

Book Review

Critical remarks on Jan-Werner Müller's *What is Populism?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2016).

Reviewed by Victor L. Shammass

Jan-Werner Müller's (2016) account of populism purports to establish a minimalistic conception of populism. Populists, on Müller's account, say that they are (i) against pluralism, and (ii) against corrupted elites. But, so my argument holds, Müller's account is conceptually arbitrary and critically futile. Müller himself suspects that his views might be viewed as "profoundly conservative" (p. 68). This is largely an accurate self-diagnosis, even if Müller himself is quick to dismiss it.

Thus, tellingly, Müller writes, "[I]n Machiavelli's Florence, fighting for the *popolo* against the *grandi* would not automatically be populism, but saying that the *grandi* do not belong in Florence, no matter what they say or do, *would* be populism" (p. 23). Notice how this account places a very high premium on what alleged populists say and places no value on what they do. Müller's theory, on first pass, is a *speech-heavy* theory, rather than a behavior-oriented theory. Of course, following speech-act theory, speech might be viewed as a sort of behavior, but Müller doesn't seem to think so. At heart, what matters is what populists *claim* to be

doing, indexed by their words, rather than what they actually do: while populists may do things that Müller finds disagreeable, it is their statements that define them, according to Müller.

Antipluralism takes place when “populists claim that they, *and only they*, represent the people” (p. 20; emphasis in original). The emphasis here ought to be on the verb *claim*: what matters to Müller is that they *claim* to be antipluralist. Similarly, antielitism takes place when populists “justify their conduct by claiming that they alone represent the people” (p. 4). Once again, the emphasis is on claims-making: they *claim* to represent the people. Whether they actually do so is, on Müller’s account, insignificant. What matters, conceptually speaking, and as the title of the first chapter makes clear, is “what populists say.” Populism “employs a very specific kind of language” (p. 40), and it is this language we should care about, analytically speaking, in constructing a concept of populists, Müller contends.

But why should we feel so strongly about what supposed populists say? This sort of Habermasian fixation on language is all too characteristic of the scholastic view, which tends to fetishize language at the cost of valorizing actions more conventionally understood: the allocation and expenditure of social energy, the implementation of policy, the re-arrangement of institutions—these should probably play at least some part in our conceptual underpinnings.

Similarly, Müller falls for the Weberian fetish of the ideal-type. His is a policeman’s attitude to the realm of concepts. Even when political actors claim to be populists, they may not turn out to be populists at all because they do not fit into Müller’s theoretical scheme: “We have to allow for the possibility that a plausible understanding of populism will in fact end up excluding historical movements and actors who explicitly called themselves populists.” (p. 19) Take note of the phrase “plausible understanding”—those are weasel words, subtly giving rise to a form of question-begging. There is no inherently good reason why we should accept the foundation of Müller’s typology—linguistic expressions of antielitism and antipluralism—over some other set of criteria. What makes Müller’s scheme “plausible” is simply an argument by assertion – and a slotting in of empirical examples that Müller then, conveniently, thinks slots into this schema. The whole point of this symbolic operation

is to allow political scientists to demarcate the proper bounds between objective, “real populists,” and subjective populists, those “merely branded as populists” (p. 10). But this entire business of analytic propriety and plausibility is founded on a series of asserted axioms that are as arbitrary as any other exercise in conceptual demarcation.

In this specific instance, Müller’s conceptual demarcation is essentially fruitless because it doesn’t get us anywhere, strategically and analytically. So what if Donald Trump and Hugo Chávez are lumped together in a single category (or perhaps worse, Evo Morales, Mussolini, and Hitler, by Müller’s own admission [e.g. p. 94])? What happens next? Does it allow us to discern anything beyond the faintest of family resemblances? Slicing up social reality is the first, not the final, step, and Müller doesn’t answer where it is we are going. If the aim is scientific, then the operation is essentially founded on contingent, take-it-or-leave-it claims – hardly as scientific as many political scientists would have us believe. If the aim, on the other hand, is critical, it would be far more useful to show all the myriad ways in which each of these specific political actors may have produced outcomes that are harmful or injurious, what are their origins, and what can be done to counteract or resolve them; and this critical enterprise is not at all aided by typological sorting of the kind that entomologists and Weberians seem so fond of.

