

BOOK REVIEW

What is populism?, by Jan-Werner Müller, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, 123 pp., £16.99. ISBN 978-0-8122-4898-2

There can be few more polemical terms in today's political vocabulary than 'populism'. The word is applied variously to parties, leaders and social movements of the left and the right, most often as a term of abuse. At the same time, populists themselves have frequently embraced the term as a way of describing their authentic relationship to their supporters. The fact that populism means very different things in countries like Venezuela, Turkey, France and Poland only serves to complicate matters. A conscientious historian would surely avoid using the term at all: it is too loaded, too imprecise and too easy to misunderstand.

Yet such a level-headed position is problematic. For those interested in the contours of contemporary political debate, does it make sense to bypass a concept that is so widely used? And for intellectual historians, there must surely be value in trying to work out what – if anything – populism is about. Jan-Werner Müller certainly thinks so. A long-time specialist of democratic change in Europe, he was clearly pushed by political circumstance to rush out this short essay of 100 pages after Trump's victory and his intervention should be read as a contribution to an ongoing conversation about how moderates ought to respond to an increasingly volatile political context.

Müller's definition of populism is disarmingly simple. As he says throughout the book, populism is the "shadow" of representative democracy. Its central feature is "a moralised form of antipluralism" that incessantly speaks "in the name of the people as a whole" (20). This extremely capacious definition allows Müller to bring together under the populist label a remarkable range of political movements (the Front National in France, the FPÖ in Austria, Jobbik in Hungary, the PiS in Poland, the AKP in Turkey) and personalities (Donald Trump, Hugo Chávez, Marine Le Pen, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Viktor Orbán). In so doing, he cuts through one of the classic problems in the study of populism, namely the difference between right and left. For Müller, this distinction is mostly irrelevant. What matters is the way populists conceptualise politics, not their ideological orientation.

Using his definition as the backbone of his analysis, Müller develops his arguments over the course of three brief chapters. The first looks at what populists say. Rather than treat populism as a product of "anger" or as the voice of the disenfranchised masses, he takes seriously the claim of populists to speak for the people and against the elites. The way to distinguish populists from others who make similar claims is that populists operate at a "moral and symbolic" level (39). Hence, the important thing is not who populists represent in practice, but who they say they represent.

The second chapter deals with what populists do once they are in power. Müller's analysis is less clear-cut here. His claim that populists "distort the democratic process" (57) by rejigging constitutions and shutting down dissent seems fair enough. But he is also trying to make a broader point about democracy as an indeterminate political space of conflict and disagreement. Müller uses this idea, which has its roots in the work of the French political theorist Claude Lefort, to explain how populists can retain the formal trappings of democracy like elections and still be so corrosive to the democratic ideal.

Finally, in the third chapter, Müller tries to offer a template for how to deal with populism. This is even less coherent than the second chapter. Again, the premise is simple: that populism can only thrive within democratic systems since it feeds off

democracy's "broken promises" (76). But the actual structure of the chapter offers two sharply contrasting case studies – American populism of the late nineteenth century and the European Union of the twenty-first century – that do not fit well together. The rather soft conclusion, which does not obviously flow from the case studies, is that the power of the rich needs to be curtailed (how?) and that the "excluded" (who are they?) need to be reintegrated into the "social contract" (99). The book ends with seven theses on populism, which provide pithy – and highly quotable – summaries of the main points.

It should be clear by now that Müller is better at analysing populism than he is at proposing policy solutions. What is perhaps most interesting to intellectual historians is the degree to which his argument draws on François Furet's classic revisionist interpretation of the French Revolution as a crisis of representation, in which the Jacobins were obsessed with embodying an indivisible nation. Müller seems to be aware of this since the Jacobins make several appearances in his book. But it bears repeating all the same: his central argument relies heavily on a symbolic, moral and linguistic interpretation of politics. Indeed, Müller repeatedly rejects class-based analyses of populism or socio-economic explanations for its success.


There is a great deal of value to Müller's position. He is right that the rhetorical power of populism is what gives it a wide appeal. He is also right that appeals to "empirical" or "technical" arguments (such as election results, economic forecasts or investigative journalism) have little effect on populist movements because their claims operate in a different discursive field altogether. Probably the most compelling contention in the book is that populism, rather like totalitarianism, is all about eliminating the ambiguous space of contestation at the heart of the democratic process.

But Müller makes a mistake in emphasising form at the expense of content. His laudable desire to offer a global framework for populism means that he leaves to one side what populists are actually talking about. It is important, for instance, to differentiate between those that explicitly lay claim to religious authority (such as the PiS, the AKP or the BJP in India); those that occasionally manipulate religious symbolism but do not derive their strength from it (one thinks of the French Front National); and those that have nothing to do with religion at all (the obvious example would be Chávez). Yes, the form of moral claim-making may be similar in all these cases, but the source of legitimacy is not. Religiously inspired movements reinforce their moral claims through a language of piety and transcendental faith, whereas predominantly secular ones must lean on constructions like the "nation" or the "revolution".

This has consequences for how populists define their community. There is obviously a difference between representing a religious majority (Catholics, Hindus) and representing a nation (Hungarians, Americans), even when the two overlap. Moreover, populists' moral claims can only be successful when they converge with popular understandings of what the people are. In the twenty-first century, it is rarely enough for populists simply to claim they speak for the people; the people must believe them too. So, while Müller offers a powerful and persuasive framework for understanding the function of populism, he is less good at explaining its recent successes. If nothing else, closer attention to the content of populist ideologies would have reminded him that populism in contemporary democracies always depends on a fickle collusion between populist leaders and the fantasies of the people they claim to represent.

Emile Chabal

University of Edinburgh

 echabal@exseed.ed.ac.uk

© 2017 Emile Chabal

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2017.1348026>

