘final great irony’ of populism:

Populism in power brings about, reinforces, or offers another variety of the very exclusion and the usurpation of the state it most opposes in the reigning establishment it seeks to replace. What the ‘old establishment’ or ‘corrupt, immoral elites’ supposedly have always done, the populists will also end up doing – only, one would have thought, without guilt and with a supposedly democratic justification.

Populism presupposes democracy conceptually but not chronologically. A country that has not known democracy can be a breeding ground for populism, provided its citizens value the idea(l) of democracy.

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The author is keen to give populism a fair hearing. His discussion of, e.g., East Germany and 19th-century USA leads me to think that one can actually make a favourable case for populism, provided the country in question is far from being a democracy. In East Germany people (not the people, but people, lots of people) would take to the streets in 1989 and chant “*Wir sind das Volk*”, meaning that the Party was wrong to claim that it represented the people and its interests. And the USA was founded on the idea that the country should not be governed by clergy-

¹⁰ As Eco (1995) says about Mussolini, “Mussolini did not have any philosophy: he had only rhetoric.”

men, monarchs or aristocrats, as in Europe, but by the people in the form of representative democracy. Hence the disappointment when a new elite class of capitalists came into being that had little time for the vast majority. However, making a favourable case for populism in modern-day democracies is hard. The most Müller is prepared to concede can, I guess, be summarized like this: populists highlight real problems that most others in power would rather not address, so that speaks in their favour, but they prescribe a cure that will kill the patient.

One last thing. Müller distinguishes between right-wing and left-wing populism, without making too much of the distinction. While it is a distinction with a difference, the two ‘wings’ seem to me to be very close indeed, rhetoric aside. Perhaps the right/left distinction, which has been with us since the French Revolution, is not always clear-cut enough to be of much use. Perhaps a more profound distinction nowadays would be between populist authoritarianism and democratic pluralism with thorough separation of powers. Just a thought.

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This 100-page book is an easy read, lively and brisk-paced, occasionally even funny, for instance, when quoting politicians from the Polish PiS party. But also unfailingly scholarly, in part thanks to its extensive Notes. And rich in content, as one discovers when pausing to mull over a side remark or a tangential line of thought. The prose is refreshingly free of politological clichés, though a ‘neoliberal hegemony’ does crop up on p. 98, and the author is eager to reach out to his mixed readership. (I do miss an index of subjects, though.) This engaging monograph is a fine example of applied political philosophy. It is also exceptionally timely.

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Olivier Roy, Allard Tamminga and Malte Willer (eds.):
*Deontic Logic and Normative Systems: 13th International Conference,
 DEON 2016, Bayreuth, Germany, July 18-21, 2016*
 College Publications, Milton Keynes, 2016, 302 pages¹

Deontic logic enjoys increasing popularity. First and foremost, there are the biennial DEON conferences dedicated to deontic logic and related topics (since 1991). Moreover, *Handbook of Deontic Logic and Normative Systems* came into existence in 2013. The crucial importance of this publication for further rise of deontic logic is beyond question. But let us move three years forward. The 13th DEON conference took place in Bayreuth (Germany) on July 18-21, 2016. The reviewed book contains the proceedings of this conference. Interestingly enough, the special focus was “Reasons, Argumentation and Justification”. The clever choice of special focus has led to an interesting cooperation between argumentation theory and deontic logic. The conference had four keynote speakers, namely John Broome, Janice Dowell, Xavier Parent, and Gabriella Pigozzi.

The book contains eighteen interesting and original papers that are usually structured as follows: first, the authors introduce their topic, provide us with some background and some motivations for developing a new logical system, or a couple of them. Second, syntax, semantics and some inferential machinery are introduced. The effectivity and the problem-solving potential of the systems are usually demonstrated in passing. Next, the formal properties of the systems are proved, or at least mentioned. Finally, the papers conclude the achieved results, providing us

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