Müller thinks populists ultimately end up doing three things once they have gained power. They will (i) occupy the state, (ii) engage in mass clientelism and corruption, and (iii) suppress civil society (p. 102).

But all of these actions are in the eyes of the beholder and are non-specific to those said to be populists. Occupy the state? Fine, perfect! A political movement that actually wants to achieve anything *must* occupy the state – must ensure, in brief, that the state obeys its will. If not, its political agenda will be held up by bureaucrats, judges, and lobbyists with their own agendas, many of them deeply symbolic, political, and value-laden, but with the thinnest of technocratic covers (bureaucratic expertise, legal competence).

Mass clientelism and corruption? Again, modern politics is mostly patronage by another name: tit for tat, giving favors and receiving them in return. Quite how one is to engage in the complex business of administering modern societies without granting favors for favors in kind

– to labor unions, for instance – is hugely puzzling. Very probably it cannot be done. And Müller admits the centrality of reciprocity to modern politics tout court: what he doesn't like about populists is that "they can engage in such practices openly" (p. 46). By implication, then, he seems to suggest that so long as such practices are carried on quietly, behind closed doors, all is well in the realm of politics. What Müller doesn't like is the very public nature of such things – as well as a bit of snobbish nose-turning against such people as Jörg Haider's political stunt—for that is all it was—that consisted of handing out euro bills to potential voters. Few respectable politicians "would go so far," Müller writes, but he doesn't seem to understand that this is precisely why some politicians engage in such stunts—to carve out a niche, to extract symbolic profits from heterodoxy, if not outright heresy.

Suppressing civil society? Every society does it, if only by ensuring that funding doesn't reach NGOs unfavorable to ruling elites, mobilizing police and surveillance against activists, or excluding civil society actors from public consultations. Civil society is just the state by another name – the state by extension – as Bourdieu (2014: 31-36) points out: their constituent parts' autonomy is highly relative in modern societies, if one considers the regulatory frameworks that ensconce them and the funds and tax credits that flow their way. Now this isn't necessarily a good thing, and perhaps we should want a different set of socio-political arrangements to keep it from happening, but it does rather undermine Müller's point that this is somehow unique to regimes said to be populist.

Against Müller's inchoate and overly wide conception of populism – as noted, by his own admission, Müller's is a theory that includes Evo Morales and Hitler (p. 94) - I think there is only one characteristic that, analytically *and* strategically, should be used to define populism: *pretend or faux anti-neoliberalism*. Minimally populist regimes pretend to counteract the hegemony of markets and protect the people against market forces, while in reality setting about dismantling the welfare state and promoting corporate interests. "While the reality in Hungary has been savage cuts to the welfare state, Orbán's self-presentation as a strong leader ready to nationalize companies and use the state to protect ordinary folk from multinationals has been highly effective," Müller writes perceptively (p. 59). Recall also that Nigel Farage's Leave campaign

scored major points on the infamous claim that Brussels was draining Britain's coffers to the tune of 240 million pounds per week – funds which were to be reallocated to save the long-ailing National Health Service. Of course, no such funds were forthcoming, and the figure was largely a fabrication (see e.g. Clegg 2017). But the promise to restore the dignity of one of the five central pillars in William Beveridge's vision of the "people's peace," was extremely effective. Similarly, Trump has promised to protect "the little man" against corporate greed – again, a hollow promise made by a politician unlikely to disturb the fundamental tenets of neoliberalism.

In short, defining populism in this way gets at a more crucial point about the political successes of populists: they have promised a sort of paternal protection, offering devotion to the people and assuring them that their their social (or market-driven) suffering will now be relieved. Populism promises to set the world aright, a world made miserable by neoliberalism. In terms of political strategy, viewing populism as a false antineoliberalism also points ahead to a future that really would transcend populist movements and regimes, unlike Müller's prescription of a return to *more* liberal democracy (which, without further emendation, would only produce the phenomenon of populism all over again, given enough time). This point of transcendence is a world beyond global capital. Unlike Müller's conception of populism, this definition promises real redemption – a real escape from the trauma of capital.

References

- Bourdieu, P. (2014) *On the State: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1989-1992*. Cambridge: Polity.
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